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The De-Skilling of Social Workers:
An Examination of the Impact of the Industrial Model
of Production on the Delivery of Social Services

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Abstract

This article examines the effect of the industrial model of production on the delivery of social services. As part of this study, the effects of technology (used in its broadest sense) and system rationalization are explored, particularly as they result in the de-skilling of social workers. Lastly, the author makes recommendations for the development of alternative criteria for system rationality and the evaluation of efficiency in social service programs.

Introduction

In social work, as in most other professions, catch words like efficiency, accountability, system rationality, and austerity have become part of the daily vocabulary of professional life. Moreover, time and motion studies, sophisticated evaluation research, quantitative measures of client contact, and clinical proof of success are becoming increasingly common under the general rubric of accountability.

The intent of this paper is not to initiate a diatribe against technology, systems rationalization, or evaluative research, but instead to examine the deleterious effects of the industrial model of production on the delivery of social services. This paper will examine technology and systems rationalization, with the understanding that they are merely tools used in the service of the industrial model of production. In addition, the article will also explore the consequences of the industrial model of production for the work life of social workers and the experiences of clients. Lastly, the article will suggest some criteria to be used in the development of alternative measures of worker and agency productivity.

The thesis of this article, stated simply, is that when the industrial model of production is utilized in the social services it produces an effect upon client, worker, and agency which is detrimental to the well-being of each. It is the contention of this article that the overall structure in which social services are located, a social structure that by its nature stresses product and production over human needs, shapes technology and the raison d'être of social service programs. Society's emphasis on the quantification of production as the major benchmark of success forces social services into an industrial model of production, in which the most accepted measure of success is not the quality of services rendered, but instead the numbers of people processed. Furthermore, the quantification of social services determines which technologies are developed to measure worker and agency output.

Social Services, Funders, and Technology.

The demand by social service funders for greater system rationality and efficiency has increased over the last fifteen years. The pressure exerted by those funders has been fueled by a combination of inflation and recession, a general dwindling of fiscal resources allocated to social welfare, the intense competition for capital between the social welfare state and the military-industrial complex (a competition that has been exacerbated by the recent obsession with military superiority and first-strike capability), a growing feud with the corporate sector over taxation, and deficit spending on the federal level which has reached almost catastrophic proportions.

Concomitant with the emphasis on fiscal austerity has been an apparent increase in the job dissatisfaction of social workers in both private and public agencies. Many social workers in these agencies are reporting severe problems that relate to "burnout," such as low agency morale and an almost crisis-like state among the managers of many social welfare agencies (Jayeratne and Chess, 1984; Freudenberger, 1974). This dissatisfaction comes on the heels of social work's increasing use and adoption of highly sophisticated technological appurtenances. These technologies include: scientific management (i.e., management by objectives, etc.), the quantification of client/worker contact hours, a plethora of designs used to evaluate and measure how worker time is spent, goal attainment scaling, and so on. Given the recent fiscal constraints experienced by both public and private social welfare agencies, greater economic rationalization through increased

technological monitoring, downward re-classifying of social work positions, and the general diminution of social work jobs can be expected (Peccora and Austin, 1983; Karger, 1983).

The response of the social welfare establishment to the demands of funders has, in large measure, been focused on the development of greater and more sophisticated technologies. Before proceeding any further, however, a definition of technology is in order. Charles Perrow maintains simply that "technology is how the work is done." In a more precise manner, Perrow (1967: 195) defines technology:

"By technology is meant the actions that an individual performs upon an object, with or without the aid of tools or mechanical devices, in order to make some change in that object. The object, or 'raw material', may be a living being, human or otherwise, a symbol, or an inanimate object. People are raw materials in people-changing or people-processing organizations; symbols are materials in banks, advertising agencies, and some research organizations; the interactions of people are raw materials to be manipulated by administrators in organizations; boards of directors, committees, and councils are usually involved with the changing or processing of symbols and human interactions, and so on."

For the purposes of this paper, technology will not merely refer to computers, machines, software, etc. The definition of technology will encompass "how the work is done;" that is, machinery (computers), styles and philosophies of management, and the general design, organization, and execution of agency work. In this sense, technology and management are inextricably linked and part of the general fabric of agency work life.

In order to understand the relationship of technology to the industrial model of production and the delivery of social services, the key characteristics of technology must be examined. The engine that drives technology is the desire to cut costs, specifically the cost of labor. The savings for the agency, organization, or industry are established through increasing both the scale and intensity of production. This scheme results in higher productivity and an increase in the quantities produced (in human service organization the "quantity produced" is the number of clients processed). Consequently, the goal is to process more or the same

amount of people at a lower cost.

Agency savings can also be achieved by cutting the number of clients served. However, the obligation of the government, established through precedent and legislative mandate, necessitates the provision of services to clients who are at specific levels of need. Decreasing the raw materials processed (clients) may have serious consequences for the internal functioning and the stability of American society. Since the demand for services is increasing, savings can also be realized by regulating (re-adjusting means tests) the numbers of clients served. Even though overall social expenditures increase -- and with it the number of recipients -- savings accrue because the actual number of clients that should be served is not processed. The key incentive for technology is to increase the number of clients served while at the same time cutting costs. To do this, the mode of production must be standardized in such a manner as to process the raw materials as efficiently as possible.

The standardization of the mode of production demands that raw materials be perceived in a normative fashion. The raw materials (clients and workers) must have attributes that are similar (whether or not that is the case in reality), each must have a prescribed role, and exceptions must be overlooked or rejected. In short, the whole process of production must be normative for the system to achieve any kind of system rationalization.

Perrow (1967: 156) makes a similar argument when he states that:

"Techniques are performed upon raw materials. The state of art of analyzing the characteristics of the raw materials is likely to determine what kind of technology will be used. (Tools are also necessary, of course, but by and large, the construction of tools is a simpler problem than the analysis of the nature of the material and generally follows the analysis.) To understand the nature of the material means to be able to control it better and achieve predictability and efficiency in transformation. We are not referring here to the 'essence' of the material, only the way the organization perceives it to be ... The other relevant characteristic of the raw material, besides the understandability of its nature, is its stability and variability; that is, whether the material can be treated in a standardized fashion or whether

continual adjustment to it is necessary. Organizations uniformly seek to standardize their raw material in order to minimize exceptional situations. This is the point of de-individualizing processes found in military academies, monasteries and prisons, and the superiority of the synthetic shoe material Corfam over leather."

In short, the overriding object of technology is to rationalize the system of production, which in this case is the delivery of social services.

While savings within social services are important, they represent only part of the equation. The main function of social service rationalization is not merely to save money but to register a profit.

Accountability and rationality have slightly different meanings, yet their goal remains the same: the provision of adequate service at the least possible cost. In the marketplace of social services, agencies are involved in an intense competition for scarce capital. An agency will receive funding only if it can demonstrate that this money will be used in the most efficient manner possible. Consequently, although in many ways removed in form and content from the private marketplace, non-profit social services respond to the laws of market capitalism, which, at their core, operate on the premise of an intense competition for scarce capital.

The Political Context of Technology.

To blame technology per se is to confuse substance with appearance. Technology in social services does not exist in vacuo, but within a political context. Moreover, technology does not produce the social relations of production, instead it is produced by those relations (at least as those social relations are represented by the dominant values and ethos of capitalism).

Situating technology within a political context that values production above all else, suggests that technological appurtenances operate within a distinct political and social system. Given the reality of the current political context, the use of technology represents a change in the style of management rather than in the position of the worker. Used in conjunction with scientific management, the role of technology is to increase social profits (thereby emulating the system of capitalism in which it exists) by rationalizing the social service system.

Rationalization is not intrinsically bad. It is only problematic when used to rationalize the social service system on the basis of a funder's concern for efficiency, rather than client need. The paradox of technology is that the political context of social services is one of constant redefinition of tasks and means. This continual redefinition is antithetical to a system of rationality which pre-supposes stability.

It is erroneous to attribute to technology a power over humanity. Such power does not come from technology, but from the social relations of production. Technology is created by society and hence serves social interests: it has no life unto itself. To believe that technology has power is to reify social relations.

In short, social service technology is not the issue: the fundamental issue is the adaptation of the industrial model of production to social services.

The De-Skilling of Social Workers.

The values, philosophy, and culture of social work is at odds with the values of technological rationalization. Specifically, social work places a high premium on human interaction, is labor-intensive, and has a non-linear view of the world. And when complex technology pays little attention to the "terrain" (the actual work expectations and duties of social workers) of social services, social work skills become devalued and social workers lose their professional currency.

Almost axiomatic is the notion that technology tries to shape the production process to fit the strengths and needs of a particular technology. Therefore, the technology employed by the social welfare system will attempt to mold social work practice into a system which it can rationalize, measure, and evaluate. For example, if the strength of a particular technology is efficiency, social work must become quantitative in its orientation. Since this evaluative criterion is inherent within the technology, if social work fails to be quantified (e.g., numbers of people receiving service) it is assessed as ineffective. Thus the technology determines the practice, and the tail wags the dog. The result of such confusion about means and ends (the evaluative function of technology becoming the ends rather than what it should be -- the means) rigidifies social work practice. The engine that drives social work becomes evaluative technology, rather than the other way around.

In order to utilize fully quantitative technologies, human interactions must be reduced (as much as possible) to quantifiable terms. The strength of technology lies in measuring a product, rather than providing a suitable "terrain" for social service. The net result of this is that the criteria for determining client success are removed from the control of the social worker, and subsequently defined by a particular technology.

Through its emphasis on efficiency -- a notion of efficiency usually tied to quantity rather than quality -- technology attempts to replace labor energy with machine power that is usually less costly in the long-run. Moreover, it is easier to measure the productivity of machines, since production is usually constant (Mumford, 1961).

Therefore, the essence of technology is its ability to achieve efficiency. As part of that motive, systems which are able to quantify the productive output of individuals must be developed. While industry measures the number of commodities produced, social service measures the number of clients processed. In both cases the industrial model of production emphasizes quantity over quality. While describing the modern technological world, Fromm (1968: 39) writes:

"Few people raise the question of quality. This omission is evident in a society which is not centered around man any more, in which one aspect, that of quantity, has choked all others."

Current social service technology fits under the aegis of industrial production in several other important ways. As was stated earlier, both industrial and social agency production demand that the raw materials of production be standardized (Perrow, 1967: 196).

The industrial model of production -- more specifically the industrial technology of rationalization -- forces a non-routinized type of work (social work in this case) into a routinized and standardized framework. For example, the objective of operations research, as used in social work and elsewhere is to develop an unobstructed and continuous assembly line process. The goal of this activity is to create an uninterrupted work flow devoid of organizational and production obstacles. Contrary to Hage and Aiken (1974: 298), the establishment of a highly developed assembly line process is clearly applicable to social service organizations. The principle behind routinized work tasks states

that if clients are stable and uniform, and if much is known about the process of treatment, a routine work flow will follow.

An example of the need to stabilize raw materials is evident in the creation and use of the Diagnostic Service Manual (DSM III). Client problems are catalogued and a diagnosis proffered based on symptomology. When symptoms are channelled into the proper classification the correct path to treatment is illuminated. Those symptoms that defy categorization are either repudiated or ignored. Hence, an assembly line process of diagnosis and treatment is initiated. The process is, however, geared only to treating what has been defined as a problem by the diagnostic manual.

Routinization of task also has profound effect upon the decision-making process of an agency. The more uniform or routine the task, the more restricted the decision-making. Conversely, permitting each individual to control tasks is a move toward collegiality (Litvak, 1974).

Routinization also exacerbates the division of labor within an agency and locates the decision-making functions within an insulated context. If workers' tasks are routine, they can only make decisions related to a small issue. And, in order for tasks to be routine, they must be particular, specific, and measurable. Moreover, the more routine the task the less a worker knows about the overall functioning of an agency, and thus is not well enough informed to contribute significantly to planning an organization. Such ignorance insures that workers will remain passive and in a compliant state. Even within the context of their own routinized task, workers may not be allowed to control the decision-making related to their job. Thus, routinized tasks allow for a division of labor which centralizes decision-making within an administrative cadre and attempts, albeit often unconsciously, to sequester workers within a world of organizational ignorance and impotence.

Distinct problems arise when routinized tasks are introduced into the social service field. Professionalism, according to Friedson (1970: 78), is the quality of being free, self-directed, and autonomous. A professional self-directs his or her work. Conversely, an occupation that cannot direct or control the production and application of its knowledge base is not a profession (Friedson, 1970: 75). The

routinization of social service delivery is problematic for the social worker who, as a result of educational dogma, believes that professionalism is crucial when dealing with clients and other members of the public. Friedson (1970: 81) sums up the dilemma of the social work professional when he states that

"... it has been felt by many writers that the worker, as well as the client, suffers from the bureaucratization of production by a monocratic administration. Lacking identification with the prime goals of the organization, lacking an important voice in setting the formal level and direction of work, and performing work which has been so rationalized as to become mechanical and meaningless, functions as a minute segment of an intricate mosaic of specialized activities which he is in no position to perceive or understand, the worker is said to be alienated."

Therefore, as a result of the technological mandate to increase efficiency, productivity, and profits, the tasks of most workers must be reduced to simple routines approximating the logic of machine production. Workers are thus transformed from competent individuals into machine-like components who possess only the most basic knowledge of their work environment, and hence become labeled as mere "factors of production." This expropriation of knowledge deprives workers of the dignity and worth that should accompany meaningful work, and completes their transformation into marketable and replaceable commodities (Gil, 1984).

Social work practice -- through the exigencies of technology -- must therefore become specialized, its tasks mechanized, and its final mission made more fully automatic (Mumford, 1962: 118) Furthermore, this "decomplexifying" of social work skills allows less skilled people to operate social welfare agencies. Hence, the downward declassification of social work positions -- the trivialization of social work -- becomes more widespread. Because technology demands that jobs be divided into measurable parts, what was formerly a skill (insight, empathy, etc.) becomes an anachronism of pre-technology. If a caseworker's skills and attributes cannot be defined by the technocrats who manage technology, he or she is thus relegated to the role of a skilled technician who can measure behavioral change in the language of the science. Since technology stresses measurement, and what is not quantifiable cannot be measured, behavioral change will be the sole barometer of effective casework

(Hudson, 1978). Insight that cannot be measured is thus extraneous to technology, and hence cannot be included in most "scientific" evaluative strategies.

When a sophisticated technology is introduced into a program that does not pay sufficient attention to the organization and mission of social work, and when that technology is mastered by only a few, severe dislocation and stratification is encouraged in the workplace. In particular, social service technocrats who can master the new technologies come to dominate social workers who cannot compete in the technological arena. Thus, the pre-existing relations of power within the workplace become transformed into a stratified system of power relationships, as the new technocrats are treated as the most important members of the social work profession. In effect, the less technologically adept social workers operate social services under orders from their technocratic managers. The value of the social worker, and his or her ability to make decisions concerning clients, is diminished in light of the power relationships that emerge from the exigencies imposed by the new technocrats. Moreover, the importation of non-social work managers (MPA's or MBA's) results in the colonialization of social work by other professions. These managers, who try to produce the most cost-efficient, productive, and rational service, often have little understanding of the "terrain" of social work practice.

A profession which no longer values its practitioners undermines itself. With its valued talent imported, and little place to export its professionals, social work reduces itself to an economic colony subordinate to other disciplines. In effect, social work imports its own masters and trains their subordinates. Social workers fit neither the old way that is disappearing nor the new ways for which they are not trained. With only their traditional labor to exchange, social workers are threatened with economic obsolescence. Unless social workers work more cheaply or gain technological skills, they will be relegated to inferior work roles. The irony is that within the social work curriculum there is little room for more high-technology without compromising the "knowledge of the terrain."

The technological cycle causes the superfluousness of social workers who possess only interpersonal skills. In effect, they form an underclass in the high-technology social welfare field, while the scientific managers are the valued capital. Finally, the superfluousness of the skilled line

worker also leads to lower wages and the subsequent "proletarianization" of social workers.

Since technology builds on itself, and increasingly more technology is needed to be competitive, the cycle of destruction grows more widespread for the profession of social work. Each new technological advancement in social work means that greater numbers of social workers are disenfranchised from their current status within agencies. In short, every new technological development which requires scientific and complex management skills drives a nail deeper into the coffin of the traditional relations of power inherent in the social work profession.

A result of the de-skilling cycle is that workers begin to doubt and devalue their skills. With such devaluation comes a decline in self-concept and a diminution of the purpose of work. Work becomes labor and labor alienated work (Karger, 1981). That which was once active becomes passive, and he or she who was once a subject is now an object. Technology (including scientific management) dissolves the labor process as one conducted by workers and reconstitutes it as a process organized by management (Aronowitz, 1973: 170). In this sense, the reorganization of labor changes the work process.

The cycle of de-skilling is completed when the trivialization of social work becomes a reality. At the core of this is the devaluation of the social worker's capital and the reduction of social work skills to mechanical operations. The technological mandate is enforced by agencies and, often, by the profession itself. Resistance to the technological imperative is punished either through professional repudiation or agency sanction. In either case, the refusal to capitulate to technological demands engenders substantial risks. In short, the transformation of social workers into mere "factors of production" is repugnant to work, as alienation results when jobs are transformed into routine tasks.

The paradox is that, in many ways, the inhumanity of social service agencies causes worker alienation (an inhumanity fostered by the technological conditions of production). And most often this alienation is dealt with by developing more sophisticated technology. Ironically, that which caused the alienation is expected to end it.

Recommendations.

That social work is being rationalized is evident in social work practice and administration. This rationalization of the profession is a fact of life and will, in all likelihood, become a permanent fixture of social work. The following recommendations, although not exhaustive, suggest a direction for social service technologies and system rationalization:

1) The entire notion of productivity must be reassessed. Productivity for its own sake must be discarded, and in its place must be established a form of production that has a human context. Productivity must be designed to reflect the best interests of the client and the workers. Therefore, alternative means to measure and evaluate productivity must be designed. The new criteria must evaluate productivity not merely as a crude measure of production, but as a reflection of agency, worker, and client goals.

The above suggests the use and development of an appropriate technology for the social welfare field. Utilization of appropriate technology supposes the need to redefine efficiency in human rather than technological terms. The redefinition of efficiency hinges on a re-evaluation of the goals of social service, since efficiency is merely the measurement of pre-determined goals. Therefore, in order to develop appropriate technologies in social work, the goals of social service must be articulated in human terms.

Social service planning should be based on the needs of workers and extend from a humanistic framework, rather than machine-like notions of productivity. This requires a thorough assessment of the needs of workers and the ideology that is invoked to describe work in the modern world.

In order to create forms of technological assessment that are appropriate to social work, a "regional" approach to social work technology must be developed by the profession (e.g. for child welfare, mental health, etc.) Moreover, each region must then develop a specific form of technology that is appropriate for each modality of treatment. The notion that social work can develop an evaluative technology which can be used universally is not only misleading, but in the end will compromise the profession. The use of appropriate technology suggests that the "terrain" of social work practice is complex and fraught with problems. Attempts to homogenize the "terrain", by superimposing a

technological modality that is not indigenous to the particular field under examination, will only create the conditions which render social work ineffective and thus devalue the profession.

2) Social service organizations need less mechanistic practice models and more humane and democratic organizational forms. The hierarchical organization which pits worker against supervisor, and locates the focus of decision-making with a few supervisors, must be substituted for one which stresses collegiality and worker control of production.

3) The technology used in social service programs should be understood easily by those social workers who will be expected to implement it. This does not suggest utilizing only rudimentary or crude forms of technology, but instead using types that can be mastered and understood by practitioners who are not trained as engineers or computer technicians. Undoubtedly, using middle-range technology may necessitate some retraining of social service personnel. Additionally, technology must be flexible (rather than fixed and rigid) and able to be changed by social work personnel. Lastly, the new technology must be dynamic and easily altered, since the conditions of social work practice change. Technology should not determine the criteria for effectiveness, but rather measure effectiveness as it is specified by social work managers and practitioners.

Conclusion.

This paper has attempted to show that the use of inappropriate technology in the social welfare field has serious consequences. Most important is the de-skilling of social workers and the subsequent devaluation of the social work profession. Choices regarding the use and development of technology are unavoidable. Demands for accountability and the fiscal restraints placed on the social welfare system are omnipresent. While choices regarding technology must be made by social workers, the criteria used must be carefully scrutinized. As part of this process new criteria must be developed. These should be based on notions of efficiency which are grounded in the human dimension of work, rather than a purely economic view of service delivery. With a humane and democratic vision, social service technologies can be a potent force in positively changing the face of welfare services in the United States.

Technology is merely a tool. Although technology has its own logic it is still in the service of humanity. Nevertheless, technology can be an

instrument for either liberation or repression. Social work is at a crossroad. On the one hand social workers can be subservient to technology, or on the other hand they can try to develop technologies that benefit both clients and the profession. What social workers choose should be a matter for public debate within the profession.

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