Steve Rogowski considers the bureaucratic constraints under which many social workers are forced to operate and how retaining a clear sense of the primacy of relationship-based social work can erode the power of managerialism, in the process giving social workers more control over their profession.

**Relationships versus Managerialism**

So managerialism has ‘conquered social work’? This was what one social science publisher recently ‘tweeted’ on Twitter. This might be overstating things but there is no doubt that managerialism has impacted negatively on social work.

Since 1979 we have seen the end of the acceptance of a substantial role for government in economic planning and regulation, together with a robust welfare state. Private sector managerialism was introduced to control what social workers do and how, as well as to limit public expenditure.

Care management in adults’ social work was the first example, before later Labour governments introduced ever more bureaucratic, and increasingly electronic, performance indicator hurdles for children and families social work – the various looked after children and assessment forms being prime examples.

The changes over the last 20-plus years have meant that the needs of clients/users, along with social work itself, have been subordinated to the needs of managers and their organisations, as a relationship-based service has been transformed into a bureaucratic one.

The focus is on the needs of the organisation so as to ensure that, as far as possible, they won’t be criticised if ‘things go wrong’.

However, perhaps all is not lost. Take the work of Gillian Ruch and her colleagues in their 2010 book, *Relationship-based Social Work: getting to the heart of practice* (London: Jessica Kingsley), for example. They acknowledge the contemporary context of practice, including the weight given to ‘marketisation, managerialism and the commodification and bureaucratisation of the individual’. This description relates to the prevailing emphasis on markets, ‘choice’ and minimal state intervention, something that social workers and users have to struggle against in their daily practice.

Their views are a timely and welcome antidote to the current situation. They remind us that despite the many structural pressures social workers are forced to endure, relationship-based work is at the heart of good social work practice, simply because all social work begins and ends with a human encounter between two or more people. Three examples of the importance of such practice with children and families, along with the difficulties, spring to mind.

First, I recall a 15-year-old young woman with a disrupted care background having spent time living with both separated parents, as well as extended family and friends’ families. She could be challenging – not going to school, being disruptive when there, often going missing and engaging in drug and alcohol abuse, on occasions being admitted to hospital as a result. She distrusted social workers, saying that this was because as she starts to get to know and trust them, “they change” or her case is simply closed (at the behest of managers it might be added). She was, of course, eloquently making the case for relationship-based work, this being especially relevant when one considers that disaffected teenagers can be hard to reach.

The second example concerns another 15-year-old young woman, this time one who frequently went missing from home, often for days at a time, and was associating with older...

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relationships based work feature

Youths. One major concern was the possibility of sexual exploitation. Following a case conference, it was decided that more on-going work was required so, as often occurs, the social worker had to be changed as her case was transferred to a long-term team. This was clearly against the wishes of the young woman and her mother who felt they had “got to know” and developed a relationship with their current social worker. However, as so many of us know from our practice, such views usually cut little ice with the powers that be.

This is because the latter are less than concerned with meeting the real needs of clients/users, let alone their wishes and feelings. This is not mere idle political posturing but born out by the evidence that senior management are predominantly interested in the meeting of targets and, in turn, controlling social workers, something entrenched by the increasing fragmentation of the social work task itself. The separation of duty and assessment from long-term teams, along with the separation of after care for looked after children and families social work teams – all from what were once fully fledged children and families social work teams – is all the evidence needed.

The third example relates to child protection, which can, of course, involve the removal of children from their parents. Even in such a scenario the importance of relationship-based work should not be diminished. Often it is when social workers are faced by those in greatest need and difficulty, where a careful balance of care and control is required, that qualities of empathy, honesty and reliability come to the fore. As such, the need for rapport and meaningful interaction requires ensuring a climate where the client/user gains confidence in the social worker’s personal and professional integrity. It can even lead to a parent, angry and distressed about losing their child, turning to the social worker involved in the child’s removal for help and support. Again, however, many bureaucratic and managerial obstacles have to be overcome.

**Empathetic**

The above examples highlight the importance of relationship-based practice, an approach applicable to both short-term and long-term work. Practitioners need to be empathetic in their dealings with users, to listen to and incorporate people’s views, persevere, be available, honest and consistent. It goes without saying that this can be a difficult task, given that many managers want to process cases as quickly, and with as little recourse to people’s views, persevere, be available, honest and consistent. It goes without saying that this can be a difficult task, given that many managers want to process cases as quickly, and with as little recourse to the public purse, as possible.

Although relationship-based work is sometimes criticised because it is rooted in psychodynamic, systemic and attachment theories, you can also have a broader, more inclusive approach, including notions such as empowerment, which in turn resonates with a more critical practice. At any rate, all social work has, or should have, an emphasis on building relationships, sustaining them and ending them. This is even in the people-processing, target-driven managerial culture that all too often currently pervades.

Importantly, for instance, relationship-based work is particularly relevant when working with strong feelings, ranging from anger and aggression to depression and despair, and on to love and positive feelings. Surely social work involves much more than a narrow concern with the current pre-occupation with technical competence – other than people-people – which forms to fill in and how. Rather there must also be an interest in, and ability to work with, human relationships.

Advocates of relationship-based practice might be swimming against the current managerial tide but they certainly do manage to retain a sense of optimism about the future of social work, something that resonates with the recent work of key social work academics such as Paul Michael Garrett, Iain Ferguson and Bill Jordan. Such thinkers bemoan the demise of relationship-based work as well as advocating for a critical practice. This is despite the fact that there was a time that relationship-based work was critiqued by radical/critical workers as being reactionary, individualistic and un-political. But such is the current state of social work that even critical academics, and practitioners generally, acknowledge the positives to be gained by working in a relationship – rather than a process-oriented – people-processing and rationing scarce resources.

In short, it is my contention from my experiences of meeting and working with other practitioners and researching for my most recent book [see below] that most of those on undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses, as well as experienced social workers and allied professionals, will endorse the sentiments expressed here. Indeed, Ruch et al highlight the signs of renewed vigour in reclaiming social work – part of which involves developing relationship-based practice and various degrees of ‘bureaucracy busting’.

In the current economic climate and within the narrow political framework of the past 20 years there must be doubts whether politicians and managers will encourage, never mind allow, this to happen. However, the (increasingly limited) opportunities that do remain need to be taken by those resilient practitioners intent on resisting the managerial tide and making a genuine difference to clients’ or users’ lives.

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