Managers: Are they really to blame for what's happening to social work?

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Abstract: *Over the last 30 years a number of commentators have observed that social work in Britain is in a condition of crisis (Lymbery, 2001; Clarke, 1993; Jones and Novak, 1993) and neo-liberal policies and managerialist practices are transforming social work (Harris, 2003). The negative impact has been well documented by those advocating radical responses to increased managerial control over the processes and outputs in social work (Jones, 2001, Rogowski, 2008, Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). Some blame managers for these transformations (Jones, 2001, Rogowski, 2008, Ferguson and Woodward, 2009) whilst the media, politicians and the public continue to blame social workers when things go wrong (Cohen, 2002) even if the tragedy was unavoidable (Mass-Lowt and Hothersall, 2010). However there is evidence that some managers and social workers are working collaboratively to resist managerialism (Evans, 2009) which supports those who argue that the transformation of social work is not yet complete (Kirkpatrick, 2006). This paper explores these contradictory viewpoints and finds evidence of a range of strategies and approaches that are being adopted by managers and social workers, including collaborative approaches which need to be better understood.*

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Introduction

Social work has traditionally mediated between the state and citizens but changes to the welfare system over the last 30 years have directly impacted upon the social work role, and how social workers engage with service users. Lymbery (2001) asserts that

> The recasting of welfare by the New Right affected the way in which the state has chosen to interpret its mediating role in respect of social work and a more coercive and restricted role has been constructed. (p.377)

As a result 'social work practice has been subject to increased managerial control and social worker levels of autonomy have been reduced. This has created a sense of crisis which has been experienced particularly within Social Services Departments (Lymbery, 2001). Jones (2001) supports this view arguing that social work has been transformed and downgraded. He blames managers for this situation arguing that they have responded compliantly to the neo-liberal agenda, are bullies, have lost touch with the welfare ideals of social work and they can no longer be relied upon to support state social work.

There is evidence to support the assertion that the social work role has been eroded or transformed by management practice. Research by Dustin (2007) for example suggests that care management had transformed the social work role through administrative processes that emphasise targeting, financial assessments and the co-ordination of care packages. In children and family's social work, Munro (2010a) argues that over-standardised administrative systems and performance management priorities have distorted social work practice, leaving social workers unable to exercise their professional judgement. She identifies a culture of blame that has led to defensive social work practices and suggests that social work management is one contributory factor to why this is happening. She takes the view that practice appears to be dominated by management performance requirements rather than professional concerns. Research by Broadhurst et al (2010) however suggests that

> whilst social work practitioners are obliged to comply with risk reduction technologies .... Informal processes continue to play a critical role in shaping decisions and actions in this relationship-based profession. (p.1046)

What is interesting about this research is that the authors were not suggesting that social workers were unaffected by the excessive performance monitoring and audit demands but that they continued to use discretion and make decisions based upon their experiences with service users, regardless of these constraints. Harris (2003) also suggests that some social workers are working creatively and moving beyond the constraints of performance management, rather than being subordinated by it. Dustin (2007) found some evidence of social workers using discretion, although this varied

from team to team, and was dependant upon whether 'the manager respected them and the social worker was able to make a case for their plan' (p.66). Developing this idea further, Evans (2010) asserts that some social workers and managers in Older People and Mental Health teams are working collaboratively despite the constraints imposed by managerialism and his work challenges the assertion that managers have all the power and social workers have none. He suggests that the manager-worker relationship needs to be examined more closely as managers are a fractured group who do not act simply as 'policy lieutenants' and social work organisations are not 'well oiled policy implementation machines'. This paper seeks to explore these contradictory positions and examines the view that managers are to blame for the significant changes in social work organisation and practice.

The role of social work

Social work is located between competing political ideologies that shape and define social problems and solutions. It is a contested term (Dickens, 2010). This is because social work is constructed from ideas that individuals hold about the world (Payne, 2005). For example, structural theorists such as Mullaly (1997) argue that social work is a project, with its own mission, ideology, and progressive theory. From this perspective, social work seeks to overcome structural barriers, and thereby transform society. The changes that have been imposed upon social work in recent years however, have led many supporters of this view to argue that social work is in crisis (Jones, 2001), and that its role within society needs to be reclaimed (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). These views suggest that social work managers implementing neo-liberal policies, are to be blamed for what is happening to social work (Jones, 2001).

Another viewpoint put forward by Harris (2008) argues that welfare regimes are important as they shape how social work is constituted and enacted. From his perspective, social work is a contingent activity that can be positioned at different moments in time in response to a combination of events and ideas. The dominant discourse at these moments shapes social work. For example, the introduction of recent austerity measures in Britain has seen a re-emergence of a discourse from the last economic recession where the poor were portrayed as over dependant upon the state, as 'work shy' and in some cases not deserving of state help and support. This compares with state social work in the past, where the poor were portrayed as victims of inequalities and injustice and state help was made available to redress these imbalances. Current narratives support the rationing of services, and the withdrawal of welfare benefits. Social workers are required to assess individuals and families to decide if they meet the eligibility criteria for state support and refuse those who are not eligible. Given the expansive roles that social workers held in the past, it appears that the social work role today has been more narrowly re-positioned within society.

Wilson et al (2008, p.3) argues however that social work, which is characterised by complexity, uncertainty and risk can resist any narrowing of practice and continue to build relationships with service users 'even when the wider socio-political context in which they are located is not conducive'. Social work maybe dependent upon the context from which it emerges and in which it engages (McDonald et al, 2003) but it can respond proactively rather than be subordinated by change.

The social work role in Britain can be compared to social work elsewhere. The International Federation of Social Workers (2000) defined social work as promoting 'social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work'(www.ifsw.org). This definition is wide to encompass a world view of social work that reflects the interface between people, their environment, social work principles, theories and activities. This view of social work is compared with a view within the Social Work Task Force (SWTF, 2009) report which asserts that

> When people are made vulnerable – by poverty, bereavement, addiction, isolation, mental distress, disability, neglect, abuse or other circumstances – what happens next matters hugely. If outcomes are poor, if dependency becomes ingrained or harm goes unchecked, individuals, families, communities and the economy can pay a heavy price. Good social workers can and do make a huge difference in these difficult circumstances. (p.16)

Here, social work appears highly functionalist as social workers are concerned with what happens to vulnerable people, regardless of how or why people become vulnerable in the first place. Service users are framed as problems reflecting current political concerns about how vulnerable people generate costs to society, and good social work is said to reduce these costs through interventions. When comparing these two views of social work the Task Force view appears to confirm Shardlow's (2007) assertion that the scope of social work in many other countries is more expansive than in Britain, and reinforces views that social work has been eroded.

Service users views of social workers are that they provide support, control and personal change and

> The first is valued by service users; the others are contentious and particularly in work with children and families seem to be occupying an increasingly central role in social work. (Beresford, 2007, p.7)

This is not unexpected given that service users have criticised social workers for being oppressive, (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009), wary of the power social workers hold and how this is used. Beresford (2007, p.3) suggests that 'service users draw a

distinction between social work and social workers.' What makes social work more acceptable to them is the extent to which good practitioners mediate underlying problems in its ideology and organization (Branfield et al, 2005). This places a big responsibility and creates large challenges for such practitioners. Beresford goes on to suggest that service users value social workers that use a social approach (sees the person in a broader context), a relationship based approach (builds trust and supports empowerment) and can utilise personal qualities to good effect (listens, non-judgemental, warmth, etc). He makes the point that service users are unhappy about the reduction in social work contact with service users and the quality of this contact. This is mirrored in the criticisms by social workers of performance management systems which standardise practice, and generate narrow ways of practicing which are then enforced by managers (Dustin, 2007). Both service user and social worker expectations and behaviours are now understood within performance management discourse, frameworks and a wider neo-liberal context that has to be navigated, despite criticism of this context.

Whilst performance management attracts much criticism in all areas of social work practice, societal and organisational blame has created additional problems for social work (Munro, 2010b). The high level of media interest and societal concerns relating to the management of risk in children and family services in particular has created a hostile environment, as according to Brownbill (2010) social workers attract more blame than other professional groups when things go wrong. Cohen (2002) suggests that the media play an important role in apportioning blame. Mass-Lowit and Hothersall (2010) argue that

> *The Sun*'s coverage of the Baby Peter case demonstrates very clearly what the potential dangers are for any government or its agents (in this case, Haringey Council) of apparently failing to manage significant risk .... If the risks are known or predictable, then the issue becomes one of apportioning blame if bad things happen, even if their occurrence was in fact unavoidable. (p.41)

Munro (2010b) suggests that this situation has generated a blame culture and managers are contributing to social work problems as they exert more control over social workers which has led to defensive practices and increased risks to children.

The role of social work within society therefore has been framed by a neo-liberalist paradigm which has re-positioned social work, and concerns are being expressed that performance management may be dominating professional concerns through the narrowing of expectations in relation to the social work role and the increased standardisation and management control over social work practice. In a role where social workers are required to implement government policies that reduce state social work support. To understand how social workers are responding to these challenges we need to look further at what is happening in practice.

What is happening within social work?

Academics have developed models of practice that can provide insight into what is occurring in social work. Payne (2005) has developed a three dimensional model which is similar to a two dimensional model developed by Mullaly (1997). The first dimension identified by Mullaly (1997) is a *conventional approach* which focuses upon helping vulnerable people to cope or adjust to their situation. Payne (2005) refers to this as individual-reflexive. Social workers who adopt this approach strive to maintain people during difficult periods in their lives, so that when they recover, they can continue with their lives. A second dimension identified by Mullaly (1997) is a *progressive approach*, which Payne (2005) refers to as socialist-collectivist. Social workers who adopt this approach see themselves as empowering people to get what they need and engage in challenging inequalities and social injustices as they seek to transform society. A third dimension identified by Payne (2005) is the *reflexive-therapeutic* approach, where social workers focus upon supporting and enabling service users to overcome personal difficulties in their lives. Payne suggests each of these three perspectives represents social work activities, which are critical as well as complementary in relation to each other (p.11).

Payne's (2005) three dimensional model allows us to examine the perspectives and activities of social work. For example a social worker who incorporates all three dimensions in their practice but who is working in a role where the social work task is perceived to be one dimensional, may react by resisting pressure from his/her manager to work in a one dimensional way. Alternatively a social worker may decide to comply, or be required to comply. Where collaboration is possible social workers may be able to negotiate and agree with their manager to work in ways that enable them to draw upon all the three approaches using their professional discretion. These strategies mirror similar strategies found in education where head teachers and teachers were faced with unintended policy outcomes and practice dilemmas (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005).

Social work literature is full of examples of these strategies being used by social workers. White et al. (2009, p.12) for example, summarise how social workers in referral and assessment teams who were trying to safeguard children and meet performance targets, found that it was only possible to offer a service to those children and families that met strict eligibility criteria, and use rationing strategies for the remaining cases. The impact of performance targets they suggested was profound in these situations where relationship based practice struggled to remain relevant within a time-operated system. Social workers would have to adopt strategies that ensure that individual-reflexive or conventional approaches did not come to dominate their practice particularly as performance management is already restricting what they can offer. However it may be difficult to respond in any other way than with compliance, given the scrutiny that some managers exert over social work practice. Jones (2001) argues that social work managers should challenge these situations,

as they create low morale and high levels of stress for workers, and this situation is not good for service users. He blames managers for accepting this situation.

A second response by social workers is covert resistance. There is a range of ways in which social workers might undertake resistance. White (2009 found that

> '… workers often mystify or conceal their knowledge of service users in order to acquire resources ('dressing up assessments…') (p.139). Collinson (1994, p25) refers to this as strategic manipulation of knowledge and information. Second ….is to deliberately delay paperwork or assessment plans so that managers are manipulated into taking a course of action…Third, apparent cooperation with a social work task may often conceal resistance. Such forms of resistance centre of 'destabilising truth and challenging subjectivities and normalising discourses' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p.727).

A similar response but one that is more open, is overt resistance. Broadhurst et al (2001) highlighted the tension that existed between social workers and managers in the following quote (p.11)

> Social worker: My manager said to me 'why haven't you finished that yet?'…and I said 'well the health visitor hasn't called me back…and they said, 'well, no, if you've decided that its family support, then the outcome won't change, whatever they say. I said 'I disagree' and of course that information informs my assessment. I'm not putting my name to that', (p.11)

The social worker in this scenario refused to accept the managers attempt to take away professional discretion and to assert management power over social work practice. In both overt and covert resistance social workers are not compliant. The relationship between the social worker and manager is adversarial (either overtly or covertly) as managers and social workers battle for control over practice. In this scenario it is possible for social workers to appear to use a dimension of the practice model managers wish them to use, but to actually extend the range of activities through resistance strategies.

A third potential response is collaboration. Evans (2010) suggestion that local managers often chose to co-operate with practitioners is because giving practitioners control over decision-making and practice ensures that the work is completed. Local managers and professionals can work together to promote professionalism, and this is achievable as senior managers are occupied with organisation performance rather than the details of professional practice. Local managers encourage social workers to exercise professional judgement and are able to offer professional support and guidance rather than act simply as agents of hierarchical control, which is valued by social workers (Evans, 2010). Social workers are encouraged to use discretion and to exercise professional freedom and judgement and be mindful of performance requirements which require them to adapt their practice. In this scenario it would be possible for social workers to openly use any combination of the three dimensions outlined in Payne's (2005) model.

The social workers who adopt resistance and collaboration strategies challenge the prevailing view of 'management domination and control of practices' (Evans, 2010, p.2) but it must be tempered by evidence that front line practice has become more regulated and restrictive, (Kirkpatrick, 2006). Compliance maybe the only option as Jones (2001) points to evidence of management bullying and stressful work environments as managers assert their authority over social workers. The role that managers play therefore needs further examination.

Management in social work

The transformation of social work is based upon

> a new spectrum of values – of freedom rather than equality, individualism rather than community, efficiency rather than justice, and competition rather than cooperation. (Ranson and Stewart, 1994, p.48)

These values are problematical for social work as they are ideologically at odds with the values espoused by social workers and are embedded within social work and employer codes of practice (GSCC, 2002). Adherences to these codes are a registration requirement of professional registration and regulation for social workers. This complex mix of values provides the context within which social work management is located and practised.

Lawler and Bilson (2010) suggest that administration, which preceded social work management, was based upon negotiation, mediation and consensus. This approach could accommodate social work values. These authors have developed a model that explains the difference between administration and social work management. They start by identifying a rational-objective category which lies at one end of a continuum with a set of characteristics that include a rational, linear and bureaucratic orientation, a utilitarian ethical position, as well as views of change that are predictable, planned and managerially determined. Management 'know how' is generalist rather than managers having a specific understanding of social work and they assume that the external environment is stable and that a knowable reality exists. Within social work organisation, at a senior level in particular, managers can be found at this end of the continuum. As managers of the new social work business (Harris, 2003) they are focused upon managing systems that control finance, information and resources to deliver strategically planned outputs that achieve performance targets (Evans, 2010). They rely on tools that standardise practice, rational approaches to developing the business and collate data even though these tools simplify and standardise complex work, and exclude practice dilemmas. The rational-objective category contrasts with the reflective-pluralist position where social reality is constructed, where management practice is specific to social work, and change is considered unpredictable,

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conflictual and emergent. Management work includes social, emotional and reflective orientations, and the ethical position is constructivist and compassionate.

In Dustin's (2007) work the characteristics of the rational-objective category was evident at the front line, where care managers were subject to management practices that controlled worker activity to achieve planned targets. Dustin (2007) details the effects of what she described as the McDonaldization of social work upon social work practice. Social workers struggled to work in ways that conformed to their codes of practice and in ways that made important aspects of their work visible. Social work practice deals with real people's lives, which are messy and often complex and social workers have to engage with that complexity and be able to respond flexibly using knowledge that sometimes go beyond the 'rational' into spheres of knowing that can be difficult to articulate, let alone identify and measure. In trying to simplify this work, social work managers can create tensions for social workers which can result in their complying with management pressures, and adopting narrow practice approaches. Some may adopt resistance strategies. Where managers take a reflexive-pluralist position, and understand the complexity of the task and its demands upon social workers, it is possible for them to adopt strategies which enable them to collaborate and work with social workers (Evans, 2010). However, these managers must also know how to manage upwards as senior managers may seek to overlay professional issues with performance and organisational concerns.

How management is practised therefore can affect the strategies that social workers adopt. For example, if a manager is not interested in professional concerns and does not enable social workers to challenge decision making, managers are likely to find that social workers may adopt covert resistance strategies. This can be problematic, particularly if managers are focused upon organisational concerns and they use coercive strategies of control to achieve organisational objectives (Evans, 2009). Such managers perceive social workers to be self-interested and in need of monitoring. This approach is similar to McGregor's (1987) theory X approach used in Dustin's (2007) research. She found that managers who adopted a theory X approach took away discretion from social workers, who were required to focus upon activities whether or not that activity was purposeful. This domination approach is not appropriate in social work which is an ethical and relationship based activity. Evans (2009) also identifies a discursive approach, where managers are sceptical of the management rhetoric, and are critical of coercive approaches. These managers choose not to act compliantly, but rather collaborate with social workers. As Evans (2009, p.150) puts it:

> The discursive approach, then, locates actors within fields of tension – sites within which organisational and management practices can reflect professional strategies and concerns alongside increasingly influential managerialist ideas and concerns, to 'produce new focal points of resistance, compromise and accommodation' (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p.76).

It is within this view of management practice that critical management approaches can be found. The research suggests that management responses are as varied as social workers responses to the changes that have been imposed on them. It is possible therefore to understand how Munro (2010b) could argue that social work practice is dominated by management rather than professional concerns and why Jones (2001) has criticised managers for responding compliantly to neo-liberal reforms, or why social workers have been able to resist and adapt their practice (Broadhurst et al, 2010).

Lawler and Bilson (2010) assert that some social work managers are adopting management approaches that do not fit comfortably with social work values and that the impact upon social workers can be demoralising. One worker in Dustin's (2007) research for example said:

> 'I personally would love a supervision where one can also have reflection and also be able to be honest about the issues you are facing, the way you're considering or resolving them, but it's very much down to targets and actions.' (p.64)

The impact upon services users of inappropriate social work management can be damaging. White (2009) drawing on research by Gupta and Blewett, (2007) says

> What is measured is paper output not work with children. All managers care about is getting the assessment finished on time … We are scrambling around to find more children to be adopted or else we lose our three star status and hundreds of pounds, yet adoption may not be right for these children. (White, 2009, p.34)

However not all social work managers were adopting management approaches that are unsuitable. Dustin (2007) found examples where social workers were well supported and service user requirements were not sacrificed to performance targets. Similarly Ferguson and Woodward, (2009. p.74) highlight a case where there was collaboration at the front line, between social workers and managers, and between senior and front line managers. This is contradicted by Evans (2010) who found managers in social services to be a fractured group. It appears that where social work management worked well, social workers were able to use their professional autonomy, decision making and discretionary approaches to best effect.

What these examples demonstrate is that managers would appear be responding in different ways to the demands being placed upon them. The responses from social workers to these management approaches are illustrated in these quotes below

> Cynicism: *'I think they (senior managers) see social workers as there to, yes, assess the needs, because that's what we're obliged to do; but then as much as possible to limit, to ration what we can do to meet the need as cheaply as possible, as quickly as possible and as long as we get the paper work done then they're happy.'* (White, 2009, p.155)

Blame*: 'There's something missing at senior level in recognising that we really need to work hand in hand and sometimes it feels like we're actually fighting against each other.'* (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009, p.74) and;

'There is a huge gap between managers … who are trying to implement what we've been talking about and their understanding of what actually good practice is' (pg 72).

Understanding: of the difficulties facing managers; *'I wouldn't want to be a manager. I have found my little niche. I do what I can. I don't feel I can compromise myself, to the extent that I would have to, to go up the career ladder',* (White, 2009, p.61)

These examples illustrate the variety of responses that managers are making and how these are perceived by social workers and go some way to explain why managers may be blamed for what is happening to social work

Conclusion

In care management it is generally agreed that the transformation of social work is complete (Lymbery and Postle, 2010). However Dustin (2007) highlights some areas where social workers and social work managers adopted collaboration strategies but this was not representative of her overall findings. It has been suggested that the personalisation agenda (HMG, 2007) is bringing new challenges, particularly in relation to the protection of vulnerable adults and the management of risk, which will require social workers to re-engage with more complex ways of working, but this will be challenging for social workers and managers. Dustin (2007) found management practice largely reflects Theory X approaches, as managers used the performance management frameworks to assert control over social work practice. McGregor's (1987) work is interesting in that he argued that there was a link between the style of management a person adopts and their attitudes to human nature and behaviour. In the case of theory X, McGregor (1987) argues that managers believe that workers are basically uninterested in working hard, in thinking for themselves and prefer to be told what to do. In highlighting that social work practice is being delivered supported by theory X management, Dustin (2007) exposes some serious problems relating to the value base being adopted by managers in care management and raises questions as to how these approaches are affecting service users, although some indications have already been presented in this paper. She highlights some variations in practice, and in particular describes one manager who adopted a theory Y approach which is the antithesis of theory X; this manager worked collaboratively with social workers. It appears that the values informing her social work practice were also informing her management practice. In children and family social work

the picture is more complex. The impact of blame on social work practice is an additional problem, which when added to performance management, is creating a situation where managers appear to be increasing their control over the means and ends of practice, (Derber, 1993). The colonisation of social work by inappropriate management approaches at the front line of social work appears to be undermining social work practice and according to Munro (2010b) reducing the scope for professional judgement and flexibility, which is making it difficult for social workers to learn from practice and is increasing the risks to children. Whilst social workers may wish to respond to inappropriate management practice through resistance strategies so that they can create space for decision making and discretion, this may not always be possible. Evans and Harris (2004) suggest that it is necessary to look at each situation on a case by case basis because what is happening is contingent upon 'beliefs about a manager's desire for, and ability to secure control and workers ability to resist control and seek discretion' (p.871). Where social work managers fail to appropriately support social workers, the social workers may feel justified in blaming managers and respond by adopting what they see as appropriate strategies to alleviate the worst effects of inappropriate management approaches. However, not all managers are responding inappropriately and collaboration strategies are being adopted when both managers and social workers on the front line shared professional concerns and are able to adapt management performance requirements (Evans, 2010) This situation was also found in education (Hoyle and Wallace, 2005). It would be useful to understand more about the conditions for collaboration, along with some analysis of how the demands of the different roles are worked through in the lived experiences of social workers and managers. Whilst the prevailing view is that managers are largely responding compliantly to the changes in social work, it is clear that in practice the picture is far more complex.

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