

1 Social Work in Organisations

Introduction

Social work is a profession that is practised within the confines of an organisation and the tasks that social workers carry out are defined by the nature of this organisation. Thus, a social worker employed in a voluntary sector family centre may be engaged in more individual and family counselling work than a social worker in a hospital setting. Similarly, the knowledge that social workers use in their daily work may also vary: the family centre social worker may have specialist knowledge of particular therapeutic techniques while the hospital social worker may have specialist knowledge of particular illnesses and their impact on individuals' capacity to live independently. Some social workers may feel that they have little wider professional identity outside of their particular job role or simply that the nature of their job results in more identification with the organisation than with the profession.

Nonetheless social work does have something unique to offer human service organisations. We have an accumulated body of knowledge that helps us understand individuals and communities within their wider social and political contexts. We promote certain values and take political stances in order to defend these values. We apply our knowledge and values through our skills in critical thinking, research, policy development, counselling and networking. In this sense, social workers bring a unique awareness and capacity to organisational practice.

In this chapter we overview:

- the role of social work in organisations;
- the tensions social work experiences as a professional occupation;
- key players in human service organisations;
- challenges posed by labour market reform and managerialism; and
- issues for social work knowledge in organisational practice.

Negotiating the ideals and realities

If we conceptualize social work as incorporating knowledge, values and skills generated through professional education, socialization and experience it is

possible to see that social work extends beyond the confines of a particular job or organisation. The challenge for social workers is negotiating the slippage between the potential or the ideals of social work as a professional activity and the reality of social work as organisational work (Lymbery and Butler, 2004).

The work environment will always limit the potential of social work. There is no one job that can facilitate the meeting of all the profession's aims and aspirations. With social work skills the potential of 'I can do this' can easily slip into 'I do this' as the capacity to exercise a wide range of skills is undermined by the lack of opportunities to practise these in daily work. Similarly the confidence of 'I know this' can be reduced to 'I know this to do this job'. Even more challenging is the slip from 'I believe this' to 'I believe this to do this job'. This results in social work losing its distinctiveness and its purpose and may result in external political and economic agendas – such as neo-liberalism and managerialism – determining a social worker's role.

It is social work's values and, in particular, its commitment to social justice which sets it apart from other occupations. According to Bisman (2004: 115):

Without this emphasis on social justice, there is little if any need for social work or social workers. ... [I]n practice, social workers draw from the same knowledge base in human behaviour and social systems as do psychiatrists and city planners. It is the application of knowledge and skills towards moral ends that imbues the profession with meaning and defines the role of the social worker in society.

It is understandable, then, that social workers may experience tension and uncertainty in the gap between what they know and believe and what they do in their day-to-day work. Similarly, they may fear the reduction of what they know and believe to only what they need to know and believe in order to do the job. Later in this chapter, we explore this tension in relation to debates about evidence-based and best practice.

For many social workers this sense that their professional identity is limited by their organisational role comes as a surprise. Their social work education had been about not just instilling in them the skills, knowledge and values of social work, but also in socializing them into the profession. That they are not able to fulfil all of the potential of their professional identity in the organisation that now employs them challenges many people and may lead them to question the adequacy of their education to prepare them for organisational life. The newly qualified worker is confronted with the following questions:

- How is what I do different from what other employees do?
- What contribution does social work make to the organisation and to its service users?
- How do I apply my social work knowledge, values and skills to the work of the organisation?
- What happens when organisational practices conflict with my social work values?

- Should I seek to influence the organisation in line with social work values and, if so, how should I go about this?
- How can I survive, maintain competency and integrity, and flourish, as a social worker and as a person, in this organisation?

'Learning to survive organisational demands is ... important if social workers are to sustain satisfying careers in the personal social services' (Eadie and Lymbery, 2002: 516). For many social workers the challenges of organisational practice are managed by engaging (and re-engaging) with the profession, its knowledge, values and skills. Importantly this should not be an abstract enterprise or one that solely helps manage the stress of social work, but rather it should facilitate the reformulation of the self in relation to an unfolding professional identity.

The social worker identity is based on a relationship of reflexivity through which the construction of identity is made present through working on the self. Self-care is not an isolated, individual or narcissistic process but one in which the social worker must be open to the influence of the other in the creation of enhanced practice. (Miehls and Moffat, 2000: 346)

There may be organisational systems and supports to enable you to do this. For example, newly qualified social workers may be directly responsible to a social work educated supervisor who, in addition to providing advice on the handling of specific cases, may also assist in integrating professional learning and personal practice, spending time helping workers to acknowledge the dilemmas of practice. While other supports, such as mentoring schemes and seminar groups, may be found within the organisation, it is likely that many social workers will need to look for these beyond the organisation so that they can continue to explore their emerging identity as a social worker. Many social workers engage in ongoing professional development activities run by the professional associations, post-qualifying consortia and universities. While for some these activities are the first to go when things get really busy, their benefits in facilitating reflexivity and an integrated social work identity should not be underestimated.

Recently social work authors have advocated a reprofessionalization of social work. This could be achieved by reconfiguring professional associations so that they are more politically engaged (Lymbery, 2001) or by developing coalitions across professional associations and new political unions (Healy and Meagher, 2004). However, according to Hugman (2001: 329), while social work needs to develop a 'collective voice' that stands outside the interests of the state and, we would argue, any particular organisation, it also needs to stay engaged with organisations to promote change within them. For individual social workers the challenge is to 'work critically within the world *as it is* while seeking change, and to work within agencies *as they are* while being able to promote positive change' (Hugman, 2001: 329; our emphasis).

This for us is fundamental to critical, ethical and reflective practice within human service organisations: to be able to stand both inside and outside the organisation and, using this knowledge, to work strategically to change the organisation. We must recognize and engage with management and professional agendas in organisations, but we must also be critical of them, consider their impact on service users and their social and political situations, and seek to alleviate this impact. In the following hypothetical practice example a social worker seeks to engage with and extend his professional identity.

Practice Example 1.1 Extending a professional social work identity

Harvey is employed as the sole social worker in a community organisation providing retraining and support to older unemployed men. This is his first job following graduation. For the first year in the job he received intermittent supervision, which was primarily focused on meeting administrative targets. There was little opportunity to critique his social work practice and gain support for his efforts to extend his professional skills and knowledge.

In an attempt to ward off an increasing sense of job dissatisfaction, Harvey sought the advice of a more experienced social worker who he had met at a local interagency meeting. This worker agreed to become Harvey's mentor and they have met a few times over the past year. Some of the strategies she suggested for Harvey to maintain and extend his professional social work identity included joining the professional association and becoming involved in an interest group on mental health policy (an area he is particularly committed to).

Since taking up this advice, Harvey has been more motivated about keeping up his professional reading and has attended some of the association's workshops. His work on the mental health policy group has also increased his awareness of service user involvement issues and he has been able to introduce some participation strategies into his employing organisation. It is still early days, but Harvey is feeling more positive about his role as a social worker in his organisation, especially since his manager recently agreed to pay for him to be regularly supervised by an experienced social work practitioner.

The nature of social work organisations

We speak and hear of them so often that it seems strange to ask: what are organisations? They feel like a real and solid presence in many aspects of our lives, from sporting to educational organisations, from retail to government organisations. However, if we strip away the bricks and mortar – which really are simply containers for organisations – then we can begin to uncover the complex web of human relationships and interactions that comprise them. How we come to understand these relationships and interactions has been shaped by a

wide range of theoretical ideas. Thus different conceptualizations or definitions of organisations emerge from different theoretical perspectives and traditions. We overview some of these theories in Chapter 2 and discuss their implications for understanding and analysing organisations. However, at this point it is useful to identify two alternative ways of defining organisations.

The first and most common definition of organisations emphasizes their rationality and goal-directed nature. There is a sense that people come together to pursue a common purpose and create structures and processes that are best suited to achieving that purpose. According to Etzioni (1969: 3), 'organisations are social units (or human groupings) deliberately constructed and reconstructed to seek specific goals'. Forming an organisation and working together is thus seen as more efficient than working separately to achieve the agreed goals. Working together as an organisation involves creating structures and technologies that are suited to the pursuit of these goals. For many, the rise of the modern organisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries embodies the 'inexorable advance of reason, liberation and justice and the eventual eradication of ignorance, coercion and poverty' (Reed, 1999: 25).

An alternative to this modernist and functionalist definition of organisations derives from a range of social constructionist, critical and postmodern ideas, and emphasizes not the rationality of organisations but their irrationality or, at least, their frequent irrationality. While organisations are often intended to be rational and goal directed, the people within them often act in contradictory ways. At the centre lies the exercise of power through the creation of structures, technologies and language that meet a wide range of human needs, which are frequently unrelated to the formal or espoused goals of the organisation. Casey (2004: 303), in summarising the trajectory of critical and postmodern views of organisations, identifies organisations as 'sites of action' and as comprising 'contested and negotiated rationalities'. For Chia (1996: 150) organisations are 'loosely emergent sets of organizing rules which orient interactional behavior in particular ways'. Thus those operating from this position are actually not so much interested in defining or theorizing *organisations* (as completed entities) as they are in defining and theorising the processes of *organizing*.

Increasingly the agencies social workers work in are referred to as 'human service organisations'. This term signifies their purpose to be the production of services to meet human needs, rather than the production of material goods. Hasenfeld (2000) goes further than this, however. He claims that human service organisations 'engage in moral work, upholding and reinforcing moral values about "desirable" human behavior and the "good" society' (p. 90). The legitimacy human service organisations have in working with people is gained from their wider institutional environment and social policy arrangements. However, their outcomes and effectiveness are more determined by the everyday small-scale interactions between service users and workers (Hasenfeld, 2000).

There remains considerable variation amongst these organisations. Just in terms of teamwork alone different forms of human service organisations can be identified. For Payne (2000), *field organisations*, such as social service

departments, involve professionals operating mainly as individuals, working with people or 'cases' in the community. Teamwork, in this context, involves collaboration between different professionals and different organisations working with the same service user. *Multiprofessional organisations* involve people from different professions working together within the same organisation, such as community mental health teams. Here the teamwork issues involve negotiating the power and conflict involved in everyday organisational life. *Community network organisations* refer to organisations that rely on community and informal networks to deliver services to people (e.g. case management or care management). *Institutional organisations*, such as hospitals and residential homes, involve workers and service users working and living in close proximity everyday. Just as there is variation in organisational forms so too is there variation in the key players in human service organisations.

Key players in social work organisations

Human service organisations employ many workers in a range of capacities and job roles. Sveiby (1997) identifies four main players in complex organisations: the professional, the manager, the support staff and the leader. His categorization is based upon an understanding of the power plays that occur in those organisations that employ highly skilled people and that rely on the transfer of information and knowledge. It classifies each of the players in terms of professional and organisational competence. This categorization produces archetypal roles that are present within social work organisations at least in people's minds and within organisational culture, if not in actual practice.

If we recognize the area of community competence, we can also incorporate into the schema two additional players: the volunteer and the client or service user. These players are not (usually) employees of the organisation, although they may receive some benefits from being involved in the organisation, such as receiving services or gaining skills. The important players in social work organisations include both paid employees and those present and active in the organisation in other ways.

It is also worth noting another common distinction made in the social work and community services literature: that of being on the 'front-line'. Front-line workers are typically seen as being at the 'coal face' of human service delivery. These are the people who have most contact with service users and who may consequently have considerable community competence. For those working or managing on the front-line there are dangers that, if they are not properly supervised and supported, they may easily become burnt out or may end up acting defensively. In Chapters 4 and 7 we examine these dangers in more depth.

The professional

The professional is characterised as having access to specialised knowledge that can be applied in understanding and responding to situations within the

organisation's remit. That is, professionals are concerned with delivering the organisation's services and providing expert advice. Stereotypically they are seen to be highly committed to their job (to the extent that they frequently work long hours), to have a high degree of professional pride and confidence, to subdivide themselves into increasingly narrow ranges of specialization, and to dislike routine and bureaucracy (Sveiby, 1997). Further, Hodson and Sullivan (1995) claim that the professions are characterised by:

- control over abstract and formal knowledge;
- considerable autonomy, especially in terms of task decisions;
- authority over others, including clients and other workers; and
- a commitment to altruism in professional behaviour, often embodied in codes of ethics and monitored by professional bodies.

Each of these can be seen on a continuum, so that some professions – such as medicine and law – may be identified as having more and a higher level of these attributes than others – such as social work and nursing. Their community competence may be seen as emerging mainly from their contact with clients, to whom they provide professional services, and their subsequent understanding of clients' needs and concerns.

We discuss shortly issues for social work in the human services labour market; however, it is important to note that social work has experienced some conflict and ambivalence over its identity as a professional occupation. Some have argued that social work is not fully professionalised and have characterised it as a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969). Others have seen its claim to professional status as working against the interests of service users and communities who are themselves the real experts (Bamford, 1990). According to this argument, the more professional the worker becomes the less likely they are to have high levels of community competence.

Despite these debates, social work has evolved in western nations as a professional occupation, and it is possible to recognise to some degree the stereotypical professional attributes in social-work roles. At the same time, social workers strive towards greater community competence and working with and understanding the issues of people within communities is not necessarily seen as antithetical to professional practice.

The manager

Sveiby (1997) argues that managers have high levels of organisational competence and, because they have less contact with service users, we suggest that they can be seen as having less community competence than professionals. Regardless of any prior career or academic specialization, managers are usually employed in that capacity because of their organisational skills. In their managerial role, they focus on maintaining organisational functioning in line with the organisation's goals (Bryman, 1999). In human service agencies their role is not so much in delivering services, but in ensuring an organisational context that enables others to provide services.

Managers are frequently involved in activities such as staff recruitment and supervision, managing resources and finances, coordinating information systems, and reporting to higher levels within an organisation (such as to a senior executive or to a management committee). Managers are often less involved in immediate task decisions than they are in medium term planning, which commonly involves decisions about how resources will be allocated to particular organisational goals or programmes. The power of managers rests in their control over financial resources (Hodson, 2001), as well as in their symbolic authority.

The support staff

Support staff include a range of employees – such as secretaries, administrators, office workers, clerks, receptionists – whose role is to support the work of the manager and, often to a lesser extent, that of the professionals (Sveiby, 1997). Their role is focused on the needs of the organisation and, although Sveiby classifies them relatively low in terms of organisational and professional competence, the longer they are employed in an organisation the more they are likely to be valued for their organisational knowledge. Additionally, specialised skills, such as note taking, word processing or spreadsheets, can often be seen as an important resource. Many support staff are also front-line organisational workers in that they are often clients' first point of contact with the organisation.

The leader

According to Sveiby (1997), leaders display high levels of both professional and organisational competence. We would argue that, at least in human service organisations, they should also have high levels of community competence. Thus leaders are characterised as having expert and in-depth knowledge across the whole organisation.

An organisation's leader would most obviously be the person in the most senior executive position within the organisation: the person who is seen to exercise the most authority. However, sometimes others can emerge as leaders within organisations, although it is likely that they too would be able to exercise considerable authority and autonomy in their role. It is often noted that the difference between managers and leaders is that while managers seek to preserve the status quo – the healthy functioning of the organisation – leaders will often seek change and innovation so that the organisation can grow and adapt to changing community and societal needs (Kotter, 1990). Leaders are stereotypically seen as risk takers and as motivating others through their own charisma. In Chapter 4 we examine some different approaches to leadership.

The volunteer

In human service organisations the volunteer role may range from stuffing envelopes during a fundraising initiative, to providing in-home respite to

someone living with a terminal illness, to sitting on an organisation's management board. Volunteers are often drawn from the organisation's 'community'. They may espouse a desire to redress the social problems or fulfil the community needs that are within the organisation's mandate. This may sometimes emerge from personal experiences. For example, volunteers with the various Alzheimer's disease societies and associations are frequently carers, ex-carers, partners, relatives and friends of people with dementia. Thus volunteers may often be prized for their community competence: their connection to and knowledge of the communities the organisation provides services to.

Depending on their background volunteers may also have considerable professional and management knowledge. However, apart from those on management committees, they may have less opportunity than they wish to implement this knowledge in their volunteering role. Inevitably everyday organisational life revolves around those in paid capacities, and volunteers can sometimes feel unsupported and unacknowledged in their work. Thus volunteers frequently experience tensions around their status, role and level of inclusion in the life and culture of the organisation (Netting et al., 2004). This is often particularly acute when community organisations grow from 'grass-roots' organisations (with volunteers often instrumental in setting up the organisation) to funded service providing organisations (where volunteers may have a more marginal role).

The service user

Another important organisational player – and perhaps the most important – is the person or group constructed variously as the client, service user, patient, consumer or customer. Without these people the organisation would not exist. Service users can be seen as having high levels of community competence, at least in their knowledge of their own experience within communities. Service users may be typically seen as lacking professional and organisational competence in the organisation from which they are seeking services. This does not mean that they necessarily lack professional or organisational knowledge and skills generally or within other organisations (such as ones that employ them).

In Chapter 7 we examine issues in service users' experience of social work organisations in some depth. It is, however, important to acknowledge here the wide variation in people's experiences and in the level of their involvement in organisational life. Some clients may visit the organisation only once, others may receive regular services and support over many years. Despite increased rhetoric around increasing client involvement in both statutory and non-statutory settings, the experience of user involvement strategies is not always positive, especially if they are poorly resourced or seen as tokenistic. For non-voluntary clients, such as those being investigated for child abuse or neglect, there is unlikely to be motivation for further involvement in the life of the organisation.

Inevitably the distinctions made here between organisational players are caricatures, albeit ones that remain persistent in organisational cultures. In addition to their inability to reflect the diversity of personalities and activities within

organisations, these caricatures fail to account for the considerable overlap between tasks regardless of the specific role designation. For instance, all members of the organisation are likely to be involved in administrative or secretarial work. This seems to have been particularly the case since the widespread introduction of new technologies, such as computers and word processing software. Most employees would do their own typing of letters and reports and many would do their own photocopying. Similarly different employees may participate in management functions, for example by taking responsibility to lead a sub-committee of the staff meeting.

In the following hypothetical practice example a social worker struggles to understand the way in which role boundaries are demarcated within her organisation.

Practice Example 1.2 Inclusion, exclusion and organisational roles

Chris recently joined a social services team working with young people with disabilities and their families. The team comprises social workers, welfare officers, administrative staff, an occupational therapist and a team manager. Also involved with the team are volunteers who contribute to a visiting programme and representatives of service users and parents/carers.

The annual team planning day is held off site and involves team building and strategic planning activities, such as discussing changes in community needs. One issue to be addressed is the availability of administrative staff to carry out tasks (e.g. photocopying documents, taking phone messages) required by volunteers and service user representatives. There has been debate within the team as to whether or not it is appropriate for administrative staff to be doing this work, especially as resources are currently stretched. Some administrative staff feel that the parent/carer representatives are taking advantage of their generosity by asking them to photocopy articles.

During her induction Chris met with some volunteers and representatives who expressed concerns that they had not been invited to the team planning day. They argued that they were best placed to advise on changes in community needs and should be involved if they were to have a meaningful role in the organisation.

Chris took the matter to the next staff meeting and was surprised at the level of concern expressed about the idea of involving the volunteers and representatives in the planning day. Some staff argued that they would not be able to discuss the issue of the administrative staff's workloads, because they would feel too uncomfortable raising this in front of volunteers and representatives. Others felt that it was inappropriate because it would restrict their ability to discuss particular clients and their families during the meeting. Underneath it all Chris suspected that the staff may also have felt some resentment that a special day set aside for the team could be taken over by 'outsiders'. It left her wondering about the boundaries of social services teams and the marginal status still experienced by volunteers, service users and carers.

Social work in the labour market

While in the past social work may have been seen mainly as a voluntary or charitable activity, today social work is constructed as paid labour. The use of a social work qualification to gain employment and the subsequent use of social work knowledge, values and skills in that employment are central to how social work is defined. This is the case even though social work as a professional identity extends beyond organisational and job boundaries. Social workers compete in the labour market and assert themselves (not always very well) as best placed to occupy a particular job.

The labour markets of western industrialized nations have undergone considerable change over the last few decades. A shift that is often noted is that from a Fordist to a post-Fordist labour market. Fordism emphasizes a modernist production-line approach with workers having specific job roles and little wider organisational knowledge. The post-Fordist labour market is more delineated by workers experiencing overlap between job roles, referred to as multiskilling, and having to be more flexible in their career path. Other labour market reforms include:

- shifts from industrial to service and information modes of production;
- increasing casualization of the workforce and consequent effects on employee benefits such as sick pay;
- more individuals having to change occupations with consequent periods of unemployment and re-training;
- increasing demand for specialist qualifications to be competitive in the labour market;
- more instability in the role of unions in setting the terms of employer/employee relations;
- greater reliance on 'out-sourcing' of public sector work to private- or voluntary-sector workers; and
- more emphasis on demonstrated job competence for employment, education and training. (Perrons, 2000; Shapiro, 2000)

An important implication of these labour market changes has been the proliferation of professional turf wars where professional groups compete in terms of status and expertise to resolve human problems. The last century saw a five-fold increase in professional occupations in advanced economies: from 4 per cent to over 20 per cent (Hodson, 2001). Competition is fierce as to which professional group will dominate in different service settings and in determining what the specific areas of its expertise are. 'Professionalism and professionalization can only be understood in relation to occupational power' (Hugman, 1991: 201). According to Shapiro (2000) while many of the professions articulate a public service ethos, as this in part defines them as professions, professional activity is often about monopolising a service area and enhancing the status of its members.

One way to monopolise is through social issue construction, a strategy medicine and law have been particularly good at. This involves the profession identifying a social issue that needs redress and then setting about defining the nature of the issue, framing the possible responses and then claiming the expertise to deliver these responses (Jamrozik and Nocella, 1998). A further way in which a profession can promote itself as best equipped to frame and respond to a social issue is through science and the language of science. As a result the professions align themselves with research activities, and most recently have adopted the assumptions and practices of evidence-based practice (McDonald, 2003) (to be discussed later in this chapter).

Like other professional groups, social work has been profoundly affected by these developments. It has asserted its professional status by claiming expertise in particular service areas (e.g. child welfare), by demanding professional registration, by asserting the importance of a university qualification as the entry into the profession, and by aligning the profession with scientific discourse and evidence-based practice.

In English-speaking countries the alignment of social work with the state and the existing and potential turf wars between social work and other professions are an important backdrop to understanding multiprofessional practice in human service organisations. While emphasis is placed by governments on collaboration between professionals within and across organisational boundaries (e.g. Farmakopoulou, 2002), the reality of the labour market is such that these professionals are also competitors.

While the proportion of the labour market comprising professions is likely to continue to increase overall (Hodson, 2001), there are particular factors within the human service sector which are holding back the growth of social work, in particular, as a professional occupation. We discuss in a moment the effects of neo-liberal and managerialist policies and practices on social work. For now it is important to note that these reforms have led to an opening up of a range of social work-type positions that are not designated specifically for social workers. Thus a further implication of labour market change is the loss of a unique social work identity in and contribution to contemporary human service organisations.

This development is evident across the English-speaking world (Healy and Meagher, 2004). In Britain, Jordan and Jordan (2000) claim that New Labour's antagonism to social work is evident in its failure to designate jobs such as Connexions Personal Advisors as specifically suitable for social workers. Thus, many social workers – those with a social work qualification and eligible for membership of social work associations or registration as a social worker – do not have jobs titled 'social worker'. Some are called care managers, project workers and child care officers. Increasingly jobs have been opened up to a range of qualified and non-qualified staff who are able to demonstrate the appropriate competence and experience to carry out the job tasks. The under-employment of social workers in para-professional work, where 'their qualifications are neither required nor fully utilized', contributes in part to a

deprofessionalization of social work (Healy and Meagher, 2004: 245). Hence, as discussed earlier, we have recently seen an increasing focus on reprofessionalization in social work.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- 1 Review some job advertisements in social work and social care. How are recent labour-market reforms apparent in job titles, conditions, roles and duties?
- 2 Think of a social issue (e.g. youth crime) and identify the different professions that have a stake in this issue. How might these professions construct the issue differently, develop alternative or competing responses and stake their claim to expertise on this issue?

Social work and managerialism

This picture of social work in the labour market is of a profession in change and under threat. And there is no doubt that many social workers feel they have been under threat for the last couple of decades, particularly since the introduction of neo-liberal reforms of the welfare state. In the UK this was marked by the expansion of quasi-markets in health and social services by the Thatcher/Major Conservative governments and the introduction of the 'care manager' to facilitate the split between the purchasers and providers of services. In Australia Labor governments restructured the way funds are provided to community and for-profit organisations, relying heavily on competitive tendering. In both countries the funding of community-based organisations, many of which were initially formed as grass-roots advocacy organisations, to deliver services in line with government policies and procedures, has undercut their advocacy and activist potential.

The aim of these reforms were to ensure that voluntary and for-profit organisations would be the main deliverers of services, while governments would set the direction for service development and regulate its delivery. The well used phrase in the mid-1990s was that governments should be 'steering, not rowing' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992).

Linked to the rise of neo-liberal thinking has been a rise in managerial discourse and practices. This is often presented in the government sector as 'new public management' and more widely and pejoratively as 'managerialism'. Just as politicians and policy makers turned to the principles of the market to inform welfare policy and practice, so too did they come to rely on the current developments in business management as a guide to steering human service organisations. If the setting up of a competitive market was the answer at a macro (policy) level, then surely the answer at a mezzo (organisational) level was the

practices employed by those who are most competitive: big business and their corporate leaders. This shift would, it was hoped, herald a departure from what were seen as the failings of large welfare bureaucracies. The ideal organisations – both government and non-government organisations – would be that directed by management as being most efficient and competitive.

In the 1990s the ideal organisation was the ‘flat’ organisation, stripped of its supposedly wasteful and bureaucratic middle management. The organisation would be led by a charismatic and transformational leader, guided by science and its determination of what works best, and driven by teams that evaluate and adapt their work in synch with the environment (market) and its demands. This image of the flat, efficient, competitive organisation draws widely from management and organisational theorising, often relying on what is most popular at the time.

This is no better demonstrated than through the rise of Total Quality Management (TQM) and its influence on managerialist practices within human service organisations in the 1990s. The aim of TQM is to maintain the long-term competitiveness of businesses by not succumbing to short-term efficiencies. Rather investment is made into different interdependent teams within the organisation to improve the quality of the product or services and retain long-term customers. However, human service organisations may be aiming to do the exact opposite by helping clients become independent and self-reliant or eradicate particular personal or social issues, such as domestic violence. Additionally not all those who use social work services do so voluntarily: an inevitable barrier to customer satisfaction. Nonetheless, the potential of TQM for social work is that it can encourage team control over localised decision making and can increase awareness of quality issues (Watson, 2002).

For social workers one of the challenges of managerialism and the ‘flattening’ of organisations is that they are increasingly managed by those who are not social workers and who may have little affinity with the profession and its values. Even where social workers continue to report directly to a senior social worker or practice manager, increasingly these work teams are called upon to demonstrate their effectiveness to non-social work managers. Thus those who are often employed in management positions are those with skills and qualifications in management, not the professions which profess a detailed and specialist knowledge of the work tasks. In this sense management is seen as content-free: any good manager can manage any workplace, regardless of whether it is a social services department or a supermarket. And the experience of the rise of managerialism in social work organisations has been one of constant change, most commonly through the practices of:

- *downsizing*: shrinking the organisation through redundancies, forced retirements or increased casualization;
- *re-engineering*: re-evaluating the purpose and goals of the organisation and re-inventing the organisation (to varying degrees) in line with new goals, usually so the organisation is more responsive to the needs in its environment (i.e. more competitive);

- *continuous improvement*: continually engaging the organisation in small-scale change through reliance on performance measuring and making adjustments to improve quality and the responsiveness of the organisation to the market-place (draws on TQM ideas); and
- *limiting professional autonomy*: regulating the activities of professionals through, for example, performance monitoring, evaluation and financial control. (Lymbery, 2004)

Many social workers have experienced organisational change as being done to them, rather than as a process in which they were key players. This is examined further in Chapter 3.

Before moving on it is important to acknowledge that management literature and practice have not been completely insensitive to the critique of managerialism. This is particularly the case in the public sector, where debate has taken place about the virtues and vices of 'new public management', at least partly influenced by communitarian and 'third way' ideas that have emerged through Britain's New Labour government. Shifts toward a more inclusive management agenda are apparent within the public, for-profit and voluntary sectors and are often framed as issues of governance. For private sector organisations, corporate governance is not so much about running the business for the organisation's sake, but about the overall direction of the business and its accountability to its stakeholder(s) and its ability to meet social and political goals: being a good corporate citizen (Ryan and Ng, 2000).

Governments are also likely to be interested in what Edwards (2002) calls participatory governance, which involves engaging private and voluntary sector organisations (providing services contracted out by the state) in government planning and decision making. According to Edwards, the proliferation of voluntary and for-profit organisations in delivering services has led to a reduction in government control over policy processes, at least at the implementation level. Participatory governance would be about involving these organisations in policy making, although new measures to ensure these organisations are accountable for their roles would also need to be set up. While these concerns about governance reflect a tempering of management practice, especially in the public sector, they do not mark a significant shift away from the neo-liberal style of managerialism which has tended to dominate.

A further development in the management literature that has been popularised in management practice is the increasing use of the term empowerment to describe strategies that give workers more control over their work practices. Social workers may be forgiven for feeling a sense of déjà vu in the popularization of this concept and perhaps a certain scepticism in the way it might be conceptualized within a management framework, especially given its use to describe consumer power by Conservative administrations in the UK (Lymbery, 2004). As in social work, it may be that there are some in the management literature who use the term in a progressive way to help refashion a more democratic relationship between employees and employers, while there

may be others who use it as a cloak for tokenistic gestures. Some authors claim that empowerment is about giving workers 'decision making authority in respect of the execution of their primary work tasks' with the primary aim being to improve 'work and organisational performance' (Wall et al., 2002: 147). As this quote suggests, the framing of empowerment by management is more in line with the TQM and human relations traditions – where contented and empowered workers make productive workers – than with a fundamental restructuring of the power relations between management and employees. For Watson (2002: 878), who critiques the Blair government's quality agenda, the likelihood in many social work organisations is that both quality improvement and empowerment strategies are implemented in a top-down way reducing empowerment to 'at best a marginal and at worst a tokenistic activity within a controlling managerialist discourse'.

The influence of management thinking and practice on human service organisations remains considerable. While some approaches to management may coalesce with progressive social work and progressive social workers bring many qualities to management (Healy, 2002), the dominant expression of management in human service organisations is managerialist. That is, what is valued by the most powerful stakeholders in human service organisations – government and other funding bodies – is an ostensibly content-free management that actually espouses neo-liberal organisational practices emphasising efficiency and competitiveness in the human service 'marketplace'. These neo-liberal practices involve consumerism or notions that the customer has a choice and that customer service is paramount. Thus much of the language within current social work discourse is of consumerism and, increasingly, of risk and its management (Gregory and Holloway, 2005). We return in detail to a discussion of risk in social work organisations in Chapter 4.

Social work knowledge and organisational work

Social work draws broadly on a knowledge base grounded in sociological, political, psychological and philosophical research and scholarship. In particular fields of research social workers have been leaders, for example in researching children's issues, domestic violence and mental health. Social work has also developed and applied this wider knowledge base to the formation of practice theories. There is also an enormous amount of social work knowledge, theory and research which either directly relates or can be applied to organisational practice. Social workers, for example, commonly have sophisticated understandings of communication processes, group and community development, social and family systems, and policy making processes: all this knowledge can be effectively applied to organisational work.

It is important to note that social work has not engaged with its knowledge base uncritically. We have actively questioned the construction of knowledge through the scientific model and have engaged in debates about the nature of

positivism (a particular theory of knowledge underpinning the scientific model) and have promoted alternative ways of developing and synthesising knowledge for practice. Social work has questioned the sources of knowledge and resisted elevating particular knowledge to doctrinal status. This reflexive and critical capacity makes social work vulnerable in the labour market because we may appear uncertain and lacking a distinct and closely defended knowledge base. However, we argue that it also provides social work with great strength as social workers actively seek to engage with the complexity of knowledge and to look honestly and openly at the problems involved in knowledge development and application. This reflexivity surrounding knowledge for social work is no more evident than in the current debates, both in academic and practice contexts, about evidence-based practice and best practice.

Evidence-based practice

We have already noted the co-opting of science, and its language, within professionalising agendas. The incorporation of evidence-based practice (EBP) within social work in part reflects this trend (McDonald, 2003) in an attempt to position social work as an equal alongside other professions, especially in health care. In Australia, for example, the directors of social work in hospitals have been lead advocates for EBP. Importantly the definition of EBP in social care promoted by the Centre for Evidence Based Social Services in the UK is derived from Sackett et al.'s (1996) authoritative definition of evidence-based medicine: 'EBP in social care has been described as "*the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions regarding the welfare of service users and carers*"' (http://www.cebss.org/evidence_based_practice.html). To implement EBP, social workers thus need to evaluate existing research and knowledge and use this to inform their decision making. At least two components of this definition are subject to debate. First, what comprises 'current best evidence'? Second, what are the implications of focusing on professionals' decision making?

There is no more hotly contested question in EBP than 'what is evidence?' The word evidence refers to what is plainly visible not just to one person but to many; it implies the existence of an objective reality that is easily discernible. In research terms, evidence is related to positivism: a valuing of research based on scientific principles, probability theory and data that is observable to the senses. It is unsurprising then that many proponents of EBP in health and social care conceive 'current best evidence' in line with positivist principles. This is particularly apparent in the promotion by some of a hierarchy of methodologies, with randomised controlled trials and outcome evaluations (which seek to mirror the classic experiment) at the apex. These studies are particularly concerned with determining the accuracy with which the treatment, intervention or programme causes the desired outcome. For example, in evaluating the success of a programme to support bereaved parents (with increased support being the outcome), how confident are we that it was the programme that increased

parents' feelings of support and not other variables, such as the influence of friends and family or the use of anti-depressant medication? However, while some (e.g. Macdonald, 1999) promote these designs as a 'gold standard' for social work and social care, others caution against over-generalising their usefulness. For Qureshi (2004) it is the nature of the research question that should determine the appropriate methodology, and there are many methodologies relevant to social work and social policy – including qualitative methods – that are often more appropriate than experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

Nonetheless, these designs continue to be promoted within social work. Outcome evaluation studies are particularly favoured by managers and governments as they are seen as providing evidence of the effectiveness of professional interventions and programmes. This in turn can help determine whether the benefits gained from the interventions or programmes are worth the costs (cost/benefit analysis). Outcome evaluation can also be used to evaluate the extent to which policy or organisational objectives are achieved. Such an approach rests upon the assumption of 'top-down' decision making processes where knowledge is transferred from a macro (policy) level to a mezzo (organisational) level and through to a micro (practice) level. However, according to Webb (2002), EBP is an attempt by policy makers and managers to control the production of risk and to instill trust in health and welfare delivery. Such attempts are based on the assumption that those who incorporate this approach into their work can directly influence and determine the outcome of decision-making processes. As we discuss further in Chapter 4, it is argued that this is not always possible given the irrational and contingent decision making that is observed in many organisations (Webb, 2001).

Social workers have expressed concerns that positivist, managerialist and top-down approaches to EBP undermine professional autonomy (Webb, 2002) and ignore the perspectives of service users. Beresford and Evans (1999) question the capacity of evidence-based approaches to involve the so-called subjects of research in research processes and to hear the views of consumers on the way services are provided (Beresford and Evans, 1999). A further concern is that, when relying on positivist principles, EBP strives towards increasing levels of accuracy in measuring observable phenomena and thus tends to operate at a surface (observable) level. It may miss the deeper and more complex realities underpinning social issues, including the effects of social and cultural stratification according to such dimensions as 'race', gender, sexual identity, age and disability.

Best practice and practice guidelines

Two strategies for knowledge collection and dissemination, related to EBP, are best practice modelling and the production of practice or clinical guidelines. Best practice involves identifying high quality practice interventions and promoting these as the 'best' or most appropriate responses in given situations in a particular field of practice. Different bodies – such as funders, regulators and

service user groups – are using the concept of best practice in an attempt to influence the work of social workers and other professionals (Manela and Moxley, 2002). As with EBP, best practice can be driven by managerialist agendas and can be experienced by social workers as limiting their autonomy. Demonstrating that an organisation conforms to best practice within a particular area or that it has established a best practice model is frequently used as a strategy to gain funds from governments and other funding bodies. Such a strategy may be seen to give a particular for-profit or community organisation the ‘edge’ when involved in competitive tendering processes, which, as we mentioned earlier, are increasingly common since the neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state.

Determinations of what practices are considered ‘best’ are based variously on the views of experts in the field, on outcomes from research and, sometimes, on the effectiveness of the marketing of particular practices (Manela and Moxley, 2002). A particular concern is that once best practices have been identified within an organisation these practices can then become overly standardised. This may result in an inability to identify opportunities for further improvement or adjustment to suit unique circumstances (Manela and Moxley, 2002).

A similar concern can also be directed at practice or clinical guidelines. These are statements that assist the practitioner to make appropriate decisions, based on research evidence and expert consensus (Howard and Jensen, 1999). They can be conceptualised as statements to guide the practitioner towards best practice. According to Howard and Jensen, practice guidelines should be developed by an expert panel – which may be multi-disciplinary and may also include service user representation – that weighs up the available evidence and evaluates the costs and benefits of different intervention or treatment approaches. In the United States, concerns have been raised about the way practice guidelines may be used as the basis for determining poor practice in malpractice litigation, although they are also promoted as a tool for protecting practitioners against such action (Howard and Jensen, 1999). However, rigidly applying practice guidelines may lead to defensive practice, as outlined by Harris (1987) and as we discuss further in Chapter 4.

A reflexive approach

Concerns about narrow and overly scientific approaches to evidence-based and best practice have been well expressed within social work. Like Qureshi (2004) we choose not to dismiss scientific approaches out of hand or because of a rigid commitment to an alternative epistemology. Social science methods have assisted the development of practice theories in social work and have enabled the exposure of underlying inequalities within society. We also recognise that concepts like EBP and best practice are ones that social workers need to engage with because they are such important features of the health and human services industries and, if engaged with in a certain way, can stimulate greater

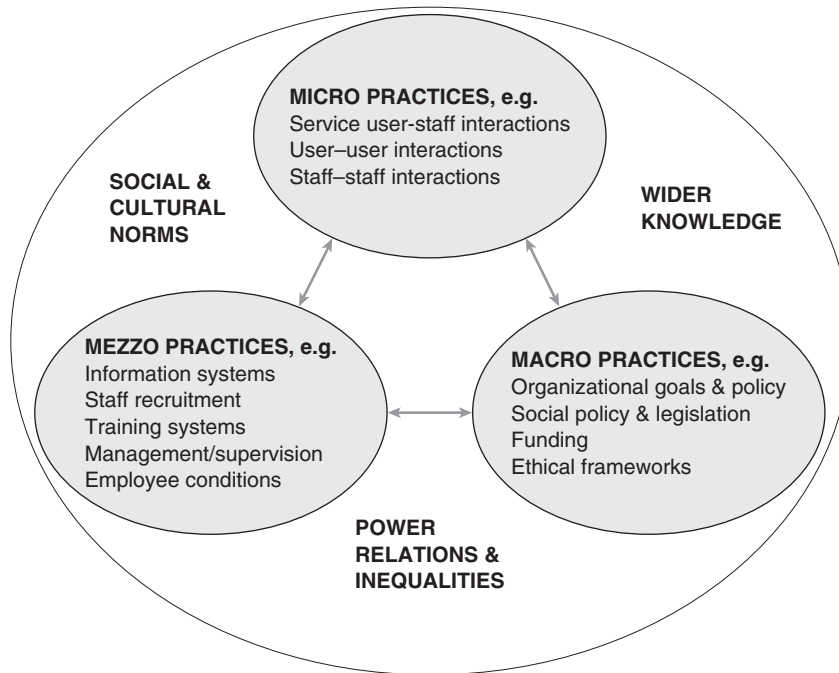


FIGURE 1.1 A reflexive approach to knowledge in organisations

understanding of the complexities of practice and its potentials. We argue for a critical, reflexive and inclusive approach to knowledge generation and sharing within organisations. Such an approach would incorporate concepts like EBP and best practice but would not be constrained by them. It would draw widely on theory and research emerging from other disciplines, particularly from organisations and management studies. It would also recognise the value of social workers being involved in researching organisational practice and, in particular, researching service users' experiences and needs.

An essential part of such an approach is the recognition that there are different levels of experience within human service organisations (this is examined further in Chapter 7). It is important to note that our discussion here focuses on knowledge for organisational work, rather than on social work knowledge generally. In this section we have adopted the convention of identifying micro, mezzo and macro levels and have focused on different organisational practices (as outlined in Figure 1.1). The micro level of experience within organisations relates to person-to-person relational encounters. Thus micro organisational practices include the small-scale everyday interactions between the key players within the organisation. How people experience organisations is in part defined by these relational encounters. If conflict occurs, if personalities clash, if there is a feeling of dislike or distrust, then the implications for the organisation and the delivery of its services to particular individuals or communities can be

considerable. From our perspective social workers need detailed knowledge of these micro practices.

Another level of experience that we need to develop an understanding of involves mezzo organisational practices: these relate to the systems and processes the organisation has established to ensure optimal organisational functioning. For many employees, including social workers, mezzo organisational practices often feel imposed on them by managers and they are usually written up as organisational procedures. However, without these mezzo practices organisational work would almost certainly become chaotic. As outlined in Figure 1.1 such practices include the organisation's information management systems, such as its computer and records-keeping systems, as well as its systems for staff supervision, training and recruitment. Social workers need an understanding of how these systems guide and direct the micro organisational practices and, in turn, how these micro practices might influence the development – including the undermining – of the mezzo practices. For example, if social workers are receiving limited supervision, how does this affect their micro encounters with service users? Additionally, if in their everyday relations some staff prefer to liaise and make decisions in informal settings, such as the tea room, in order to avoid including those other staff who they find difficult, how does this affect the effectiveness of weekly staff meetings?

In turning to the macro organisational practices, we identify a need to understand those wider organisational practices, usually initiated by people in senior management positions, which affect the overall direction and work of the organisation. These practices are most clearly seen in formal organisational policy documents, including those released to the public, such as annual reports, strategic plans and mission statements. However, macro organisational practices relate not just to internal organisational policies, but to the effects of wider social policy and legislation on the organisation and its work.

Social workers need knowledge of how these wider macro practices affect both mezzo and micro practices and where there may be tensions and inconsistencies. For example, professional codes of ethics may directly influence the micro practices of social workers employed in an organisation even though these macro practices may not be recognized at the mezzo level. Additionally what happens at a micro and mezzo level determines the effectiveness of macro practices. If staff ignore a particular policy initiative, either of the organisation or of government, then in that context the initiative exists only on paper. In the model we outline in Figure 1.1, policy implementation is not conceptualized as a 'top-down' process; rather we emphasise the interactions between micro, mezzo and macro practices in shaping the ultimate effectiveness of policy. Importantly, policy makers, both at organisational and societal levels, need information back from the mezzo and micro levels on how policies are enacted on the ground and how future policies might be better constructed.

In addition to understanding the interactions between the micro, mezzo and macro levels of organisations we also acknowledge in Figure 1.1 that organisations operate within wider social and cultural contexts. In order to understand

the interactions between different organisational practices social workers will also need to understand them in relation to social and cultural norms, to wider knowledge which includes but is not limited to professional and disciplinary knowledge, and to wider power relations and inequalities. For example, despite the fact that equal opportunity and anti-discrimination policies might exist at macro and mezzo organisational levels, it is not until we locate micro practices within the wider context of power inequalities within society that we can understand the barriers women and black and ethnic minority workers experience within human service organisations. Similarly in order to understand how ethical principles, such as the right to privacy and confidentiality, might be breached when faced with an alternative principle, such as a right to safety, it is helpful to understand these principles within the context of wider social and cultural norms and values.

In developing our understanding of organisational practices we need to draw on different sources of knowledge. These include: our knowledge of organisational and social work theories, knowledge gained from organisational systems (e.g. information systems), shared experiences and knowledge of the organisation and its members, and our own ongoing critique of our practice. This might involve some of the strategies employed by evidence based practice, best practice modelling and practice guidelines but would not be limited to these. It would also come from research on organisational dimensions of social work, including research on the interactions between different levels of experience within organisations.

For us, a focus for knowledge development should be the everyday organisational practices and their impact on service users and communities. Knowledge generation could be a reflexive process in that we would be constantly critiquing our involvement and would be striving to learn and improve our practice.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of evidence-based practice, best practice and practice guidelines?
- 2 What are some alternative sources of knowledge which are essential for organisational practice?

Conclusion

In this chapter we have provided a broad overview of issues for social work in contemporary human service organisations. Social workers are one of a number of players in these organisations and they compete with other professions

and occupations in the wider human services labour market. The changing nature of this labour market and the impact of neo-liberalism and managerialism have been perceived by some to be threats to social work's status and integrity as a profession. While this may be the case, these developments determine the contemporary organisational contexts in which many social workers practice. Similarly, many social workers (and academics) are grappling with the implications of evidence-based practice, best practice modelling and practice guidelines. While we do not discount these ideas out of hand, we recommend and seek to adopt in this book a wider, thorough and more critical analysis of social work's place in organisations.

Later in the book we explore the implications of such a reflexive approach to social work in organisations. First, though, it is important to turn to the theory emerging from organisations and management studies, which variously provide insights into the different levels of organisational experiences as highlighted earlier. This is the focus of our next chapter.