Leadership: A Crucial Ingredient in Unstable Times

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Summary

Social work is experiencing an unprecedented degree of institutional instability, particularly in the advanced industrial nations which, to varying degrees and via differing paths, have abandoned the Keynesian Welfare State. It has been replaced with a fundamentally different workfare regime in which operates on quite different assumptions – all of which pose fundamental challenges to social work. The degree of change is such that it can be understood as institutional change. The profession needs a number of strategies in response the contemporary de-stabilization. Drawing on theoretical and empirical literature about institutional change we show why it is that professional leadership is crucial in the current environment. The paper reviews what in currently know about leadership, both in general and in relation to social work. Referring to the notion of institutional entrepreneurs and on the role played by other non-social work professional associations in situations of change, we articulate what role leadership can play. We conclude with recommendations about how leadership could be promoted, particularly by the professional associations.

Introduction

From the 1970s onwards, the institutional framework in which social work is located has become increasingly unstable and in some instances, the seemingly unassailable optimism of the post World War Two welfare state has receded into memory. With it, social citizenship has been re-crafted into an entirely new form – one which disarticulates rights to welfare and inserts a differentiated series of obligations on the part of various 'citizens'. Whether we accept it or not, social workers are deeply implicated, though probably not in forming the intent, but certainly in shaping outcomes – both for those who use our services and for ourselves. In the many national contexts where it had become an established part of the modern welfare state, the profession could at one time more or less assume continuity of demand. Currently that demand appears increasingly tenuous. Further, assumptions we might have made about our claims to and rights of professionalism - such as autonomy of decision making, acceptance of our knowledge base and faith in our general efficacy - are less and less viable. The state, it appears, has become at best, indifferent, and at worst, hostile to the general ethos of social justice, redistribution and collective responsibility, an ethos embodied in social work.

So what do we do? Clearly there are a number of strategies that have been suggested by cognoscenti in the profession – ranging from pleas for universal acceptance of evidence-based practice (Gambrill 2003), to calls for re-engagement with advocacy and activism (Anderson and Gryzlack 2002). When examined closely, much of this literature consists of suggestions that social work adapt to developments in the environment, through such activities as learning to cope with managed care (Cohen 2003), or through exploiting policy developments which

offer potentially new or expanding arenas for practice (Cnaan and Bodie 2002). Reshaping welfare is, however, about much more than social work itself. Here we join the long tradition of social work authors who pose the challenge of ongoing and dialogical debate about what the profession needs to do to positively influence policy and its implementation, to shape organizational practices, and to carve out a moral and practical 'space' for welfare broadly defined in the contemporary context. Our focus is on leadership; on what the profession can learn about the role of leadership in influencing policy and in shaping professional futures. It is on how individual social workers can become leaders, and how the professional associations can themselves demonstrate leadership. We start by illustrating why, at this juncture, the need for proactive leadership has become acute. We do this by framing the discussion about the transformation of the 20th Century welfare state within the notion of institutional change. We follow this with an analysis of what appears to be sustained professional ambivalence within social work about leadership. We discuss various approaches found within what may be called the 'leadership literature', drawing out the salient points. Finally, we augment this literature with a neo-institutionally informed theoretical account as well as some empirical evidence about how leadership has developed under conditions of crisis in another profession faced with environmental upheaval. We conclude with brief recommendations for the profession.

Institutional Instability

It is widely accepted that, at least in the Anglophone countries, the modal Keynesian welfare state has largely disappeared (Gilbert 2002; Glennerster 1999). To appreciate the profundity of this and its implications for social work, we draw on concepts developed theoretically and refined empirically within the corpus of what is known as neoinstitutional theory (Powell and DiMaggio 1991). We suggest that welfare regimes function as institutions; a set of norms and expectations regulating the interaction of social actors – groups, human service agencies and individuals – in the promotion of 'welfare' (Bouma 1998). Institutions are constituted by and reflected in fields, for example, the field of welfare. The transformations in welfare states heralded by such overarching programs as welfare reform represent institutional change, the effect of which is to disrupt pre-existing field-level consensus about the how and why of welfare, introducing new ideas and practices (Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings 2002). Within fields there are various entities - for example, organisations and professions - which influence field-level debates, albeit to different degrees (Greenwood et al. 2002; Hoffman 1999; Bouma 1998; Cooper, Hinings, Greenwood and Brown 1996).

Recently attention has focussed on institutional change processes that emphasise field-level shifts in *logics* and their associated *rationalities* (Aldrich 1999; Scott, Reuf, Mendel and Caronna 2000). The rationalities of welfare reform promoted by the neo-liberal political project are, taken collectively for example, an institutional logic. By this we mean that it is a common meaning system representing an array of material practices and symbolic constructs that constitute the organising principles guiding activity within a field (Galvin 2002). Institutional logics provide the rules of the game, and shape what constitutes both 'problems' and their 'solutions' (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Changes in the institutional logic of a field over time lead to changes in the functioning and behaviour of constituents (Galvin 2002), for example, social workers.

First, neoinstitutional theory would suggest that, in the context of the shift from the welfare state to the neo-liberal regime of contemporary workfare[1], the conditions for institutional change are readily observable. Oliver (1992) for example nominated the theoretical antecedents of institutional change: mounting performance crises in the field, conflicting internal interests, increasing pressures to innovate, changing external dependencies, increasing technical specificity and goal clarity, increasing competition for resources, and changing institutional rules and values. All of the above have been observed for some time, especially in the Anglophone welfare states (see, for example, Clarke 2004: Jamrozik 2001; Hughes and Lewis 1998). The supplanting of the logic of the Keynesian welfare state with that of the neo-liberal regime can be explained as the combination of an enabling pattern of resource dependencies (in that those wanting change also control resources and those potentially resisting change are resource-dependent), plus the existence of a credible alternative represented by the design prescriptions of welfare reform (Greenwood and Hinings 1996). In the case of the Anglophone welfare states institutional change was and is driven by largely by central governments committed to the new logic with almost total control over resources.

In those contexts, the logic of neo-liberalism has taken on a hegemonic status to the point where some scholars call it the 'no alternative' school of thought (Peck 2001: 445). Theoretically, this can be understood as *full institutionalisation*, wherein the logic of neo-liberalism has such an overwhelming degree of cognitive legitimacy it has become taken-for-granted (Greenwood et al. 2002). Once an institutional logic becomes dominant, the subsequent attitudes, attention and behaviours of influential actors (such as organisational managers and executives) become isomorphic with it. Thornton and Ocasio (1999), for example, demonstrate empirically how the professional logic of the higher education publishing industry was replaced by a new (dominating) market logic, largely through the activities and orientations of executives. In the case of welfare, the executives are the Directors and Senior Management of welfare bureaucracies.

Theoretically, as the welfare state becomes re-institutionalised as the neo-liberal workfare regime it will develop a different language, generating different interpretive frameworks (Meyer and Rowan 1991). In using this language participants 'create' the institution, in that it accounts for and recursively legitimizes certain actions and behaviours. Finally, neoinstitutional theory encourages us to examine the role of agency (for example that of social workers and managers) in institutional processes (Barley and Tolbert 1997; Hirsch and Lounsbury 1997). We argue that social work is caught up in these processes, albeit articulated slightly differently in the different national contexts where we work. Such is the extent and pervasiveness of institutional change that it is no longer sensible, or even possible for the profession to ignore it. With that in mind, we turn now to a brief discussion of what we regard as the ambivalence of the profession around the notion of leadership.

An Ambivalent Profession?
Leadership has re-emerged as one of the 'big ideas' of human enterprise over the past 20 years. Many professions now embrace leadership as something that is needed both quantitatively – that is, we need more people in leadership roles, and qualitatively – that is, we need better leadership. Business, politics, health, education and community development have all engaged in the ongoing development of leadership theory and practice, leadership

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[1] We note the diverse fortunes of the shifts from welfare to workfare in different national contexts.

training and development. Professions such as nursing and teaching have identified a crisis of leadership and have instigated (successful) strategic initiatives and programs to develop leaders and leadership. However, social work has been less proactive and even reluctant in taking on leadership as an issue for theory and practice. In our view, social work has actually recoiled from the idea of leadership, harboring an historical view that leadership is somehow contradictory to social work values and its underlying philosophy.

This, of course, is a contestable suggestion, and whether it is or not the case or to what degree, it requires serious examination. Nevertheless, there is a glaring absence of evidence in the professional literature of social work debating such issues, and a reluctance to consider newer models of leadership and their possible relevance and use to the social work project. Indeed leadership was described as a "missing ingredient" in social work professional activity twenty years ago (Brilliant 1986). Social work academics and researchers have identified a need for more empirical work on leadership and management (Patti 1987; Gummer 1995; Gellis 2001; Mizrah and Berger, 2001) and for the inclusion of training in leadership in social work curricula (Brilliant 1986; Patti 1987). Some twenty years after Brilliant's call for attention, there have been relatively few leadership studies within social work. Leadership has not been addressed explicitly, but instead implicitly, embedded within social administration or community development education and practice contexts.

Social work and leadership
Several studies generate a number of insights into how social workers perceive their leaders as well as the range of behaviours social work leaders need to exhibit. Gellis (2001) studied how two hundred and thirty four hospital social workers perceived their social work superiors, making the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership (Bass 1985; Burns 1978). Transactional leadership focuses on the exchanges between leaders and followers, while transformational leadership is more focused on promoting organisational change through development and transmission of a vision for the future that moves beyond the status quo. Transformational leadership sees the role of the leader as one who inspires and motivates followers to work towards particular goals, even when these have the capacity to supplant individual followers' wishes and goals.

Edwards, Cooke and Reid (1996) have explored the issue of managing in contemporary contexts, increasingly characterised by ambiguity and paradox. Social work managers find themselves precariously balancing a range of competing demands; those normally expected in day to day work, as well as additional pressures created from unstable organisational and policy environments. They argue that social worker managers require high levels of resilience to achieve this. Writing from the perspective of nursing, Kerfoot (2000) also noted how managers can easily become overwhelmed by competing demands of the day to day and long range objectives. She advocated that managers as leaders need to engage in 'big picture' thinking, to learn how to communicate with staff to enlist their support, and to address problems quickly as soon as they arise.

Rank and Hutchison's (2000) analysis within the social work profession identified five common elements in leadership: pro-action, values and ethics, empowerment, vision, and communication. They also draw attention to the notion that challenges faced by social work leaders can be somewhat different from those experienced by other disciplines; challenges which may be generated by conflicts with professional values, our holistic and systemic orientation, the overarching concern for others, and a strong desire to promote inclusive practices. Similar findings were reported by Menefee (1997) about executive directors in

nonprofit agencies who, in response to economic, political, social, and technological trends, juggled complex and seemingly contradictory strategies for success. In a Canadian study of hospital restructuring, Globerman, Davies and Walsh (1996) identified three areas of concern to social work managers: control over the nature of their work and decision making, social work roles, and the organisational structure. More specific concerns which they identified included fears of losing a social work identity and actual social work departments, and uncertainty about cross-training and multi-skilling which, they claim, contributes to boundary blurring.

A brief review of the social work literature on management and leadership demonstrates that the most notable developments have been in health and hospital social work where the demands of major changes in and consequent restructuring of health systems have prompted professional attention. A recurrent theme in this work is that hospital social workers must demonstrate, at a minimum, leadership competencies and confidence in shaping organizational change, while at the same time, balancing needs of many stakeholders. Such competencies include:

"…an ability to balance the needs of the patient, the institution, and the staff while coping effectively with the tensions in meeting these competing demands." (Mizrahi & Berger 2001 p.172)

A number of research projects in other areas of practice argue that social workers possess competencies and abilities that are congruent with those required for leadership, but they also argue for one further step; the need for social workers to assume leadership roles. Writing about family-centered practice, Briar-Lawson (1998) for example contends that social work is ideally positioned to address some of the challenges posed by welfare reform because it avoids reductionist and uncritical thinking which has marred the engagement of other helping professions in welfare-reform related programs and activities. Further, social work possesses a unique capacity to integrate social *and* economic foundations in practice. For these strengths to be recognized however, grass roots leadership is crucial.

Further, if we think beyond social work to the broader context of the human services there is a significant need for leadership, particularly given the instability of the field at the current juncture – at management levels and at the coal face. This need, in turn, lays down a challenge for social work that goes beyond its immediate interests. We suggest that the transformative model of leadership is (with one notable exception) largely congruent with the aims and purposes of social work and has, as a result, the capacity to inform future developments. Nevertheless, and as we have indicated previously, there is little extant empirical work about social work and leadership so this assertion is as yet a proposition which remains largely untested. Burns (1978), one of the earliest and most famous writers on leadership, argued that we know all too much about leaders but far too little about leadership. It was on the basis of this rationale that he proposed an alternative perspective - transformative leadership. Burns implied that leadership is something different from leaders - that is, from the observable traits and behaviors that leaders can display. His definition of leadership is as follows: "leadership is the reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in the context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals called independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers" (Burns 1978: 45). There are two aspects to his notion of transformative leadership. The first is his admonition that the nature of goals is crucial - that if they are not mutual (they may be independently held) they must nevertheless be related and

oriented toward an end value. The second aspect of transformative leadership is that any resultant process is nevertheless reciprocal, and inevitably happens within the context of competition and conflict. We tentatively suggest that this latter characteristic represents one of the core reasons why social workers exhibit ambivalence about leadership – to engage as leaders inevitably means engaging in competition and conflict, processes which are counter-intuitive to the (probably learned) dispositions of social workers.

While there are probably wide variations within the ranks of the profession on individual capacity and willingness to engage with competition and conflict - engage we must – both individually *and* collectively. Failure to develop and exhibit leadership will, at a minimum, be one key factor endangering the future role of the profession in the emerging world of welfare. In our introductory comments, we suggested that the contemporary restructuring of welfare can be understood as institutional change, and we suggested that a particular body of sociology – neoinstitutional theory – provides a very useful framework for thinking about change, as well as provide some quite specific suggestions for how to respond. We also made the point that social workers can be knowing agents in the context of institutional change (albeit it in limited or *bounded* ways). In other words, they can (partially) stand back from what is happening, and think about it. They can also act, or put in words appropriate to this article, social workers can lead. In the next section, we draw on a selection of neoinstitutional theoretically and empirically informed suggestions of how the profession collectively and individuals within the profession might respond.

Neoinstitutional Approaches to Leadership
Using the notion of entrepreneurship[2], neoinstitutional theory has for some time thought about and explored the idea of and activities of *institutional entrepreneurs* in promoting both institutionalisation and institutional change. In the framework of Burns (1978), institutional entrepreneurs are transformative leaders. In 1988, key neoinstitutional theorist DiMaggio suggested that some social actors are better than others in producing or influencing desired outcomes. Institutional entrepreneurs are individuals and/or groups who adopt leadership roles in episodes of institution building and change (Colomy 1998). Other neoinstitutional theorists, such as Fligstein (1997: 398) suggest that such people have *social skill*, and as such, are able to 'size up' the condition of the field and figure out what kinds of action 'make sense'. Drawing on salient myths and potent symbols, skilled social actors have the ability to motivate cooperation in other actors by providing them with common meanings and identities in and through which actions can be undertaken and justified. He also suggests that a key factor in this is that those actors are able to 'imaginatively identify' with the experiences and understandings of others. He then goes on to list different tactics that institutional entrepreneurs use, linking each to whether the field in question is stable or unstable and to whether the actors (in this case social workers) are in a strong or weak position. In the contemporary conditions social work institutional entrepreneurs would, in all likelihood, be trying to offer alternative accounts to those of the neoliberal workfare state about, for example, society's responsiveness to disadvantage.

Applying his generic insights to social work, some of the major tactics he would suggest for social work institutional entrepreneurs or leaders are (drawn from Fligstein 1997: 399-401):

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[2] A notion which has received some consideration in the social work literature. See, for example, Jones (2000) and Grey, Healy and Croft (2003).

1. *Taking what the system gives* – strategic social work leaders understand the ambiguities and uncertainties of the social welfare field and work off them. They have a good sense of what is possible and what is not. They know where they stand. They will grasp unexpected opportunities, even when uncertain of the outcome. They know the system and take what it will give at any moment.

2. *Asking for more, settling for less* – strategic social work leaders commonly press for more than they are willing to accept, either from other social workers or from those higher up the ladder.

3. *Maintaining ambiguity* – strategic social workers often keep their strategic preferences to themselves. This makes it difficult for other institutional actors to orient what they do in response, which in turn, makes then either act first, or not act at all.

4. *Trying five things to get one*. Strategic social work leaders have multiple courses of action plotted simultaneously or in sequence. They expect that most will fail but a few will succeed, and these successes are what are remembered by other actors.

5. *Networking with other challenger groups who have no other coalitions* – strategic social work leaders set themselves (and social work) up as the node in a network of these other groups who also challenge the status quo.

Fligstein (ibid, p. 403) also notes that in situations of crisis (or under conditions of institutional transformation):

"actors committed to the status quo will continue to use dominant understandings to structure interaction for as long as they can. Skilled strategic actors in challenger groups will offer *new cultural frames and rules* to reorganize the field" (italics added).

Put another way, strategic social work leaders should have the capacity to take a reflective position towards current practices in the profession, coupled with a capacity to envision and articulate alternative modes of engaging in social work (Beckert 1999). Such persons stand in contrast to what Beckert calls 'managers' – actors who adopt an unreflective stance towards the dominant rationality and current practices. The latter, he suggests, orient their decisions on imitation and adaptation. And what is clear is that social workers who wish to act as strategic leaders must *understand* the field in which they operate – an imperative which requires an informed and critical orientation to the contemporary conditions.

Finally, Greenwood, Suddaby and Hinings (2002) demonstrate empirically how, in the context of the profession of accounting, leadership works. This is a profession which was profoundly challenged by institutional transformation, albeit in different ways than social work. Nevertheless, in the fairly recent past, the taken-for-granted meanings of what accountants are and what they do were thoroughly de-stabilised. As these researchers demonstrate, professional associations can play an important role in responding to institutional change. Their work leads them to suggest that:

"[Professional] associations can legitimate change by hosting a process of discourse through which change is debated and endorsed: first by negotiating and managing debate within the profession; and second, by reframing professional identities" (ibid, p. 59).

In charting that profession's response to the rise of what is known in accounting as the 'Big Five' (large international accounting firms), Greenwood et al show how, as a result of their entry and eventual dominance of the field, accounting firms (both large and small) shifted the nature of their work from traditional accounting narrowly defined to a broad multidisciplinary role of providing 'business services' – in which the legitimate boundaries of what accountancy could do were radically expanded – often at the expense of other professions.

The accountancy professional associations were instrumental in this shift through actively *theorizing change* (Strang and Meyer 1993). This had two parts (Tolbert and Zucker 1996). First, they *framed* the problem in that the profession was presented as being under threat from the forces of change. Over a twenty year period the 'problem was insistently specified and generalised as affecting all members of the profession and change was presented as natural and progressive' (Greenwood et al. p. 72). Second, the language the associations used became steadily more *expressive and direct*, with the imperative for change being cast within the framework of professional values. In doing so, the associations promoted compliance with change in moral not pragmatic terms. In other words, what Greenwood et al (2002) show, is that the professional associations engaged in discourses that legitimated significant shifts in what accountants actually do, and in doing so, re-shaped the definition of 'what it meant to "be"' an accountant.

The lessons for social work – collectively and individually - are clear. First, social work professional associations and individual social workers in specific organisational contexts can, if they choose, act as strategic and transformative leaders, and engage deliberately in a sustained process of *theorising institutional change*. And as we have suggested, in the current context of welfare reform and other institutional change, the need to develop leadership at all levels becomes imperative. Professional associations in particular need to acknowledge that institutional instability is real and that threat exists. To that end, the current NASW public education campaign *Changing the Perceptions, Improving the Profession* provides an encouraging, but nevertheless partial, example from which other countries could learn. Professional associations and individual leaders must understand the nature of the threat and the nature of probable consequences if ignored; articulate that threat in succinct and accessible ways; envisage alternatives; and frame and articulate these in terms morally acceptable to the profession. But perhaps most importantly both groups should be attentive to the warning that such processes, to be successful, need to be vigorously sustained over a significant period of time. Successful leadership – on an individual and/or a collective level - is not a quick fix. Rather, it is a way of life which the profession can no longer ignore.

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