1 Social Work in Organisations

In this chapter we overview
- social workers as active participants in organisations;
- social work as a professional occupation;
- key players in human service organisations;
- labour market reform and managerialism;
- social work knowledge in organisational practice.

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. Our argument here is that social work is a socially active and engaged profession within 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. We argue throughout this book that social work is an active, engaged and reflective profession that skilfully uses interpersonal communication, interaction, ethical and political tactics and change strategies to initiate and sustain positive social processes and outcomes for clients of human service organisations. In this sense, we see social workers as active rather than passive change agents, as engaged in decision making and taking risks rather than being ‘fence sitters’, and as motivated by their professional community of shared practices, knowledge and core values.

**Negotiating the Ideals and Realities**

If we conceptualise social work as incorporating knowledge, values and skills generated through professional education, socialisation 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 – ‘social work without a soul’ – 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 set it apart from other occupations. While it is recognised that there are different interpretations of what social justice means, typically practitioners point to equality and fairness as being important (O’Brien, 2011). 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.

These values are not exhaustive. We would include alongside social justice, core values such as respect for others, especially those marked as disadvantaged, different or marginalised, and self-determination for our clients (see Chapter 9). 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 some social workers, this sense that their professional identity is limited by their organisational role comes as a surprise. Their social work education had been not just about instilling in them the skills, knowledge and values of social work, but also about socialising 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?

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. In this context, self-care would not be an isolated process but directed towards improving practice (Miehls and Moffat, 2000: 346). Central to this would be developing a greater sense of integrity as a person, and as a professional and organisational operator. For Banks (2010: 2181–2), this involves:

A commitment to a set of values, the context of which relates to what it means to be a ‘good person in a professional role’ and/or a ‘good professional’.

An awareness that the values are interrelated to each other and form a coherent whole and that their interrelationship is what constitutes the overarching goals or purpose of the profession.

A capacity to make sense of professional values and their relationship to the practitioner’s own personally held values.

The ability to give a coherent account of beliefs and actions.

Strength of purpose and ability to implement these values [emphasis in original].
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.

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). For us, this 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 recognise 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 Practice Example 1.1, a social worker seeks to engage with and extend her professional identity.

An unfolding social work identity

Christiana is a newly qualified social worker employed in an intake team of a statutory child protection agency. During her social work studies, Christiana became very interested in anti-racist and critical reflective practice. She is of African heritage, having left Sierra Leone in the mid-1990s following the civil war in that country. She lives in a city with an increasing African refugee community, with many people arriving from Sudan in recent years. There have been some negative media reports about this increasing group in the population – both in terms of perceived pressures on health and social services, and in relation to ‘gangs’ of young African people roaming the streets at night.

In reflecting with her supervisor on her first year in the job, Christiana described having gone through a ‘culture shock’. She explained this in a few ways. The first culture shock related to her experience commencing with the child protection team – everyone was very busy, it was difficult to see work though to a meaningful end on the intake team and child protection notifications and high-risk situations took priority, while preventative work seemed minimal. Christiana didn’t have a child protection placement during her degree so she felt quite unprepared for working in this setting. A second culture shock related to working with so many people who do not come from a social work background and who do not seem to share the same perspective on social justice (or even the same language about social justice) that she does. Another culture shock related to the disproportionate number of African families the organisation is responding to, and about whom child protection notifications have been received. Together with the negative media reporting, she has become increasingly concerned...
about the unfair ways her own African culture and heritage are being represented in the agency and society more broadly.

As she expressed to her supervisor, Christiana has been left wondering what it is she does as a social worker that makes a difference in people’s lives, how she manages the authority in her statutory role with her commitment to social justice and empowerment, and how to work collaboratively with people who don’t share the same professional values. In conversation, Christiana’s supervisor helped her recognise that not all of the potential of social work as a profession can be realised in one job, but that nonetheless there are ways that her commitment to anti-racism and social justice can be put into practice in her work. These include supporting her colleagues to challenge the negative attitudes of other staff and community members towards African people, doing some background research on some of the reasons why African migrants may become over-represented in child protection notifications, and encouraging local community groups to develop strategies to address these factors. She has increasingly recognised that not all of this can be done in her regular job and so she has engaged with the local branch of her professional association to work on these issues, including writing a submission and discussion papers on the needs of African refugee communities. While these initiatives have raised questions for her – including a feeling of discomfort in being seen as an ‘expert’ on issues for African people – in recent months she has felt more in control of her work (both inside and outside the organisation) and how this connects with her emerging social work identity.

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 conceptualisations 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 emphasises 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 emphasises 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, meeting 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 theorising organisations (as completed entities) as they are in defining and theorising the processes of organising.

The agencies social workers work in are commonly 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. Garrow and Hasenfeld (2010) go further than this, however. They claim that human service organisations ‘engage in moral work, upholding and reinforcing moral values about “desirable” human behavior and the “good” society’ (2010: 33). 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 (Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2010). We agree with this orientation and would take it further to identify cause and effect chains in our field of awareness for everyday practice. Most importantly, social workers can become skilful at identifying and acting on the external and internal forces that precondition decision making, and the informal and formal ways in which leadership and collegial effort with user-led inputs take effect and drive organisational change and change cultures. In order for social work to do this, it must remain connected to the experiences of service users and attuned to the intricacies of everyday interaction and communication in and around the organisations they work in.

**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 categorisation is based on 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 categorisation 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 recognise 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 ‘coalface’ 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 5 and 8, 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 specialisation, and to dislike routine and bureaucracy (Sveiby, 1997). Further, 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. (Hodson and Sullivan, 1995; Noordegraaf, 2007)

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. While it is easy to see how the interests of professionals might conflict with those of the organisation, it is important to recognise that organisations provide an institutional resource for the professional project and that professionals can significantly influence the organisations in which they work (Suddaby and Viale, 2011).

We will discuss issues for social work in the human services labour market below; 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 specialisation, 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 as 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 spread-sheeting, 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 6, 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 experience. 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 being ‘grass-roots’ (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 those that employ them). And in some sectors, service users’ community competence – in terms of their lived experience – is being more formally recognised. For example, in the mental health sector, service users are being employed as peer workers to provide support to other service users, although, as with volunteers, there are challenges in negotiating a meaningful role within the organisation (Gillard et al., 2013).

In Chapter 8, 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, while others may receive regular services and support over many years. Despite increased rhetoric around greater 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 any 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. 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 for leading a sub-committee of the staff meeting.

In Practice Example 1.2, a social worker struggles to understand the way in which role boundaries are demarcated within her organisation.

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 industrialised nations have undergone considerable change over the last few decades. One shift that is often noted is that from a Fordist to a post-Fordist labour market. Fordism emphasises 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 multi-skilling, having to constantly update their skills and having to be more flexible in their career paths (Carey, 2015). Other labour market reforms include:

- shifts from industrial to service and information modes of production;
- increasing casualisation 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 the ‘outsourcing’ of public sector work to private or voluntary sector workers; and
- more emphasis on demonstrated job competence for employment, education and training. (Carey, 2015; Perrons, 2000; Shapiro, 2000)

The globalisation of the labour market also significantly impacts on social work. For example, in the UK staff shortages in social work have led to a heavy reliance on overseas-trained practitioners. This results in ethical questions, not just about their capacity to work in Britain, but also about the impact of ‘poaching’ qualified staff from other – sometimes poorer – countries (Welbourne et al., 2007).

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. According to McDonald (2006), social work’s professional project involves attempts to exercise authority over others as well as strategies to align the profession with the power of the state (e.g. by being registered or being empowered by the state to intervene in people’s lives). Social work also exercises authority in non-government organisations that are autonomous from the state and commonly have their own cultures and hierarchies involved in non-state social policy.

One way to monopolise is through social issue construction, a strategy which 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 have recently adopted the assumptions and practices of evidence-based practice (McDonald, 2006) (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 for 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 multi-disciplinary 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 below 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. 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 entitled ‘social worker’. Some are called care managers, project workers and childcare 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 (Carey, 2015). The underemployment of social workers in para-professional work, where ‘their qualifications are neither required nor fully utilized’, contributes in part to a deprofessionalisation of social work (Healy and Meagher, 2004: 245).

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 the 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 that is both changing and under threat. And there is no doubt that many social workers feel they have been under threat for the last few decades, given the ongoing neo-liberal restructuring of the welfare state. This began in earnest in the 1980s and 1990s with the push towards small government, increased competition in the welfare ‘marketplace’ and individual responsibility. It has accelerated in the twenty-first century with the imposition of austerity measures in many western economies which, arguably, ‘reflects the determination of those who manage global capitalism that the costs of the [global financial] crisis shall be paid by the mass of ordinary people who played no part in its creation’ (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013: 96). Alongside cuts to public spending, one aim of neoliberal reforms is to ensure that voluntary and for-profit organisations are the main providers of services, while governments 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
providers reconstitutes a myriad of services as “business units” which may concen-
trate introspectively upon core business interests whilst neglecting wider public
service objectives’. Of increasing concern is the emergence of cartel-like monopolies
where a small number of large, often private-sector, providers dominate the market
through mergers and take-overs of smaller organisations (Carey, 2015). And while
consumer-directed care and personalisation strategies are appealing because they
facilitate individual service users’ control over their own care, they have been cri-
tiqued as being influenced by neoliberalism, for example by treating the relationship
between service users and providers as a transaction, and as being a cloak for the
introduction of cost-cutting (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013).

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 manage-
ment’, 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 manage-
ment as a guide to steering human service organisations. If the setting up of a competi-
tive 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 (Fawcett
et al., 2010). The ideal organisations – both government and non-government ones –
would be those directed by management to be the most efficient and competitive.

Thus, from a managerialist perspective, the ideal organisation is the ‘flat’ organi-
sation: 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 evalu-
ate and adapt their work in synch with the environment (market) and its demands.
This image of the flat, efficient, competitive organisation draws widely from man-
agement and organisational theorising; often relying on what is most popular at the
time. The take-up of Total Quality Management (TQM) across the private, public
and not-for-profit sectors in the 1990s is a useful example of this.

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 prac-
tice manager, increasingly these work teams are called on 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, and
not necessarily those professing a detailed and specialist knowledge of the work
tasks. In this sense, management is seen as content-free: any good manager can man-
age 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 organi-
sations has been one of constant change, most commonly through the practices of:
• **downsizing**: shrinking the organisation through redundancies, forced retirements or increased casualisation;

• **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 that 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 marketplace (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.

While managerialism strives for (and employs the language of) rationality, the use of managerialist strategies within organisations can also be understood as a response to wider environmental pressures. For example, the adoption of TQM practices had as much to do with normative pressures from governments and funders as it did with improving efficiency (Suddaby and Viale, 2011). The disconnect between the perceived and actual rationality of managerialism is most evident in the significant organisational restructuring undertaken by government departments and quasi-autonomous government agencies. For example, according to the UK’s National Audit Office (2010), there were 90 reorganisations of central government departments and related agencies between May 2005 and June 2009. The cost of 51 of these reorganisations, as surveyed by the Audit Office, was £780 million. However, none of the departments or agencies set up measures to identify what the specific benefits of the changes would be and to see if the benefits outweighed the costs. Thus, despite the stated desire to become more efficient and effective by reorganising, none of the usual tools of the managerialist trade – such as developing a business plan and carrying out a cost–benefit analysis – were employed.

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 that 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 5.
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 that 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), as well as promoting 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 in 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, 2006), in an attempt to position social work as an equal alongside other professions, especially those in health care. Indeed, Carey (2015: 2416) argues that social work has shifted its base from social policy and sociology to health care and nursing, which has resulted in ‘disruption, uncertainty and confusion’, as well as ‘intense pressures to enter and engage with a health and social care discourse that privileges medical and health care-related methods and evidence-based treatment models’. EBP arose in response to concerns that professionals, initially doctors, based their decision making on accepted wisdom and asserted their views based on their authority. EBP, as reflected in Sackett et al.’s (1996) definition of evidence-based medicine, is about using current best evidence to inform decision making to the benefit of patients or clients. 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 are observable to the senses. It is unsurprising then that many proponents of EBP in health and social care conceive of ‘current best evidence’ as 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. (See Figure 1.1.)

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. A particular concern in relation to outcome studies is the risk of either

[Diagram: Hierarchy of evidence, based on traditional EBP model]
focusing too narrowly on easily measurable outputs (e.g. hours of service) or too broadly on outcomes that are hard to achieve for any intervention (e.g. improved well-being). Despite these risks, outcome evaluation is used to help determine whether the benefits gained from the interventions or programmes are worth the costs (cost–benefit analysis). It can also be used to evaluate the extent to which policy or organisational objectives are achieved. Such an approach rests on 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 instil 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 5, 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. According to Rose and Gidman (2010: 39), ‘people are not passive recipients of evidence – they are stakeholders in the decision-making process’. 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. The notion of what is considered to be best practice is typically drawn from evidence-based practice principles and strategies, such as determining the quality of research methods (including assessment of validity and reliability) employed to test the effectiveness of social work interventions (Schalock et al., 2014). Different bodies – such as funders, regulators and service user groups – use best practice (as well as related concepts of good practice and excellent 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 government 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 have become 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). The development of computer-based client management systems has also been based, to an extent, on the principles of best practice in different fields (e.g. child protection), and concerns have also been raised that these systems are applied too rigidly and reduce professional autonomy and creativity (Broadhurst et al., 2010). We discuss this issue in more depth in Chapter 4.

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 5.

**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, they can stimulate greater understanding of the complexities of practice and its potentials.

Evaluation, too, does not need to be constrained by a focus on narrow outcomes or outputs – it can be used to generate knowledge of changes in community need, to get a greater sense of how the organisation is responding meaningfully to clients and communities, and to provide feedback to workers and managers to facilitate deeper learning and reflection. So, 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 organisation and management studies, and the broad social sciences. It would also recognise the value of social workers being involved in researching organisational practice and, in particular, in researching service users’ experiences and needs.

An essential part of such an approach is the recognition that there are different levels of experience and interaction within human service organisations (this is examined further in Chapter 8). 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 1.2). 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 an 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 1.2, such practices include the organisation’s information management systems, such as its computer and record-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 with others and make decisions in informal settings, such as the tea room, in order to avoid including those other staff whom they find difficult, how does this affect the effectiveness of weekly staff meetings?

In turning to 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 also 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 recognised 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 1.2, policy implementation is not conceptualised 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 1.2 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 appreciate 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.

![Figure 1.2 A reflexive approach to knowledge in organisations](image-url)
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 key focus for knowledge development should be the everyday organisational practices and their impact on service users and communities. Knowledge generation could also 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 a socially active and engaged 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 practise. 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. We reassert the place for values, standards, engagement, relationship and reflexivity in dealing with clients and the health and human service organisations which they commonly rely on for assistance and transformation in their lives.

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 organisation 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.