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Innovation or Stagnation – Social Work Organisations as Models of Behaviour for Clients

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Summary. *The profession of social work is fundamentally concerned about the persisting problems of socially alienated people and communities. Social work, by relying on its long heritage of practical experience, intelligent conceptual models and leading edge methodologies for change, works consistently to develop radically different approaches to helping clients. They do so by challenging the government, welfare agencies and charities to review their strategies and practices across society as a whole. The profession of social work also has to manage the tension between a prevailing view of welfare services as a burden on the public purse and one which views welfare services as being for the good of society as a whole. Social policies and good social work services are a wise form of endowment in the potential of individuals and communities whose considerable resources and strengths for their and society's mutual benefit are otherwise wasted.*

Key words: welfare; social work; sustainability; alienation; autonomy and independence; power and authority.

Introduction

The problem is that the current welfare system in the UK has been a crucial building block in the making of a democratic society and one of its greatest achievements of post-WWII social reconstruction. Yet it has become unsustainable.

The reason for this is that the welfare system addresses welfare problems on an individualistic, rational and mechanical basis without reference to deeper underlying problems of social

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dislocation, marginalisation and a general social fear of dependency; yet paradoxically, these approaches themselves foster dependency on state welfare provision and charity, thus enlarging the problems that are meant to be solved by the welfare system; and squanders the potential of those it serves due to a deficit-based, remedial model, i.e., fixing the problem after it has occurred. Reducing deficit does not always lead to the empowerment of people.

The need is to develop a model of welfare organisations that is based on positive contribution of clients, which seeks to realise the value and resources of every individual, for them and for society.

Our research involves conducting trials through genuine shared stakeholder leadership, of an alternative, value-based model with clients that acknowledge the inter-connectedness between the components of the whole system and the cyclical nature of social and individual problems.

The outcomes involve evaluating strategic and operational approaches based on principles of empowerment and democracy and their impact on individuals; the effectiveness of the welfare services that clients access; and the reliability of refined concepts, models and tools that would enable effective organisational developments and wider roll-out to the rest of society.

Power must be considered in relation to the social and economic changes in the western world during the past 400–500 years, and their impact on individuals and organisations.

According to Gary Becker (1968):

- fragmentation of our organisations without an over-arching unity is unproductive, positively harmful and hinders progress: "we become mired in data, and devoted to triviality"
- the idea of progress must be re-introduced and re-interpreted
- the separation of fact and value is an anomaly and has no place in contemporary society
- the science of man in society must opt for human progress and must have a clear and compelling idea of what constitutes such progress, viz. the incessant implementation of human well-being
- having achieved a comprehensive theory of human alienation, we must now use it to help us design a clear ideal of progress

The great theological systems of the Middle Ages were based on power and privilege, tyranny, coercion, benevolent paternalism; society was composed of more-or-less fixed classes. From the earliest feudal times, social structures shifted on the sands of economic and industrial change that eventually undermined them.

In the industrial age of the 20th century there was a new-found optimism of the new world, but the ideals proposed by the Rationalists of the 18th and 19th centuries were undermined by the social realities of the 19th century with its increased tempo of social disruption and institutional change.

The problems of the late Renaissance and Enlightenment are the same as they are today: how are we to reconcile science with the larger designs of human life? Thinkers who attacked and undermined medieval cosmology, which had man as the centre of God's world, had to come up with a new unification of scientific thought, because the times were out of joint and man was not at home in his world. The fragmentation of knowledge, which scientific classification was encouraging like the fragmentation of service and production systems in our organisations, is extremely destructive. The 19th century philosophers protested against a science which was divorced from human affairs, a science which took the universe and not man as a centre.

M. Weber (1947) saw that man's own organised efficiency would threaten to degrade him completely. In medieval times the idea of the decay of nature held sway and was itself a moral force and had a moral significance. That is to say one could be an optimist even though the world was going to pot. By contrast, in the troubled times of our Age of Terror, with instant annihilation is a constant possibility and background anxiety, we can see what we have lost with the loss of the medieval cosmology.

The contribution made by Freud and psychoanalysis at the beginning of the 20th century, and in particular the place of the unconscious in understanding the social world of groups and organisations is hugely significant for social work. Freud summed up the whole movement of thought of the Enlightenment by clarifying the problem of alienation, and showing exactly how society cripples its members by means of their early indoctrination. It was Freud who fixed the social nature of the self in the early development of the child. Freud forged the daring and imaginative idea of early ego development into the Oedipus complex. It is this that offers us a very precise theory of character formation and gives us the clearest possible picture of how early training skewed the child's world view. Freud showed us how early training can completely cripple the child, how it can prevent him from coping with the adult world, or train him to cope so well and so automatically and unquestioningly that he never becomes his own person in the process; he showed how the mass of people never get to be persons, but rather remain cultural artefacts. Freud's important contribution, therefore, was a theory of alienation from society. Freud's whole work confronted society with all its harmful effects. He supported this with the excellent theory of anxiety, which allowed him to describe the growth of the personality by means of "identification", "mechanisms of defence" and the final confrontation with the "Oedipus complex".

Freud's theory of ego development showed that each individual used different techniques to ward off anxiety and to maintain a sense of self-esteem. As a result, with all these different "defence mechanisms" there is bound to be social friction. The Oedipus complex therefore, is best considered not a complex as such, but actually a synonym for the whole period of early training. It is the early world view into which the child is fashioned. There is nothing mysterious about the terms Oedipus complex and neurosis. They mean simply that the child is burdened by his early learning; by "burdened" is meant that the child learns to conduct himself, and to execute choices, in a manner which will avoid anxiety, and which will be pleasing to parents.

Because of similarities to relationships between subordinates and superiors in the work situation, we can substitute workers and managers, for children and parents. The worker, like the child, learns to gain feelings of self-value by performing to the codes of the organisation.

Therefore the tradition of personality development theory leaves little doubt about the character of alienation; of people's inability to act meaningfully in a "frame of things". The 19th century offered peace and happiness by turning people into "owning" animals. In the 21st century we have redoubled efforts to make everyone a satisfied consumer, who will live in an effortless world. Today we see that this basic premise is utterly false, that people are "doing" creatures, and not "owning" ones, and that "doing" must be achieved in the largest possible framework of meaning. All in all, we have the most powerful scientific evidence of the basic anti-humanism of our present consumer, profit-oriented industrial system. Little wonder that both politicians and academic social scientists have turned their backs on the authentic nature of social theory and its urgent message to our times: to recognise it, they would have to become antagonists to some of the basic features of the social system that sustains them. The problem of the relationship of human knowledge to society remains exactly where it was when Plato first lamented it 2500 years

ago: political and social leaders must scorn those who will radically change their habitual world.

How do we work with the destructive forces in our organisations?

From these ideas flows a clear requirement for any organisation to pay attention to the following aspects of their functioning:

Firstly, whilst a major strength of any organisation is its business-like image, which conveys a sense of paternalistic protectiveness, this can be rather recessive. We believe that whilst it is essential not to downgrade these masculine characteristics, it is important in shaping the future to add a more feminine emphasis like listening, understanding, nurturing, promoting, integrating, sustaining, etc.

Secondly, organisations need to adopt holistic approaches to individuals, their group, the company and "change" and "communications" and to consider the individual and technology in a linked way, i.e., to aim towards integrated sociotechnical systems. This is highly motivating to people and presents an opportunity for organisations to emphasise what are contemporary and relevant benefits.

Thirdly, the defence mechanisms against integrating change policies and communications systems within workrelated activities, means that people perceive themselves as isolates. It is easy to metaphorically "keep your head down" and pretend that the issues do not affect one. There is scope to find ways of fostering integration at a perceptual level and in reality within organisations so that "change" and "communications" becomes more integrated into work.

Fourthly, in all organisations there is a clear need for education, training and development, and being aware that in order to work, slow, step-by-step organic approaches are required in order to change attitudes and behaviour with relevance to workrelated thought and activity. Research highlights the importance of individual, departmental and organisational activity, which can be used in different ways to generate interest, provide information and to shape the nature of communications as a resource which promotes the organisation's general purpose. Personnel everywhere needs continuing education in order to enrich workrelated communication.

Fifthly, there is a need to develop people's knowledge of other parts of their organisations and their roles in relation to those parts in a tangible way. Inductions, joint seminars, study days, conferences, local and international, more social occasions, spontaneous and formal, can be fostered.

Finally, in terms of the approach to education and training, there is a requirement to provide activities which are integrated with daytoday work, rather than removed from it. These should be carried out in an environment committed to learning, the acquisition of knowledge and skills, so that people believe they have a choice and may be motivated towards participating in the choice process. They can be helped to see that they can use their organisations constructively, and that they will not be absorbed or trapped by them or denied their creativity, so that their organisations would become bad employers.

Rationale: our diagnosis and assumptions

The current model of welfare in the UK is not working. With £49bn spent on benefits in 2012–13[2], a further £63 million spent so far on a Work Programme that has a success rate of 3.5%[3], and

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[2]   Figure taken from DWP Annual Report 2011–12. London: DWP 2012.

[3]   Figures taken from National Audit Office: *The Introduction of the Work Programme*. London, National Audit Office 2012.

£318 million spent every year on alternative learning[4] operating as a remedy to poor outcomes in mainstream education, public funds are not being spent as effectively as they could be. That says nothing of the cost that society pays in the price for homes and communities where the system has failed to prevent the cycles of generational deprivation. For clients in particular, the model of welfare is reactionary in that it helps them to cope when things go wrong, rather than being proactive in helping them progress into thriving, independent adulthood and contributing members of civil society.

'Welfare' means much more than the public money spent on benefit. It means all the public, private and 'third-sector' strategic, funding and services arrangements and state, professional and individual efforts, that are expended on 'helping people in need'. The silo-type nature of much of this strategizing and funding means that public services in general are engaged in 'fire-fighting' rather than ensuring effective progression of clients towards independence.

Given the scale of the welfare and public services budgets and the current economic challenges, this is unsustainable. Neither is it sufficient to make superficial changes designed to achieve more with less. Cost-effectiveness improvements on the scale suggested by the Coalition Government's austerity programme require not just efficiency improvements, but a radically different approach – one that takes a holistic view of individuals, families and communities in their life stages and social milieu and looks to the long-term.

For example, successive cuts to public funding in housing-related support have led to spiralling rents, making it near-impossible for a young person to continue being supported when they find work. There are organisations in the UK provide help and support to thousands of 16–25 year olds per year with agreed, individually tailored programmes which give them access to housing, learning, personal development, training and employment opportunities in line with their needs and goals. However, when they find work they are often forced to move out of their accommodation, meaning that they lose the emotional and practical support that had helped them get into work in the first place, leading to a 'revolving door' circular scenario of repeat homelessness and unemployment. This cycle of despair has consequences for their mental and physical health, their sense of identity and well-being and other social dysfunction factors like crime, drugs, relationship problems and suicide.

Target-driven services of the government mean that the focus of the service is on the target rather than the person the service is designed to help. And 'targeting' people by their 'deficits' – as unemployed; as an offender; as a teenage parent, etc., is itself part of the problem. It supports recipients in coping with their deficits instead of enabling them to develop thriving, sustainable independent lives as they move from adolescence into adulthood.

The contribution of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations to understanding the problems of clients comes from the study of social systems from a systems psychodynamics standpoint. This offers the view that fear and hostility towards young people, for instance, is influenced by the social dynamics that feed on deep-seated social fears of the sexuality and aggression of young people, a fear that tends to demonise teenagers and pigeon-holes and controls them in order that they should no longer pose a threat. There is a trend of defining clients as 'moral panics' – when a condition or an episode, a person or a group of people becomes defined as a threat to societal values and interests (Cohen, 1973). 'Moral panics' result in treating clients as either 'mad', 'bad'

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4   Based on estimates provided in Taylor: *Improving Alternative Provision*. London, Department for Education 2012.

or 'sad' with consequent over-regulation, criminalisation and medicalisation of clients, treating them as objects of surveillance and control, rather than as capable and creative contributors to society. These aspects of the 'beneath-the-surface' dynamics probably permeate all layers of the welfare system and tend to remove power, growth and independence from clients.

These issues have implications for the social work profession and the institutions in which they work – duplication, incoherence, low productivity and low morale, whilst in others, recipients of one service are ignored because there is nothing to move them on to – progression is blocked. We need to understand the characteristics, skills and beliefs that underpin successful progression, and to develop practical applications for every client context, especially for young people. We need to lead in development, innovation and practical support for clients by transforming education and training so that it achieves lifelong progression.

The situation is particularly acute for young people. The changing demographics of the nation mean that the current welfare model is not sustainable; young people are our future, not our problem and we need a new model that acknowledges the vital contribution that these people will make for themselves and for all of us. We need to develop a model of welfare that is based on positive investment to maximise personal assets, rather than one of negative costs to remedy perceived deficits.

What needs to change?

We need to move our welfare, educational, employment, housing, health and justice systems:

From deficit to asset

The deficit focus of the government's and charities' current approaches to helping clients perpetuates practices that lead to duplicated effort, higher costs and lower performance. By making the most of individual assets and strengths, services can build on a journey of progression for the individual and society, based on developing human potential for contributing to personal maturity and the greater good.

From silos to systems

Policies and services developed and delivered with limited reference to each other lead to incoherent and conflicting strategies and organisations and their staff remaining stuck in their silos. Housing, education, social care and faith organisations provide overlapping interventions, which can perpetuate cycles of dependence. A 'whole system' view focused on the needs of the whole person makes for coherent programmes of support and builds increasing independence from the services themselves.

From short-term service targets to personal progression journeys

Many social workers know the reality of meeting targets designed to regulate services for the purposes of accountability, cost-effectiveness and reporting. But these targets often serve system requirements at the expense of the person in receipt of them, and lead to resistance, subversion, false reporting and greater cost. A long-term view of the goals of welfare investment in an individual's personal progression journey towards thriving adulthood enables alternative

accountability measures and milestones to be developed that serve the vision rather than the system.

From linear thinking to understanding the cyclical nature of social problems

Poverty, poor education, lack of skills, mental illness, violence, exclusion from social, political and economic life are inextricably linked together. This is a challenge for the whole of society and it is generational. We need greater understanding of the inter-locking nature of patterned cycles of social behaviour. Social problems and their solutions do not follow straight cause-and-effect lines. Without knowledge of systems thinking, without a belief in individual and group potential, intervening helps in the short term, but leaves other questions unanswered.

Our proposal

We have identified a four-stage cycle designed to support the effective application of a new model of welfare system.

Innovation: By bringing together new methodologies, and the research and consultancy expertise of the Tavistock Institute in understanding and working with group relations (cf. www.grouprelations.com), political theory, leadership studies and organisational development and change practice, we help re-think how welfare services are commissioned and delivered to facilitate the kind of welfare conversation we are looking for.

In order for us to do this, we employ tested techniques such as Future Search Conferences (cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Future_Search) to draw recipients (clients), practitioners (social workers), commissioners of welfare and leaders of welfare organisations together into the conversation.

Interpretation: Following our initial development work, we have identified the innovations required and by engaging together with staff and clients, we are able to interpret the data for innovations. Possible changes to practice include how the general concepts of the 'positive welfare conversation' are 'translated', paying attention to different languages, cultures, operations, organisational contexts, challenges, etc.

Implementation: Our 'interpretation' is applied in ways that can be 'owned' by local organisations and maintained. Our approaches take account of the full range and diversity of provision – size of population, location, age range, gender mix, ethnicity, levels of need, etc. Our approach also takes into account general organisational resistance to change, the dynamics of leadership and issues of autonomy and independence.

Impact: Impact on locally identified outcomes is evaluated both for the local context and for the general concepts and models, so that learning can be transferred to other situations. This includes addressing the impact on individuals as well as the impact on stakeholder organisations of adopting the modified approach to 'welfare'.

Characteristics of the new Model of Welfare:

Our model looks more like 'scaffolding' that enables recipients to 'climb to' or build a thriving livelihood. Welfare should not be regarded as a burden on the state, but rather as an important investment in the future. At its heart, this conversation with Government and welfare organisations

has the notion of the 'whole person, whole journey' and is designed to facilitate progression at every stage.

We believe that 'welfare' should be a conversation between the state, the stakeholders and the recipients, based on relationship, rather than transaction. 'Working with' rather than 'doing to' is our paramount value.

Our social work models should have a strong sense of co-production and co-ownership between commissioner, provider and recipient. They should be flexible and happen in a 'transitional and transformational space', that allows for risk-taking, and finding-out together, rather than attempting to attain a pre-determined set of measures, as if officialdom knows what is best for clients.

Strategically, welfare organisations and social workers should organise search conferences for recipients, practitioners, and commissioners of welfare to agree the 'welfare' agenda, the issues and the 'solutions'; they should re-define welfare as an investment in the future; they should re-define how welfare services are commissioned and delivered for clients that promotes autonomy and eschews dependency; they should develop specific learning objectives and greatest impact in different welfare contexts.

Operationally, welfare organisations and social workers should access and work with clients 'in transition'; identify key stakeholders who contribute to the welfare of clients; develop the 'scaffold' and develop a blueprint for the national and local dialogue between welfare providers and clients; support the 'solutions' on a blueprint of life phases; identify the changes to practice that need to happen; and apply the model so that it can be locally 'owned' and maintained.

I propose that the welfare conversation with clients should be guided by the motto:

"Providing opportunities for clients to have the kind of developmental conversations they would otherwise never have."

Welfare institutions and social workers need to challenge the status quo. The conversations you have should bring together the 'well-being' perspective with the 'well-doing' perspective. Our experience shows that the two perspectives cannot be separated. We promote new, innovative and developmental attitudes to clients and especially to young persons based on a clear set of values and principles. The focus of this work is a relationship with clients to help them too to resist the status quo.

Ethics of care should inform your approach – acknowledging the risks of falling into a paternalistic mode of care. This requires a clear purpose of not simply getting clients 'to cope', but to do something more with their lives. An example of such an approach is how we work on the learning task – instead of getting experts to think 'how do we define learning outcomes?', we support social work practitioners to find the best ways of helping clients to define their own learning objectives and outcomes for themselves. Hence, your key values should include obtaining the views of clients themselves and helping in the realisation of these.

Clients should lead: We should not lead and direct these conversations; instead, our task is to create frameworks and opportunities for having these conversations. It is more like a 'scaffold' than a structure. It is a language, framework and process; it is not static. The value lies in the dynamic nature of what we are doing. People's roles change as a result of this process; there are no fixed indicators of outcome – each individual develops their own indicators.

Flexible support: These processes should be supported by practitioners who are role models

themselves, where their role is to 'stand next to' the client, brokering, on the boundary between the person and the outside world.

Working with the boundaries: Social workers need to take into account the fears that clients have of established, fixed boundaries and institutions and we should respect and work with their refusal to abide by boundaries – both psychological and social. Being aware that the world of clients is fluid, we should know that categorising is counter-productive. Clients should be encouraged to 'play', experiment and learn, including risk-taking. The boundaries provided by the welfare organisations' structures and meant to provide stability in order to provide a 'safe' environment for relating and conversing.

Acknowledgements:

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