

**Report on workshop sponsored by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia
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Location: University of Sydney

Title: Sisters of Sisyphus? Human service professions and the New Public Management

Human service professionals work with citizens at their most vulnerable—with children, with the frail aged, with the ill and with those affected by social risks such as disability, unemployment, exclusion, and violence. During the last two decades, profound organisational changes have swept through human service agencies, as the ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) has reshaped how and by whom human services are provided. Formerly public services have been privatised or contracted out, generic managers have replaced those specialised in human services, new modes of accountability and surveillance for both providers and service users have been enacted, and market concepts and frames have been imposed on the discourse and organisation of human services work. Significant changes to their working environments challenge theorists, policy researchers, policy makers, and human service professionals themselves to understand the implications of changes and to fashion responses that preserve or renew capacity to deliver humane and effective services. This workshop brought together researchers and professional leaders to explore impact of the (now not so) new public management on the meaning, experience and organisation of professional work teaching, nursing, allied health and social work.

Many, perhaps most, human service professionals work in institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social welfare organisations. In the past, one would have, on reflex, called these ‘bureaucratic’ institutions, but one of the aims of NPM is to remake large organisations, particularly those in the public sector, along new ‘post-bureaucratic’ lines. One key dimension of this process of remaking organisations has been the introduction of new technologies, such as risk assessment tools, performance targets, new approaches to budgeting and standardised testing. These technologies change the way human services work is conceptualised, organised, managed, and measured within institutions providing—and experienced by human service workers and service users.

Several participants presented findings on the impact of these developments at in a workshop sponsored by the ASSA and held October 2008. A paper by Professor Karen Healy (University of Queensland) examined how the competence, even the suitability, of social welfare professionals is currently being challenged by changes to policy and practice in the Queensland Department of Child Safety. In a context of rapidly escalating workforce turnover and some high profile system failures, the Department has reoriented the construction of the role of child welfare workers away from holistic, change-oriented relationships with service users towards risk management and forensic investigation, underpinned by detailed decision making tools and practice manuals. University-based training in human service disciplines such as social work is represented by the Department as

both unsuitable and unnecessary preparation for the work, and the Department proposes to move to less 'restrictive' recruitment practices. Taken together, these kinds of developments are effectively deprofessionalising an increasingly complex field of human services practice.

In education, deprofessionalising is happening without replacing teachers with other categories of workers. The contribution of Professor Marie Brennan (University of South Australia) explored how successive waves of neoliberal changes in education policy since the 1980s have sought to control teachers' work. Steering mechanisms—standardised testing of students, centralisation of curricula, and codification of teachers' knowledge and practice into 'standards'—have been introduced to judge the value of teachers' work and its 'outcomes', replacing the broad ethic of 'service' for the public good that previously operated at a common sense level.

Deprofessionalisation is also happening in nursing, as the management of nursing in hospitals is being removed from nurses and handed over to generalist managers. Contributions by Professor Mary Chiarella and by Stuart Newman and Professor Jocalyn Lawler (all University of Sydney) examined how changes in hospital organisation are effectively sidelining nurse managers from the management of clinical services, and decoupling professional and clinical lines of reporting. Overall, a loss of capacity for nurse managers to lead in clinical practice and to participate in policy development has resulted, partly because of new organisational structures, and partly because of the growth in their workload as more, and sicker patients move faster through hospital systems.

Behind these developments is fundamental scepticism about professionalism, apart from professional 'management', in the discourse and practices of NPM. It would be a mistake to dismiss the devaluation of professionalism in human services as little more than a setback for a group of mostly women, who are aspiring to higher social and economic status. Participants in the workshop discussed how developments directly affect the quality of services available to the most disadvantaged Australians. One basic problem, particularly evident in education and social work, is that the least experienced human service professionals are frequently placed in the most difficult jobs, with inadequate resources. Many schools in disadvantaged areas have a high proportion of recent graduates on their staff. Inexperience and rapid turnover among teachers make it difficult for schools to consolidate their role as hubs for community development in locations with significant need. In services like child protection, turnover and inexperience can have catastrophic consequences for individual families.

Clearly, one key way that New Public Management has changed human service organizations is through (re)defining in particular ways the role and appropriate ways of working of these organizations and the practitioners they employ. Thus there is a clear discursive politics in play, as problems and their solutions are reframed. Dr Toni Schofield took up these issues in her analysis of the technocratic 'problem definition' that prevails in the field of workforce planning for the feminized allied health professions. The context for her study is the critical workforce shortages predicted for the health professions, including allied health. Schofield shows how the prevailing problem definition fails to grasp the *gendered dynamics* of the

organization and practice of health service work, and so throws up limited solutions that are unlikely to remedy the underlying problem.

In his contribution, Associate Professor John Germov (University of Newcastle) showed that the impact of managerial technologies are complex and context specific, and do not invariably cut across professional ideals nor reduce professional autonomy. His research has explored the experience of professionals in the health care system who chose to participate in a new form of work organisation based on multi-disciplinary teams. He found that different kinds of team structures emerged in different contexts with different impacts on professional autonomy.

Another problem, which demands further investigation, is the *cost* of the monitoring, measuring and managing of human services work in the intensive modes currently operating. How many resources are being diverted away from education, social work and nursing to undertake these activities? Pressures to increase efficiency and cut costs seem pervasive, despite sustained and high economic growth in recent decades, and so human service professionals are being squeezed by demands to ‘do more with less’ and ‘work smarter’, while also being measured, monitored and controlled in new ways. These are demoralising working conditions, and workshop participants believed that standards being maintained in human services, paradoxically, by exploiting what we might call the old fashioned public service ethics of human service workers.

Despite the sense that human service professionals are, like Sisyphus, engaged in an apparently endless uphill struggle, participants in the workshop discussed spaces and strategies for resistance within organisations dominated by NPM ideas. In her contribution to the workshop, Professor Barbara Fawcett argued that the ideas of ‘community’, ‘participation’ and ‘social entrepreneurship’ that have been central to ‘Third way’ social policy can be re-appropriated to facilitate meaningful participation in by people in decisions that affect their lives. By paying attention to the dynamics of power in places, and by thinking creatively and collaboratively about genuinely engaging people, human service professionals can open up space to reconfigure and rework NPM and Third Way approaches to re-forge social connections. In her contribution, Professor Raewyn Connell (University of Sydney) offered a compelling account of the deleterious impact of neo-liberalism on teaching, education, and society more broadly. Yet she also concluded on a note of (very cautious) optimism, remarking that ‘resistance to neoliberal agendas in education does occur, and can be effective – at least in the short run’.

In the wide-ranging and spirited discussion around the papers, workshop participants also identified a range of positive strategies for the education and professional development of human service practitioners in the challenging environments they face. Participants particularly relished the opportunity to discuss common concerns and potential for collaboration across the boundaries of professional disciplines and organisations. Academic participants offered both strong encouragement and some pointed challenges for moving forward: contesting technologies such as NPM is intellectual as well as practical, and involves resisting a Cassandra-like position that sees neoliberalism and NPM sweep all

before them. These academic participants included Associate Professor Jenny Lewis (University of Melbourne) and Dr Lesley Scanlon (University of Sydney). Professional leaders from unions and professional associations contributed both further evidence and nuance to the research claims made in the papers. These professional leaders included Ms Jenni Devereaux from the Australian Education Union, Ms Marcia Gleeson from the Australian Nursing Federation, Professor Bob Lonnie, President of the Australian Association of Social Workers, and Dr Nicole Mockler, independent educational consultant.

Several papers from the workshop have been recently published in a special issue of the *Journal of Sociology* entitled 'Neoliberalism, New Public Management and the human service professions', edited by Professors Raewyn Connell, Barbara Fawcett and Gabrielle Meagher (Volume 45, No. 4, December 2009).