September 1994

Designing Community Social Services

John O’Looney
University of Georgia

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol21/iss3/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.
Designing Community Social Services

JOHN O’LOONEY
University of Georgia

The literature is reviewed on the qualities of integrated and non-integrated organizational systems. Social service delivery has changed in recent decades such that organizational strategies and structures that may have once been successful no longer appear to be so. As tasks have changed, so too have the technologies that might assist in the more effective delivery of social services. A discussion of how organizational strategies might be designed, so as to link emerging tasks requirements with the ability to effectively use existing and potential technologies, concludes the paper.

From an historical perspective, the current vogue for collaboration and service integration cannot be described as something entirely new (U.S Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1990). Similar calls for reforming the fragmented social service system have been made in both recent and distant history. The New York City Youth Board, for example, brought schools and social agencies together for early detection and treatment of youth at risk in the 1960s; the CETA program in the 1970s attempted to unite all the manpower planning and service agencies under one collaborative effort; and the Model Cities program tried to bridge the gulf between and among community service agencies and economic and community planners. In the more distant past, the settlement house movement was an effort to bring social and human services under the same roof covering clients in need of services (Husock, 1992). What is somewhat new about current efforts is the attempt to consciously combine a number of qualities—such as flexibility, comprehensiveness, ease of access, a family focus, customer satisfaction and choice, and early intervention—into a “reformed” or “integrated” social service system (Melaville and Blank, 1991; Bruner, 1991). While the qualities of this new collaborative model of social service delivery are all desirable individually and in the
abstract, when they are grouped together and applied in real environments, they do not suggest any one coherent or consistent organizational form. Instead, like Herbert Simon's (1978) "proverbs of administration," the new wisdom of collaboration and service integration can lead to calls for very different organizational and administrative structures and systems depending on which qualities one desires to maximize or which "proverb" is most appropriate under the circumstances. Essentially, program designers, managers, and community advocates who wish to infuse their social service systems with all the desirable qualities need to be aware that the "collaborative" interorganizational structures may not be able to deliver all that they promise and may even include tendencies to undermine some desirable values.

Qualities of Collaborative (Tightly Coupled) v. Non-Collaborative (Loosely Coupled) Models

Where Lizbeth Schorr's (1986) suggestions for more effective service delivery provide an important practice-based touchstone for the re-designing of social service systems, this article takes a more theoretical and deductive approach to the same task. That is, instead of starting from observations of seemingly effective practice in order to arrive at lessons for system re-design, I intend to move from an analysis of emerging tasks and available technologies to arrive at potentially similar (or possibly contrasting) lessons for system re-design. As a result of this approach, it may be possible to provide more theoretically based reasons for supporting collaboration among social service providers as well as more explicit guidance as to exactly how service systems need to change.

Schorr (1986), Bruner (1991), Morrill (1992) and others who have formulated a practice-based literature on collaboration often promote two contrasting system designs changes simultaneously—suggesting on the one hand that the service system should act more as a comprehensive, tightly coupled organization in terms of some activities (e.g., building rich communication channels, developing shared plans, and blending funding streams, training, and other resources), while on the
other hand suggesting that agencies should act more like independent, loosely coupled units with respect to being flexible in service delivery, responsive to client choices, competitive in delivering the best and most innovative services, adaptable to local circumstances, and entrepreneurial with respect to providing greater outreach (Schorr, 1986; Morrill, 1992; Bruner, 1991; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1990; Gerry and Certo, 1992). Unfortunately, the practice-based literature: 1) tends to promote these contrasting inter-organizational designs under a single term—"collaboration"—suggesting a systems design that may be more unitary in nature than would be desirable, and 2) provides little guidance as to how to achieve an optimal balance of desirable, but potentially, incompatible organizational design features.

Models and Contexts

In the practice-based literature, the model of collaborative, integrated service provision is meant to be an alternative to traditional, loosely coupled service delivery that is provided by an ad hoc set of decentralized, independent, uncoordinated organizations interacting as occasions arise, but lacking formal ties and having a potential for competition (Perrow, 1986). Obviously, while most communities can be characterized as following the traditional model in part, these communities also have over time developed a number of coordinating mechanisms, coalitions, and interagency agreements that move them beyond the level of a pure social choice basis of organization. Roland Warren (1972) suggests that most communities fall somewhere along the spectrum from little or no prescribed collectivity orientation, which he calls a social choice context (and which typically generates a loosely coupled system of organizations) to a very highly prescribed collectivity orientation, which he terms a unitary context (and which typically generates a very tightly coupled system of organizations or organizational units). In between these extremes, he suggests the possibility for coalitional and federative contexts. Figure 1 summarizes the differences in these contexts.
Figure 1

Interorganizational Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unitary</th>
<th>Federative</th>
<th>Coalitional</th>
<th>Social Choice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coupling</strong></td>
<td>Tight</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Little or None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prescribed</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Minimal</td>
<td>Little or None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivity Orientation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relation of Units to an Inclusive Goal</strong></td>
<td>Organized for achieving an inclusive goal</td>
<td>Units with disparate goals, but some formal organization for inclusive goals</td>
<td>Units with disparate goals, but informal coordination for inclusive goals</td>
<td>No inclusive goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Locus of Inclusive Decision Making</strong></td>
<td>At top of inclusive structure</td>
<td>At top of inclusive structure subject to unit ratification</td>
<td>In interaction of units without a formal inclusive structure</td>
<td>Within units</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Table 2 in Roland Warren’s (1972) chapter on “The Interorganizational Field as a Focus for Investigation.”
Warren's continuum of interorganizational contexts provides a baseline or map for thinking about re-designing the human service system in light of a desire to provide more integrated, collaborative, and effective services. Some theorists note that no agreed upon model of collaboration exists and that the state of our knowledge is such that it is premature to establish any particular model (Levy and Shepardson, 1992). Even these researchers, however, fail to emphasize that there may exist an underlying contradiction in the use of the term "collaboration" with respect to system or inter-organizational design principles.

While those suggesting that it is premature to offer a single, comprehensive model of collaboration or service integration are correct, an analysis of the emerging tasks that this system is designed to address and an understanding of the capabilities of emerging organizational and material technologies should expand our ability to envision an "appropriate" system, one that provides the most adequate fit of technology to task and that is informed by an awareness of the particular strengths and weakness of certain organizational features such as loose versus tight coupling or federalist versus other governing principles. In terms of Warren's typology, the objective is to explore within the context of emerging tasks and technologies some notions of how and where organizations can effectively collaborate or integrate services and should therefore move toward federative or unitary structures, and how and where organizations and communities might be better off if the organizational context remained coalitional or even more loosely coupled.

The Emerging Task: "New" Poverty: Although the full extent of the problem of poverty may not be evident in data that use the current government definition of poverty, it is nevertheless true that most social service agencies are generally confined to providing services to those who can establish need based on a government-set, poverty line benchmark. If Schwarz and Volgy (1992) are correct, changes in the way poverty is defined have resulted in a smaller pool of individuals being eligible for services. Poverty, thus defined, limits the overall scope of service delivery to those who are generally most in need, and it is these most-in-need, economically and socially isolated individuals and families who now form the context for understanding...
the "new" poverty. Whereas poverty was once thought to be largely treatable through economic supports alone, the "new" poverty seems to be relatively immune to such treatment and demands stronger and more continual social supports and intervention.

While designing a service delivery system to serve all groups of children and families is an important goal, the scope of this article and of most reality-based human resource planning is much narrower: to provide some suggestions for the re-design of the current service delivery system based on the assumption that this system, being continually resource-poor, will be forced to focus its concerns overwhelmingly with families who are in the highest risk categories. These "new poverty" families are typically characterized by multiple problems, disintegrating and stigmatizing social and neighborhood contexts, the lack of employment opportunities, work incentives and sanctions, and role models, and by contact with multiple, fractured service agencies—each with their own eligibility rules, some of which are at cross purposes with other providers' rules (Mead, 1992; Kaus, 1992; Lemann, 1991 Bruner, 1991). Additionally, research suggests that these families often have a difficult time navigating the complicated social service network. One study suggested, for example, that most of the families who are referred to other agencies for service never receive these services (National Council on Social Work, 1977). Unfortunately, the social service system with its multiple points of entry, uncoordinated and obscure eligibility requirements, patterns of abrupt gaps in service followed by "over-servicing," and cumbersome paperwork requirements seems at times to have been designed on purpose to frustrate the meeting of these families' needs.

The system design implications of "new poverty" challenges are fairly obvious. Simply put, these families would seem to benefit from a much tighter coupling both within and between social service and educational agencies. This tighter coupling will involve a number of features, including:

- a focus on the whole family. This focus is key to addressing problems that are multi-generational in nature and that have their origins in family systems. Research on case
records of juveniles who have had contact with the social service and correction systems suggests that troubled children are generally part of a larger troubled family system (Herrman and O'Looney, 1989-1990).

- a much stronger eligibility linkage among programs that serve the same family or neighborhood. This linkage is needed to assure that families get all the resources they need, that signals about what is appropriate assistance are clear, but also that public assistance does not become viewed cynically as a degrading and labyrinthine system that can nevertheless be "beat" if one is clever and opportunistic enough.

- a much stronger communications and program planning linkage. This linkage will be needed to insure that programs or services are complementary and provide fool-proof channels of access that lead to appropriate service utilization.

- a shared (interorganizational) responsibility for monitoring family and community progress. Just as workfare is more costly than welfare because of the supervisory demands of monitoring work cost more than simply sending a check, so too, tracking of family development and well-being will cost more than assuming that if clients do not return that they are doing fine. The added expense for outcome evaluation might be paid for in part by the elimination of duplicative, ad hoc, and ineffective interventions found through monitoring family progress.

While an agenda for addressing the "new" poverty would appear to call for much tighter interorganizational coupling along some lines, it would also seem to require a looser coupling along other lines. In particular, it would seem to involve:

- a high level of human discretion. While we know more about changing a dysfunctional family and community system than we have known in the past, our knowledge is far from exact or comprehensive. Because as Tolstoy remarked, every unhappy family is unhappy in their own peculiar way, knowing what resources and services are
needed when and with what families is still an art rather than a science. Addressing the peculiarities of “unhappy families” requires time, ingenuity, judgment, and tenacity in combinations that cannot entirely be predicted, planned for, or systematically applied.

• a high level of sensitivity to the stigma of being associated with a culture that is viewed as impoverished. Like great teaching, judicial use of discretion or sensitivity cannot be programmed. Rather, it must be rewarded when it is discovered. Unfortunately, more tightly coupled organizational systems, because they must be based on rational, technologically-driven criteria, usually do not have the capacity to discover or the discretion to reward this type of sensitivity.

Changing Tools

As the task faced by contemporary social service providers has changed, the technology assisting the accomplishment of this task has changed very little. However, emerging information and expert system technologies suggest that this will not be the case for long. Because technologies change, successful system or organizational design approaches are also likely to change (e.g., the introduction of cable and fiber-optic technologies tend to support a more loosely coupled approach to programming because of the fragmentation of the market).

Social services, like most service fields or tasks built around human expertise and judgement rather than rote behavior, have traditionally been immune from changes in technological capabilities. However, the third wave of information technologies is likely to change this situation. Shared data bases, for example, can assist case managers in reducing the fragmentation of services, increasing the speed and comprehensiveness of risk assessment and eligibility certification, and eliminating duplication of information gathering. Additionally, expert systems can guide minimally experienced or skilled social workers toward higher standards of practice. The experience of social service departments with expert systems is still limited; however, in the places such as Tulare and Merced counties in California evidence to date suggests that these systems have
enabled fewer eligibility workers to process more cases with no increase in wait time. Additionally, these systems have enabled workers with comparatively little experience to effectively navigate complex Medicaid rules and regulations. As will be explored below, however, the potential benefits of these systems will only be fully realized by service delivery systems that have re-designed their work or organizations to take advantage of these technologies.

*Fitting Organizational Approach to Emerging Technologies*

The dramatic decrease in the cost of storing, retrieving, manipulating, and organizing information should have resulted in a productivity boom and cost savings to information intensive organizations such as insurance, general business, and social service organizations. Unfortunately, the expected productivity boon of the computer age has for the most part not been achieved and will not likely be achieved as long as computers are used chiefly as typewriters that store text. As Hammer (1990) and others have suggested, in order to capture the expected benefits of low-cost information systems, work will have to be restructured around new principles that will redefine the roles and organizational structures through which individuals work. These principles, often called "flexible specialization," were first developed in a production context to describe how highly skilled workers using flexible machinery and software could produce short runs of precision, customized goods with only small re-tooling costs. However, these principles also can be applied to the aspects of service delivery or education that are information intensive (O'Looney, 1993).

In essence, flexible specialization suggests that information technologies, properly designed, will allow ordinary workers who are trained to use these technologies to perform jobs that once were the province of certified "experts" or "specialists." That is, instead of using technologies to de-skill ordinary work as often occurs in the design of mass production systems, technology is designed to empower ordinary workers to act more skillfully and more like specialists than would otherwise be the case. Just as important, however, it allows these ordinary workers and narrow specialists as well to work in a number of areas
and to flexibly move from one area to another. The notion is to raise the general problem-solving and information access skills of average workers so as to allow them to act as if their skills were in fact much more specialized, and to allow someone who has specialized in a narrow field to become more flexible in using these skills and in acquiring others that are more appropriate to environmental demands. The idea of flexible specialization should not be confused with a movement toward deprofessionalization and its attendant problems (Hasenfeld, 1985; Dressel, Waters, Sweat, Clayton, Chandler, 1988); in fact, as Stein (1982) suggests, the promotion of information technology skills (i.e., the basis for flexible specialization) among case workers is probably the best strategy for combating the movement toward deprofessionalization and increasing the skill level of the average social worker, though along fewer categorical lines. For example, a flexible specialization case worker would be trained to both diagnose problems and to treat the majority of problems that can be handled by a someone with good communication, mediation, and problem-solving skills. As such, this case worker would not unnecessarily refer clients who needed only minimal to moderate levels of counseling, parent education, or similar common treatment modality to costly specialists.

Flexible specialization requires that service agencies begin to re-think their current use of low skilled workers such as those who may be filling gate-keeping or record-keeping positions. In a re-designed service system, these individuals, assisted by expert systems, would be trained to work at a much higher level of skill and would approach the skill level of today's generic case worker. On the other hand, many social workers who currently specialize in narrow sub-fields and sub-professions might find that they will be asked to assume greater responsibility for a larger spectrum of inter-connected problems, while only occasionally being called on to provide specialized services. This more generic and holistic approach should not be confused with a de-skilling of professional work or a lowering of the level of professional service; rather, it should be seen as a re-forming of the helping professions so as to make them more effective by making them part of a flexible service delivery team. In this regard, social service providers will no longer be able to ignore
systemic problems (in the family or in the service system) simply because they fall outside of one's specialty. Instead, these providers will use information systems within redesigned organizations to identify and treat—with skill mimicking that of a specialist—a number of problems that might otherwise have been ignored, being "outside" of one's specialty.

This greater flexibility of roles would be made possible through the use of expert systems that would guide new or inexperienced service providers toward decisions and patterns of behavior that echo those of a more experienced or expert provider. While some existing computer programs that provide "counseling" to users seem a bit contrived, more sophisticated information systems, such as those being created through the Baylor-Howard Universities' Community Work Station Project, are in the works. This "work station of the future," for example, will include handy expert protocols (e.g., in the areas of elderly or child abuse) for handling particularly difficult or legally sensitive cases. Similarly, a number of universities and private vendors have developed outreach, intake, and eligibility software that can assist a natural helper, such as a teacher, nurse, or school counselor, to provide the kind of guidance, information, and referral that one would only expect from a professional social worker. Obviously, programs developed to assist ordinary helpers in the treatment of minor emotional or mental illnesses could go a long way toward filling the gap in mental health services for those whose illness is not severe enough to qualify them for free or subsidized treatment or after care. Although no technology will be able to duplicate the abilities of highly perceptive and intuitive service providers, expert systems should be able to raise the average level of practice to something approaching the best of human performance and provide average and below average service workers with heuristics for adapting their service-related behaviors to the specific needs of specific families.

However, in order for the promise of flexible specialization and expert system in service delivery to occur, the system as a whole has to be reorganized. Hammer (1990) has outlined a number of principles of re-organizing for flexible specialization, including:
Principles of Flexible Specialization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) a cross-functional perspective</td>
<td>a nurse who also can conduct a mental health needs assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) a tighter connection between those who use the output of a process and those who perform the process</td>
<td>employer and workers design the training for youth on a vocational education track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) a tighter connection between information processing work and real work</td>
<td>a youth’s (or group of youth’s) grades, attendance, behavior and social history information is easily available to all who enter the information (e.g., teachers, probation officers, parents, counselors, and outreach workers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) a use of information networks to pull together resources from larger geographical areas</td>
<td>scarce or geographically distant experts/vendors are accessed through teleconferencing, on-line bulletin board Q&amp;A sessions, national data bases, or educational software.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) a linking of parallel activities rather than integration of the results of these activities</td>
<td>pre-natal care workers, parenting educators, public assistance providers, etc. work together to design the intervention with high risk pregnant teens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) a location of decision points closer to where the work is performed while building control into the process</td>
<td>allowing a school nurse to purchase needed supplies directly through an on-line purchase/budgeting system without having to go through other offices. The system itself has approved vendor lists, purchasing, budgeting, and accounting functions that limit the discretion to acceptable levels.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) a capture of information once and at the source</td>
<td>several social service agencies share the same planning and client (e.g., income, social history, eligibility, etc.) information data base, with each agency responsible for complete information gathering on first encounter.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing these principles from the standpoint of the tightly v. loosely coupled design parameters, it appears that applying the principles calls for a tighter coupling of informational channels, while allowing a looser coupling of the people who work within a system or network of organizations. Standardized, inter-connected highways offer a good illustration of the type of coupling that is suggested. While development of such a highway system calls for greater central authority to standardize grades, intersections, traffic flows, etc., the system itself allows for much greater freedom on the part of the end-users of the system.

A number of Hammer’s (1990) principles of flexible specialization are fairly clear as to whether or not they would involve more organizational or inter-organizational coupling. That is, organizational systems will have to become more tightly coupled if they are to more effectively “connect the output of a process and those who use the process.” The fracturing of human service delivery into categorical specialties tends to undermine this process. For example, in our vocational education and rehabilitation systems, potential employers (i.e., those who will use the output of the vocational education process) have a minor, if any, role in developing the training curriculum or treatments for those who will emerge from the system. This stands, for example, in stark contrast to the highly praised German vocational education system (Streeck et. al, 1987).

Hammer’s principle of building a “tighter connection between information processing work and real work” is also likely to involve creation of tighter linkages among an organizational system’s components. In the long run, however, as systems approach tighter coupling in this regard, the workers who have traditionally been engaged in the “real” work of the system should become empowered by their new information processing skills to act with greater discretion. As described above, both support staff and more professional staff would enjoy greater discretion in areas of work that were congruent with their service mission. While an increase in such discretion implies a more loosely coupled system, this discretion is actually based on a system that is more tightly coupled to a common information base, diagnostic and triage procedures, and intervention
sequences. The highway metaphor is appropriate in understanding this phenomenon, and the notion is more explicitly suggested in Hammer’s principle of “pulling together resources from a larger geographical area by use of information networks.”

Another of Hammer’s flexible system-design principles states that organizational systems should “link parallel activities rather than integrate the results of those activities.” This principle also suggests a more tightly coupled system. In the social services, such a system might involve linking together: day care personnel, child health professionals, early childhood educators, special education and early intervention services, and parent education programs—all into one seamless system that encompasses parents at any point of contact. Such a linkage could enable the system to enact another of Hammer’s flexible design principles: “capture information once and at the source.” In terms of human service delivery, this principle suggests that all human service providers share in the same informational data bases related to both client and program planning data and individual and family well-being. The purposes of such a data base are several, including: to serve families in crisis in a manner that does not further traumatize these families or place obstacles in the way of service delivery, to support a strategic and systemic approach to family system problem-solving, and to develop accountability for the service system as a whole. (Currently, single service providers are accountable only for the effects of the services they provide to individuals in a short-term time frame, rather than for the long-term effect on the whole family’s well-being).

With respect to Hammer’s idea of developing a cross-functional perspective, loosely coupled networks of organizations would seem to be more philosophically supportive of this idea. Loosely coupled individuals or groups of workers can move more easily across functional or bureaucratic boundaries (or perform several functions in the delivery of service to families). The cross-functional perspective actually harks back to the craft tradition where workers tended to perform more steps in a production (or service) process than is true in modern work arenas were the division of labor into its smallest elements is the predominant approach.
A Flexible Craft vs. Mass Production Approach to the New Poverty

While development of a cross-functional perspective does not necessarily mean a return to products or services produced by a single craftsman, it does mean that a high degree of parallel coordination exists among those persons who work with the same family such that the same craft-like approach is taken and a customized service plan is fulfilled. This stands in contrast to standard "mass production" or Fordist modes of service that characterize the design of our service delivery system. In mass production, the final product is assumed to be a standardized one (e.g., an independent healthy family) that can be produced in high volume using standardized categories of inputs (e.g., so much AFDC, so much Food Stamps, so much counseling). Because work has been divided into its simplest parts, the skill required of most service workers (outside of the small number of managers and licensed professionals who deal with the difficult cases) is minimal. As in mass production factories, once the assembly-line of service delivery has been completely designed, there ceases to be any need for craft-like skills.

While it seems obvious to some that service delivery work should not be accomplished through a mass production delivery design, this insight is in fact relatively new and based on both a realization of the potential of emerging technologies and an understanding that the tasks presented by the "new poverty" are not very amenable to a "Fordist" or production line approach. That is, whereas the typical separation of services specialties, (and within these specialties, separation of outreach, intake, diagnosis, treatment, case management, and after care) was once the most efficient and effective model of service delivery, the greater precision and customization of service delivery demanded by high-risk families and the potential, due to emerging information technologies, for providing customized services makes this "wisdom" obsolete.

Organizational and Inter-Organizational Changes to Address Task & Technology Mis-Match

In terms of system design, as the task of poverty elimination has become less linear and more complex, organizations within the service delivery system will need to change both at
the organizational and inter-organizational levels to more effectively model flexible specialization approaches and take advantage of emerging technologies to address "new poverty" problems. Currently, the service delivery system is mis-matched in terms of its tasks and available technologies. At the inter-organizational level only a very loose coupling exists, resulting in a fragmented delivery of services to multi-problem, impoverished families. At the organization level, however, operations tend to be tightly coupled such that front-line workers are given narrowly defined tasks, strict work sequences and requirements, and little discretion to act in the broader interests of the health and welfare of a whole family system. This mis-match is the result of the Fordist approach of breaking down work into its smallest, most easily replicated, standardized steps. The principles of flexible specialization would suggest a different organizational strategy: promote tighter coupling at the inter-organizational level (thereby allowing for cross-functional and information exchange activities), some looser coupling at the organizational level (thereby allowing greater discretion at the front-line), and complex processing at both levels. This tightening at the inter-organizational level, paradoxically, should lead to a certain loosening at the level of the individual worker. Practically speaking, as separate social service agencies begin to look at whole family systems and communities, they will have to build their approach collaboratively, coordinating both their own interactions and the overall tasks within their separate organizations. However, as service providers collaborate, the scope of how each agency defines its mission will likely widen considerably and individual workers within each agency could, consequently, be assigned responsibility for a broader range of tasks. As this range widens and as agencies are re-designed around flexible principles, these workers should have more discretion to determine a particular order or style of approach that will be most appropriate given unique family conditions.

The paradox of it being possible for a tightly coupled organization at a meta-level (e.g., a centralized state) to enact policies designed to support and facilitate loose coupling at a front-line level is in a sense the Faustian paradox of technology itself: technology can be designed either as a means of control or as
an instrument of individual or team empowerment. This notion is expressed in Hammer's sixth principle: "locate decision points closer to where the work is being performed while building control into the process." This principle suggests that more flexible systems will provide workers with larger areas of discretion and that the boundaries of this discretionary power will be marked (in Handy's (1992) terms) by two concentric circles of responsibility: an inner circle containing everything workers have to do in order not to fail, and an outer circle marking the limits of their authority. Currently, most human service systems tell their workers in too much detail what they must do, but do not outline or describe the limits of what they could do to reach the system's goals (Schorr, 1986).

Pulling It All Together

The organizational design principles that emerge from an analysis of the new poverty and those that emerge from an analysis of the new technologies are by no means perfectly parallel, but the two do appear to intersect to a considerable degree, suggesting not a simple or single answer but a few heuristics as to what approach or degree of system coupling would be most effective in re-inventing the service delivery system:

1) inter-organizational systems may need to become more tightly coupled in terms of information gathering, processing, storage, and retrieval, and with respect to breaking down service barriers erected by existing bureaucracies and professional associations. A tight coupling will be needed to negotiate within an interorganizational order new, more flexible service delivery boundaries and to obtain the political clout needed to change law or policy that is currently supporting these boundaries.

2) organizational systems may need to become more loosely coupled in terms of the discretion allowed to workers and with regard to supporting program and service innovation.

Satisfying both guidelines 1 and 2 will demand an artistic touch (and may involve a relinquishing of some of the benefits
of developing more tightly coupled linkages within an individual organization). Judicious application of these guidelines is needed because the same information technologies that can be used to provide greater discretion to ordinary workers and professionals alike, to implement a flexible specialization approach, and to devise a more “seamless” service system for clients can also be used to control and limit discretion and keep clients under-empowered, uninformed, and under-served. Fortunately, unlike many mechanical technologies that tend to foster only linear processing, information technologies have the capacity to assist in the processing of complex work in ways that mimic those who are best at this work.

Planning to Prevent Negative Side-Effects of System Changes

A tightly coupled service delivery system (especially at the inter-organizational level) is desirable because such systems have been shown to be more effective than loosely-coupled ones in promoting the introduction and diffusion of new technologies and related work processes (Aldrich, 1978; Aiken and Haig, 1972, Warren, 1972, Davies, 1979, O’Looney, 1991. However, it must be recognized that there is a danger that such tightly coupled systems could simply re-introduce at a higher level of centralization ineffective, linear, Fordist technologies that would do little to improve service delivery. Additionally, movement to a more tightly-coupled inter-organizational structure also leaves the system vulnerable to eventual staleness and rigidity, because tightly-coupled systems tend to be less innovative and entrepreneurial (Aldrich, 1978; Rogers, 1979). In this regard, loosely coupled systems, because of their smaller scale, more competitive environments, and fewer bureaucratic rules, tend to have quicker response times and are generally at an advantage.

To overcome the tendency for tightly coupled systems to promote linear and Fordist, rather than complex, flexible processing or the tendency for these systems to become technologically stale, a couple of strategies can be pursued:

1) develop organizational "pockets" that are exempt from standard operating procedures and organizational regulation. The classic example of this strategy is Bell Labs where
Social Service Systems

researchers are very loosely coupled to parent organization (AT&T) and are generally free to pursue their research interests without organizational interference. Similarly, in the educational area, some states (e.g., Georgia) have created an "innovative school" option that allows a particular school or school district to opt out of having to follow state regulations.

These limited organizational experiments are intended to be a source of innovation for the entire system. As particular innovations show positive results, the larger organization attempts to diffuse the innovation throughout the system. While this strategy can be effective, it has limited potential when the dominant organizational culture is not very accepting of innovation. A more effective and systemic strategy would be to:

2) explicitly *infuse federalist principles* into organizational and inter-organizational structures. Federalist principles as outlined by Handy (1992) include the ideas of:

- **Subsidiarity**, or the placing of power at the lowest possible point in the system and keeping higher order bodies from taking on responsibilities that properly belong to a lower order body.

- **Interdependence**, or the spreading of power around. This can occur through efforts to reserve powers at lower levels or through explicitly creating different centers of power.

- A uniform way of understanding the results of work through development of a common language and common standards (e.g., for evaluation of success).

- **Separation of powers**, especially the separation of management, monitoring, and governance.

- **Twin citizenship** in both a higher and lower order body.

By distributing and separating power, establishing dual citizenship and bottom-up decision-making, and creating a common language and standards that nevertheless promote "understandable diversity," federalist principles counteract the tendency of tightly coupled organizations to become rigid,
linear, top-down, mass processing mechanisms. Infusing organizations with strong federalist structures and principles can also counteract the tendency of tightly coupled human service systems to become authoritarian, and mechanistic. The principle of subsidiarity, for example, can act as a guide to protecting against the potential for abuse of a central data base of client information. The idea of subsidiarity suggests that information about a client be as much as possible within the control of the client, that the information that is exchanged between agencies be kept to the minimum that is relevant, and that the exchange is limited to those who clearly need to know. Such guidelines have, in fact, been proposed for information sharing in interagency efforts (Joining Forces, 1992). These guidelines, especially when combined with the development of a common language and standards for human services can make it possible to "develop means of exchanging information that are effective and practical on a wide scale, while still respecting legitimate rights to privacy." (Joining Forces, 1992, p. 2).

While a full examination of how Federalist design principles might address the concerns of the new poverty (task) theorists and those who advocate the introduction of flexible technologies is beyond the scope of this study, at a glance, it seems that these principles would meet these concerns in important ways. The Federalist principle of subsidiarity, for example, can be instructive on a number of different levels. At the level of the frontline of service delivery, subsidiarity translates into the social work principle of "never doing for others what they are able to do themselves." At a more organizational level, subsidiarity would suggest that local communities and even neighborhood units should perhaps be responsible, and be given the resources that would enable them to be responsible, for the health, safety, and well-being of the members of the community or neighborhood group. Neighborhood organizations, for example, might be given the authority to hire and evaluate education, human service, and law enforcement personnel who are to service that area. Such neighborhood organizations could begin to address the "new poverty" problems associated with a lack of role models and middle-class resources and skills in high-risk neighborhoods by requiring that new teachers, police, and human service
Social Service Systems 127

workers begin to actually live in the neighborhoods they serve. Such local control of some of the day-to-day management of human services could also insure that work processes and procedures are culturally sensitive and contribute to the goals of the local community rather than simply to the status and privileges of the agency or organization. While the principle of subsidiarity would argue for more local voice in the functioning of human service workers, the principle of common standards can act to counter the tendency for local control to become an excuse for local corruption, nepotism, or rule by powerful local factions. That is, local control can be inoculated from the tendency toward corruption to the extent that human service workers have to meet high professional standards, follow a strict code of ethics, and undergo monitoring from an independent body.

The Federalist principle of interdependence parallels the notion among many "new poverty" theorists that human services need to do more to promote responsibility (on the part of both service workers and clients) and a linkage between service benefits and the obligations. Likewise, the idea of interdependence supports building collaboratives, not just among service providers, but between service providers and beneficiaries.

Following Federalist principles, such as those related to dual citizenship, separation of powers, interdependence, and development of common standards and languages, would also seem to encourage the introduction of Hammer's flexible technologies and organizational structures such as cross-functional teams. For example, the principles of interdependence, twin citizenship, common language, and separation of powers are particularly important in setting the stage for people taking a cross-functional perspective on problems and tasks. That is, while organizational or inter-organizational boundaries of long standing are often very difficult to break down (Weisborg, 1992) and impossible to eliminate entirely, a Federalist system works against turf guarding by making it difficult to establish independent or autonomous turf in any secure manner. As Tjosvold (1986) argues, the setting up of separate, but interdependent centers of power can help system units to realize a need for other agencies or departments. Infusion of this federalist principle would likely mean that an autonomous service agency with
its own sub-units for training, eligibility, outreach, placement, etc. would contract with, for example, an education agency for training, an employment agency for placement, and so on. In addition, the management, monitoring, and governance functions of this agency would be separated, making it more difficult for the entire organization to establish hard and fast turf to guard. Similarly, if the twin citizenship and common language principles were in effect, the staff of this agency would also be socialized as employees of a larger system-level organization in addition to learning the culture and mores of their own agency, and they would share enough of a common language and service standards with persons from other professions to be able to effectively communicate and work as a cross-functional team.

Hammer's idea of "linking real tasks and information processing" can also be seen as being furthered by adoption of Federalist governance principles (i.e., because real tasks and information processing tasks are logically interdependent operations that can be more effectively carried out if they are linked by a common data language). The flexible technology idea of the "taking advantage of geographically dispersed resources" is also at root dependent on Federalist organization, since geographically dispersed resources will be difficult to tap if there is no common language, sense of dual citizenship, or understanding of interdependence and reciprocity on the part of the persons who control the dispersed resources.

An analysis of the emerging task and technologies as well as the organizational options available to service providers suggests that successful reorganization of social services for the next few decades will demand an understanding of the nuances of organizational design and an ability to envision hybrid, nested, and federalist organizational systems. In rushing toward more unitary or collaborative systems, it would be a shame to lose the creativity of "public entrepreneurs" or the flexibility of smaller agencies. Like the spider's web, the intricate tangle of contracts, mergers, protocols, data sharing agreements, and inter-agency associations that bind agencies together can be either a means of spanning gaps in social service delivery and tapping a flow of resources, or just another way of getting stuck in a bureaucratic snarl. Federalist principles can assist social service planners in
carefully outlining how new technologies will be engaged and how new tasks will be taken on without providers becoming mere cogs in a mechanical system or families becoming "just another case." Handy's (1992) belief in the managerial value of federal organizational design is supported by the work of political theorists such as Ostrom (1990), who has identified "collective choice" or federalist-like arrangements that appear to do a better job of managing common pool resource problems better than either loosely coupled private markets or tightly coupled centralized planning. It can be argued that families are, in fact, a different type of common pool resource, and that the best practice management of this resource would be similar to practices that work effectively with natural resources (O’Looney, forthcoming). Additionally, federalist principles provide some guidance on how to balance the need for a tighter coupling of social service delivery with the need to provide choice for clients and healthy competition among providers.

Moving Toward a New Service System: An Illustration

Currently, there are several pilot initiatives supported by the Department of Health and Human Services and by foundations such as Annie Casey, Whitehead, and Pew that are designed to promote service integration in programs that assist children and their families. These initiatives use new monies "glue" to pull educational, social, and medical service organizations together in collaborative efforts at planning, budgeting and structuring a more integrated service delivery system. The experience of these initiatives to-date suggests that the social service professionals involved are exploring many of the strategies that have been suggested in this analysis of tasks and technologies. However, as new information technologies have yet to be introduced on a large scale in the program sites, the strategic directions taken have been based more on an understanding of the emerging tasks than of the potential uses of emerging technologies. This focus on tasks has resulted in a much higher level of inter-organizational coupling. In particular, as provider agencies began to take an holistic, cross-functional look at families, a number of strategies indicative of tighter inter-organizational
coupling were developed, including: co-location of services at places (e.g., schools) that were least stigmatizing; joint program operations; cross-training of staff; joint hiring of staff; and development and use of a common intake, eligibility, and social history taking process. Additionally, as suggested in this analysis, the tighter coupling at the inter-organizational level tended to allow some agency staff, especially those hired by the inter-agency collaborative to work in teams, to act as flexible specialists rather than as narrow specialists. That is, workers who were hired to fill some specific functions (e.g., eligibility, health screening, mental health counseling) in a Fordist model service delivery system have become more aware of the functions of their co-workers who have other specialties; these workers have in some cases begun to see their own roles as crossing the traditional functional lines. As this has occurred, they have begun to act in ways that are more flexible and that involve greater amounts of discretion. Similarly, workers acting in a gate- or record-keeping capacity are being trained to be part of the service team rather than mere processors of information.

Finally, these service integration programs have made some explicit use of federalist principles in planning for this new service system. For example, enacting the idea of subsidiarity, the state-level collaborative offered to fund any local site plans as long as key local community partners (i.e., the heads of the school, public health, and family and children service system) agreed and signed-off on the plans. This idea was extended in many sites to include participation in the governance structure by client citizens. The ideas of subsidiarity and dual citizenship were also evident in the management of the evaluation plan in which local sites within a state collaborative were able to make independent decisions about their local evaluation plan as well as participate in development of the overall (state-level) plan and make decisions about when and how to go forward with it. Remarkably, once the idea of subsidiarity was confirmed, local sites became more willing to engage in negotiations about how to develop other federalist features such as a uniform language of evaluation or the separation of various functional powers such as fiscal agency, evaluation, chairmanship of the board, and personnel administration.
Arriving Where We Started

In taking a deductive approach to the search for an appropriate design of a new social service system we have arrived, in large measure, but from a different direction at conclusions that echo Schorr's (1986) "lessons" for a renewed social service system. What is new in these conclusions is the offering of: 1) some specific guidelines and elaboration as to where collaboration and service integration might be beneficial and where these movements might be limited or even dangerous; and 2) how infusion of the principles of federalism might act as an antidote to the more threatening tendencies of service integration and collaboration.

So far, the experiences of service integration initiatives tend to confirm the broad system design principles that were deduced from an analysis of the new social service tasks and available organizational and material technologies. While practical experiences with new service delivery systems and technologies remains slight, any theory of effective organizational design for social services can only be partially confirmed. Nevertheless, as those responsible for building these new systems will need to continue to search for ever better ways to fit emerging tasks to emerging technologies—an efforts akin to "building an airplane while flying it"—there may be some value in deductive theory providing a partial map and blueprint.

References


Materials for the case study used in this research were drawn from the evaluation of the State of Georgia's Family Connection Initiative. Dr. O'Looney is the program evaluator for this initiative.