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THE SOCIAL WORK SERVICE* COMMODITY IN THE INFLATIONARY 80'S**

Harold Lewis

The decade ahead is going to be dominated by economic issues. All signs point to continued inflation, continued high levels of unemployment, cyclical troughs and declining peaks in the overall economy, energy shortages and increasing financial pressures, particularly on those families living on minimal or below-poverty level budgets. Stresses in management of basic requirements for maintenance of health, housing, education and transportation will burden middle income, blue collar and the working poor family. In this context, funding of social services will be tight, relative to need. It seems useful, for these reasons, to place our discussion within an economic framework, to view social work services as a commodity, and to consider how the anticipated market conditions of the 80's will affect this commodity, including how these conditions will impact on the producers, the consumers and the distributors of these services.¹

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Social work services have distinctive attributes as commodities. In the past they have rarely been available on a competitive basis. Usually, particular services are to be had from one or at most a few sources in the community. Even when associated with tangible services, such as day care, homemaker or foster care, social work services are labor-intensive. The average consumer finds it difficult to evaluate their quality and to appreciate what constitutes an appropriate quantity to meet a specific need. Most social work services are provided by tax-supported sources. Rarely are the costs for producing a service covered by consumer payments.

Social work services materialize in the act of being rendered. There is no "service" in the resources allocated for their provision. Nor is there a "service" in the consumer's experienced needs. Only when provider resources and consumer needs come together in an actual transaction, does a "social work service" as commodity, evolve. Thus,

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Social work services are those generated by social work interventions, constituting one of the broad range of social services.

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unlike most commodities in our economy, social work services exist only in the process of their formation. They have no existence apart from it. For this reason, one cannot inventory social work services in the traditional sense. One cannot go to a bin and count how many of these and how many of those services are on hand to be used to meet current demand. Counting available resources may suggest the potential available for providing a service, but hardly constitutes a count of the "service." The availability of a resource is no assurance of its use in a transaction that produces a service. Unhappily, the transient nature of this service allows it to disappear without too much notice of its absence by persons other than those directly involved in its production and consumption. Inventories of unsold cars convey a far more dramatic message of uneconomic productive policies and practice than do the absences of transactions that produce social work services.

This commodity is short lived. Not only does the transaction create it, it also absorbs it *en-toto*. The only evidence after the fact that the commodity was created and used is in a depletion of resource and a change in consumer condition. Thus, if the quality of the commodity is to be evaluated directly, what transacts in the need-provision exchange must be observed in process. *Ex-post-facto* evaluations inevitably face the complex problem of isolating particular effects in situations involving matrices of causal influences. The implications that flow from this attribute will be considered further. Suffice it to note that in an inflationary situation with resources shrinking relative to need, protecting the quality of this service is difficult. Unlike the faulty brake or slipping automatic shift, there is no recall possible to correct for manufacturer's error. Since there is no clear product that can be demonstrated to be at fault, it is more convenient to fault a program that provides the service than the particular methods that are used to create it.

Like all commodities, social work services have use value as well as exchange value. As is true of any human service, the use value is largely determined by consumers' judgments of costs relative to satisfactions obtained as a result of participating in its creation. The exchange value, on the other hand, relies more heavily on judgments of providers. What alternate uses can be made of an equal investment of resources, largely determine its exchange value. From the consumer's perspective, the better quality for equal cost, the more use value one can assign to the commodity. From the provider's perspective, the less costly the resource, other things being equal, the more economic the exchange value. Given these considerations, it is important to note that the persons creating the social work service -- the worker and the consumer -- are most often dependent on relatively disinterested parties for the crucial decisions as to the quality and quantity of service to be subsidized.

Finally, it is also important to recognize the logic that applies to the analysis and understanding of this commodity's relationship to the satisfaction of specified needs. The intention of service, in all but a few instances, is to enhance the potential for constructive choices on the part of the consumer of the service. The major sought-after outcome for the consumer is the meeting of a need in such a way as to diminish as far as possible the consumer's dependency on the service when confronted with a similar need in the future. Thus, the service is not only expected to have a fixed, determined effect as an outcome. It is also expected to change probabilities in the consumer's capacities for coping, in a wide range of social functioning areas. We readily admit that none of our evaluative procedures based on statistical aggregates of individual units can tell us what will happen in a particular case served, or in the next case to be served.³ But beyond this probability issue which our literature has discussed in detail, there is another, more fundamental probability issue. When seeking help consumers bring with them to the service creating transaction a variety of potentials in relation to behavior, reasoning, valuing, etc., all interdependent. As a result of the service, changes in the distribution of these potentials should provide some measure of the nature and scope of the service impact. The most demanding aspects of a service transaction, for which professional social work skills are required, are located in this problematic area, the influencing of potential. Nevertheless, "before and after" degrees of potentials are hardly susceptible to measurement by available procedures. We have yet to adequately describe these potentials, let alone agree on a procedure for counting them. For example, when does self-awareness, which may be an important indicator of a person's potential for constructive interpersonal relationships become excessive self-preoccupation, an indicator for an opposite potential?⁴ To arrive at an acceptable definition of self-awareness, self-preoccupation, and excessive narcissism, we need to know much more than we now do about these qualities. Moreover, given the bio-psycho-social influences on their development, counting such quixotic qualities can prove as futile as counting melting ice cubes. The results, inevitably are watered-down statistics.

Complicating the measurement task is the intentional nature of social work service. Service normally is shaped by the efforts of its creators to achieve particular effects. It would be necessary to determine what was to be altered, in relation to what were non-targeted potentials and to understand their interactions, before concluding whether a particular intervention produced a particular change in potential for acceptable social functioning. This fundamental expectation denies the possibility of simple causal explanations.

There are additional ways in which social work services differ from other commodities. For our purposes, the attributes identified provide a sufficient basis for exploring the central focus of this

discussion: How will the inflationary resource squeeze of the 80's impact on the profession and our service programs? Issues affecting access to social work services, the quality of these services, their utilization and their evaluation will be considered using the framework provided by the definitions of the social work commodity.

Access to Social Work Services

During the past two decades the monopolistic character of social work service programs was breached. Private entrepreneurship detected profit to be made in the delivery of health and welfare services. Large corporate interests contracted to manage and provide social work services otherwise only available from public or not-for-profit voluntary agencies. Labor unions and management moved to provide a range of protective and supportive social work services to employees at their work site or in their communities. Private practice, self-help and mutual aid concurrently expanded to offer alternative access to resources. For persons with means, and for those organized to exercise political and economic power, these developments opened up additional choices; for the most deprived, those who could not pay for social work service nor exercise influence through organizational power, little changed. An example may illustrate how the combination of limitations in knowledge, conflict in values and lack of control over access to social work services combine to further disadvantage the most disadvantaged, despite the expanded availability of sources for this particular commodity.

During the past two decades our society has been deeply involved in policy and practice debates on questions of life and death. With the availability of legal abortions, a major concern has been the determination of when life begins. With the development of artificial support systems that can sustain otherwise non-functioning vital organs, a major concern has been uncertainty as to when death has occurred. With respect to both issues, we are lacking in essential knowledge. But in these debates the most contentious issues have concern "moral rights." Differences as to what constitutes the right to life and the right to separate from life have highlighted deepseated, conflicting ideologies not readily reconcilable. In both instances, we are confronted with ethical dilemmas stemming from ambiguous situations in which choices must be made, when knowledge on which to base these choices is limited, and values are in conflict.

In this example, contending religious, political and professional groups have sought to define standards for allocating legal rights, each hoping to establish what are necessary obligations

that further their different views of the common good. As is usual in conflicts involving the allocation of legal rights, those more fortunately situated tend to focus the debate on issues affecting freedom-of-choice as the central value. For the disadvantaged, whose choices are restricted in any circumstance, distributive justice is the crucial value. Now, in relation to both issues the service sought and its associated social work intervention is available from a variety of sources, some public, some private, some profit oriented, some philanthropic, and some from informal self-help associations. Despite the high moral tone of the debates, the nitty-gritty problems of service delivery provide evidence of the impact of unemployment, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and poverty on who will have access to the available resources. Each of the contending groups in the debate have to face up to the caste and class inequities that are inherent in the application of their proposed standards. In the final analysis, for those who can afford it, the non-monopolistic character of service availability represents choices and opportunities to exercise rights in a conflict-ridden area of social work service. For those who cannot afford it, or have no organizational clout, access hardly increases when a subsidized or fee-for-service profit-sector has been added to the group of social work service providers.

In the decade ahead, we should anticipate pressure to further breach the monopolistic control of social work services, largely increasing the choices available for those who can purchase the services they seek. For the most disadvantaged, it will take militant advocacy in the form of organized political pressure to obtain changes that will improve the amount and quality of social work services to which they can gain access.

The Quality of Social Work Service

When a product exists only in its use; when it is created in an exchange and has no material content apart from the processes through which it is realized, quality control is often synonymous with the control of the quality of those who participate in its creation -- the workers and the consumers. In the sixties and seventies, personnel recruited to work in the human service field expanded to include persons with various levels and kinds of educational preparation, and various attributes associated with life-styles and personal experience. The expectation was to improve on the quality of services, provide wider coverage to reach previously underserved populations, and concurrently make possible employment opportunities in the social services for persons whose inter-personal skills and systems sophistication were among their work-related, marketable talents. Increasing the pool of social work service personnel to include a wider range of competencies, however, has different

implications for quality of services in a period of expanding resources, as was anticipated in the sixties, and contracting resources as was actually experienced in the seventies. It does not require detailed explanation to appreciate the potential for reducing costs that exist when the quality of a commodity is not determined by an analysis of the product itself. In place of expanding coverage by employing lesser skills to service less complicated need as is possible in a period of resource growth, in a period of contracting resources the skilled worker is replaced with a worker having a lesser competence to deal with the more complicated needs. There was much evidence of this latter replacement process during the last decade. Despite the political rhetoric about who can help with what problems most effectively,⁶ one can assume the prevalence of traditional criteria for choosing one's helper when opportunity for choice is present. For those who can afford to pay for services, or can press for special considerations, self-selection of service providers is normally reflected in these consumer's choices of the usual educational reputational and credential evidences of competence. For the economically or situationally disadvantaged, who must accept the worker assigned to help them or be denied access to services, there are few choices. If the criteria usually used by those free to choose have merit in the case of those not free to choose, the change of service providers does not result in an expansion of service, but different quality of social work service or no service at all.

In the inflationary 80's we should expect pressure for reduced costs to continue. The difficulty in evaluating the product, rather than the persons who help create it and who use it, will be used to obfuscate the reduction in quality of services that tight funding will demand. It will require more, not less, organized effort to protect standards that offer safeguards against the dilution of service quality.

While we may welcome all efforts to open up the "black box" of practice to more thorough scrutiny, in times of contracting resources we can anticipate that funding for such studies will also be curtailed. Lack of knowledge does not inhibit those who attack social work services in order to reduce their costs and availability. It ought not inhibit those who would defend these same services when their experience and belief indicate these services to be necessary and helpful to people in need.

Utilization of Social Work Service

There is no assurance that a product that meets the highest standards for judging quality will necessarily be used and used effectively by a consumer. The fact that social work services are in part created by the consumer, and that this creation is totally absorbed in the process that brings it into being, tends

to becloud the utilization issue. There is nothing unique to social work services that can protect them from being abused, misdirected, insufficient for their intended purpose, or dysfunctional in certain contexts and at certain times. For this reason, the distinction between the quality of service and its utilization should be respected much more than is usually evidenced in discussions of "quality" in the literature. This distinction is of considerable importance when one considers the problems of accountability associated with this commodity.

Accountability in social work services concerns not only the quality of the product, and its utilization, but also the process of its production. As noted earlier, ability to observe and measure the process of its production is limited. Since the product itself is short-lived, and is totally absorbed in the process of its creation, its quality tends to be judged inferentially from the qualities of those who produce it. Utilization, similarly, is inferred from secondary evidence, gleaned from ex-post facto analyses of the behaviors and attitudes of its consumers. Understandably, to be fully accountable for the provision of social work services is an achievement that defies the prowess of ordinary mortals.

Inferring use from ex-post facto data runs the risk of equating utilization with success. It is misleading to conclude that a client failed to make appropriate use of marital counseling if the marriage is not made a happy one as a result. We all can cite instances of persons who used appropriately the services of able physicians but did not get well. While utilization and successful outcome are related, analogous to objectives and goals in organizational work, they are not the same. Yet this distinction is hard to maintain in the social work services, where the consumer helps in the creation of the product.

The seventies was mistakenly dubbed the decade of accountability. It turned out to be the decade of count-ability. What could not be qualified and counted was discounted. Since those imprecise personal forms of knowledge, feelings and emotions, could not be satisfactorily described and enumerated, changes in sorrow, pain, fear, joy, trust, self-confidence, compassion, happiness, etc., rarely were identified as indications of success, compared to such hard-data as is evidenced in improved skills and appropriate behaviors, the subjective soft-data did not count at all. In this way, we replicated those educational evaluations which measure success by what the student knows and can do while ignoring or downplaying what kind of person he will be. What Polanyi⁷ calls personal knowledge, while not readily amenable to quantitative manipulations so essential for measurement, is central to the intention of the social work service transaction, particularly if we are to focus on utilization as distinct from success.

In the typical helping situation, whatever the mode of intervention, the helper seeks to exercise personal influence through a meaningful relationship. If one could visualize a completely dehumanized social work service transaction, it might conceivably be argued that feelings and emotions need not be considered. But in the transactions that depend on human interactions, what is utilized most are the gained knowledge and values which are absorbed and understood because their digestibility was facilitated by the lubricating effects of deep, lasting feelings. To know with conviction, to appreciate with affection, to master with delight -- these phrases convey the feelings generated by the relationship which makes the new and different palatable. One must wonder how long-lasting are achieved changes in behavior, skills and attitudes if the accompanying feelings are not constantly present to help reclaim and sustain changes.

Yet, in the decade of the 1970's, when our nation was blemished by immorality in high places and gross insensitivities to the pressures affecting the lives and welfare of large sectors of the disadvantaged populations, it was not surprising to find that feelings were ignored even in the efforts to understand the social work services. All things considered, the inflationary 1980's will produce more of the same, unless compelled by those whose feelings are most at stake, to do otherwise.

Evaluation

During the past decade it appeared that the measure of a program's success was to be determined by the success of the measure used to judge it. In the aftermath of Girls at Vocational High when some of social work's detractors were wondering out loud if casework was dead, the profession and many social agencies spent the next ten years trying to revive it. In the liberated 1960's, fields of practice responded to the mass protest movements by launching innovative programs. In the 1970's, the response to massive doubts about effectiveness of services was to innovate methods. In contrast to the relatively few approaches of the 1940's and 1950's -- diagnostic, functional, problem-solving, Thomistic, the 1970's proliferated so many approaches most agencies and practitioners have come to view their preferences as eclectic.⁶ If measurement of the service commodity was complicated because of its transient, short-lived attributes, the eclectic nature of the intervention did little to simplify the measurement problem.

Possibly the most important lessons of the past decade with reference to efforts to evaluate human service programs are not to be found in the increased technical competencies of the evaluators. One need only consider the concerns of powerful sources that stimulated the press for evaluation, and the success

they achieved in their major objective, i.e. to contain the escalating costs of social services, to realize that however well-intentioned the evaluators, their function was not to reason why. If one asks why the military, after the catastrophes in Viet Nam, in the Bay of Pigs and in the deserts of Iran, were not subject to evaluative efforts that curtailed their funding, but were used to justify more spending for the military; or one wonders how our elected officials can justify rescue operations for Chrysler, Lockheed, Pennsylvania Railroad and more, where threatened bankruptcies testify to mismanagement or worse in their planning and operation, the answers given would not help alter the very different treatment experienced by health, education and welfare programs. The commodities produced by the former claimants on our nation's resources, and the political-economic interests that benefit from their production, simply will not tolerate doubts that would threaten their benefits. As every child knows, and as President Eisenhower reminded us in his departing advice to the nation, it is among those interests that one will find the current rulers of our nation's destiny. It may seem more convincing to argue that commendable utilization occurs when money allocated to elderly dependent clients of social agencies is used to provide them with warm mid-day meals and extra heat allowances, than when monies are spent on multi-million dollar weapon systems which the last President, as head of the Armed Forces, publically admitted would be obsolete for defense purposes by the time they are ready to "fly." But this logic has not impressed those allocating resources. Long ago, in the late 1940's, Gunn and Platt⁹ found in their study of the health field, that monies do not go where the need is greatest. The 1970's should have taught us our error in rushing to evaluate, when the prerequisites for sound evaluation had yet to be established. But our failure to avoid this error is understandable, if not excusable: those who controlled the purse-strings called the tune and, as suggested, ours was not to reason why. If in the 1980's, we continue to dance to this tune, and fail to orchestrate our own approach to the study of the commodity that we produce, mindful of its peculiar qualities, we ought not blind ourselves to the possible disservice that can be the consequence of our best, well-intended efforts at evaluation.

From this discussion of the impact of the threatening 1980's on access, quality, utilization and evaluation are there any suggestions that can help guide our practices, programs and policies so as to manage more successfully than in the 1970's?

The following is a suggested priority order in which effort should be invested by the profession and organizations providing social work services to counter the negative effects one can anticipate, given the scenario projected for the decade ahead. It is also proposed that one overriding principle should guide such efforts.

Clearly, issues of access should take precedence over issues of implementation. There will be risks and benefits involved in efforts to provide social work services to persons in need. We all desire that good be done and harm avoided in the provision of these services. But these ethical intentions hardly assure that justice will be done. Evidence suggests that a fair distribution of resources is not likely to occur without special provision to increase the opportunities to connect with service for the most disadvantaged, and to compensate in program design for deficiencies in different persons' capacities that limit utilization. As indicated, in the pressures to which fields of service responded during the past decade, justice was not a major priority, nor will it be so in the 1980's unless fought for by those most concerned to achieve it. The principle to be observed might be stated briefly as follows:

A fair distribution of burdens and benefits requires that unequal opportunities for access be so arranged as to increase the availability of services for the most disadvantaged.

Clearly, study of the service transaction itself, and the circumstances that influence utilization should take precedence over accountability efforts that focus primarily on success or failure measures. It is not possible to separate success measures from the ideological preferences of those who select them, nor to establish with scientific precision the causal state of our ignorance of the social work service creation process itself. Thus, evaluations that stress success over utilization are likely to provide very weak justifications for continuing or terminating different modes of intervention. Focusing on the service process and its utilization on the other hand, will provide opportunity for those most closely involved in service creation to contribute to an understanding of what is done, how it is done, and what impact it has on those most directly affected by it.

Finally, quality of service should be of greater concern than coverage, and for obvious reasons. Given the attributes of the commodity, in periods of tight budgets, the press for accountability tends to focus on reduced unit costs for service. Given the nature of the professional function in relation to the provision of social work services, under conditions of uncertainty as to success or failure, the inclination will be to employ the least expensive provider and maintain the same coverage, accepting a different quality service as a result. Unless concern for quality is given precedence, the silent disappearance of major elements that

determine what the social work services can achieve will be a costly default, burdening the most disadvantaged more than the advantaged.

This ordering is not intended to weight the relative importance of access, quality, utilization and evaluation as areas for attention at all times, under all conditions. This ordering is intended to provide an essential counter-balance to contextual stresses that threaten the existence of necessary social work services.

FOOTNOTES

1. This scenario is based on conservative assumptions. It projects the current scene across the decade, assuming a relatively unchanged distribution of influences that shape national priorities. The analysis, on the other hand, is intended to contribute to a change in these priorities. If the purpose of the analysis is achieved, the scenario will be in error. The scenario anticipates a future we wish to avoid. For a related scenario see: S. M. Miller "Turmoil and/or Acquiescence for the 1980's?" Social Policy, May-June 1980, pp. 22-25.
2. Discussion of social services as commodities usually is associated with efforts to understand the political economy of social services. See, for example, Stanly Wenockur and Michael Riesch, Issues In Social Work: A Political Economic Perspective. (Unpublished Manuscript) and David M. Austin, the Political Economy of Social Benefit Organizations: Merit Goods and Redistributive Services," Draft of paper prepared for the Meeting on organizational theory and research related to human services, March 2-3, 1979, at the Center for Advanced Study on the Behavioral Sciences, Stanford, California.
3. Katherine M. Wood, "Casework Effectiveness: A New Look at the Research Evidence," Social Work, November, 1978, pp. 450-451. Prof. Wood's review of studies which, in part at least, were intended to evaluate social work practice, concludes with the observation that for a variety of reasons these studies offered little for social work theories about direct practice. Prof. Wood further notes, "It is difficult for the reader to determine specifics about clients, conditions, interventions and changes since the most essential details are lacking." This suggests another limitation that may be inherent in use of aggregate data -- i.e., it may not be possible to know what did happen in individual cases, not only what will happen.
4. See Florence Wexler Vigilante, Self-Preoccupation As A Predictor of Performance in Graduate Social Work Education (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Yeshiva University, School of Social Work, August, 1980) for one example of an effort to operationalize these concepts.

5. The concern of many within the profession, that the delivery system whereby the commodity was marketed also limited the access and quality of practice, served to rationalize proposals to promote an entrepreneurial model for service delivery. See in early discussion in Irving Piliavin, "Restructuring the Provision of Social Services," Social Work, Vol. 13, No. 2. January 1968, pp. 34-41. Also Alvin Shorr's editorial Social Work, Vol. 13, No. 2, April 1978, p. 2. For a more recent discussion of the uses of public monies to create private non-profit alternatives for service provision through contracting out, see Paul Terrell, "Private Alternatives to Public Human Services Administration." Social Service Review, March 1979, Vol. 53, No. 1, pp. 56-74.
6. NASW News, Vol. 24, No. 10, November, 1979, announcement of H.E.W. Children's Bureau Grant to NASW to perform research on the classification and validation of state merit system jobs, notes reasons for fearing that the widespread declassification of social service positions may have an adverse effect on the quality of service rendered. The separation of social services from income maintenance program concurrently established differential requisites for personnel in each function. Norman L. Wyers, "Whatever Happened to the Income Maintenance Line Worker?" Social Work, Vol. 25, No. 4, July, 1980, pp. 259-263; Irving Piliavin and Alan E. Gross, "The Effects of Separation of Services and Income Maintenance on AFDC Recipients," Social Service Review, 51, (September, 1977), pp. 389-406; and Final Report, the Task Force on the Future Relationship Between Publicly Funded Social Services and Income Support Programs, National Conference Social Welfare (Columbus, Ohio, 1979), will appear to be in agreement on important negative impact stemming from separation on the delivery and utilization of social service in public assistance agencies. The separation appears to separate clients from services as well.
7. Polanyi, Michael, Personal Knowledge, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1958.
8. In addition to further development of previous approaches evidenced in the psycho-social interactional and systems perspectives, the ecological, life mode, structural, behavioral and task-oriented perspectives are more recent additions.
9. Selsker Gunn and Philip Platt, Voluntary Health Agencies: An Interpretative Study, New York, Ronald Press, 1945.