

REVISITING THE ESOTERIC QUESTION: CAN NON-SOCIAL WORKERS MANAGE AND SUPERVISE SOCIAL WORKERS?

Lambert Engelbrecht

Abstract

A dilution, and eventual denigration, of the social work profession, such as through the practice of social workers being managed by non-social workers, can increasingly be traced to neoliberal utterances and resultant managerial discourses. Social workers may unwittingly be contributing to the handover of management practices to non-social workers. This paper outlines the reasons for the tension between general management and social work management, presents a conceptualisation of social work management and supervision, and examines the impact of the global neoliberal discourse and resultant managerial tenets on social work in the South African context.

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INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper reflects a key ongoing debate within different contexts all over the world (Hafford-Letchfield, 2010). A plethora of international authors such as Coulshed and Mullender (2006), Lawler and Bilson (2010), Patti (2000), Hughes and Wearing (2013), commenting on social work management and supervision, acknowledge that worldwide non-professional managers are increasingly managing and supervising social workers. This was also observed in South Africa in the National Supervision Framework for the Social Work Profession (Department of Social Development & SACSSP, 2012) and during a recent social work indaba held by the Department of Social Development (Department of Social Development, 2015a) with the theme: Revitalising the social work profession in South Africa. But why is the tension between generic management and social work management relevant, even more than two decades after democratisation and transformation of social work services in South Africa? The following quote may present an answer:

“The reorganisation ... called for changes in orientation and commitment and required an extension of functions. Social workers had to re-think their *raison d’être*, come to terms with new responsibilities, extend their work into unfamiliar areas, deal with feelings of loss of identity and recreate for themselves a new sense of belonging. During the initial phase of reorganisation when too much change occurred in too short a period, lack of a clear purpose brought upheaval and disorientation to the department as a whole and separately to individual members of staff.” (Westheimer, 1977:1-2)

Although relevant to the contemporary South African context, the irony of this comment is mirrored in the fact that it was made about four decades ago in an English context. This question “Can non-social workers manage and supervise social workers?” thus appears to be a frequent, universal and esoteric question: one that needs to be addressed within a specific context and situation, but taking universal complexities into account. Therefore, it is evident that this close-ended question may not have a straightforward answer. Rather, the answer lies in an understanding of vital interplaying variables to the question, which beg for critical examination and thought-provoking debate. Hence, in this paper, the reasons for the tension between general management and social work management are outlined, a conceptualisation of social work management and supervision is presented, and the impact of the global neoliberal discourse and resultant managerial tenets on social work in the South African context is examined in an attempt to answer this esoteric question. To this end, the intention of this article is to contribute to global and local debates, based on primary international and South African research, and relevant policy directives on the topic.

REASONS FOR THE TENSION BETWEEN GENERAL MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT

Social work administration, management and supervision emerged parallel with social work intervention. The first formal social welfare agencies surely had to be administered in an organised fashion. However, there are still a series of unresolved issues in determining the conceptual and practical territory of administration, management, supervision and leadership; second, there remains little agreement as to what constitutes good administration, management, supervision and leadership; and third, the literature on these issues *per se* is relatively scanty and sporadic in social work. One reason for this may be that in social work the focus is primarily on social work intervention, based on the core functions of social work (Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014).

As is well known, the core functions of social work include remedial, preventive and change functions (Midgley, 2014). The remedial or problem-solving function involves provision of services, including counselling and material assistance; the preventive function is proactive in its approach to social problems; and the social change function is concerned with promoting people's wellbeing. This function is sometimes referred to as social work's transformative function, since it seeks to radically alter existing oppressive conditions that prevent people from realising their potential. The wider social conditions that impede progress are addressed with the vision of bringing about positive improvements in living standards and democratic participation. This latter function is also referred to as social development, particularly in the South African context. However, the challenge of a social development approach to social work resides in harmoniously harnessing these core functions of social work to serve society best. This challenge gives rise to the predominance of debates on matters relating to critical interventions in social work, both in academia and practice, with less attention accorded the management of these interventions (Engelbrecht, 2013).

In addition to management issues, a social development approach to social welfare also includes a range of other disciplines such as education, health and economics. The boundaries between these disciplines became progressively blurred. A specific example is the refinement of the type of social work in South Africa towards "developmental social work" with the embrace of Midgley's (1995:25) definition of social development as "a process of planned social change designed to promote the wellbeing of the population as a whole in conjunction with a dynamic process of economic development". This notion suggests *inter alia*, first, the incorporation of distinct economic principles and language in social work; second, the development and implementation of macro policy to frontline social work services, involving a range of relevant disciplines and spheres of civil society; and third, a consequential general and content-free reference to management functions. Within this paradigm, a simplistic conclusion may easily be drawn that any good manager can manage any workplace and workforce, regardless whether it is a social welfare organisation or a supermarket.

However, in the light of harmonising and operationalising unique social work functions, it follows that neither social work interventions, nor the management of these interventions in terms of planning, organising, leading and controlling can be understood

in isolation: both are context-based and focus on the end goal of promoting the wellbeing of people (Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014). Therefore, an exposition of the essence of management and supervision within the context of social work would be essential to counteract simplistic conclusions.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION

The time has long gone for social workers to immerse themselves in self-contained activities and leaving management, administration and supervision to “them” or to “headquarters”. Management is essential to all in social work (Coulshed & Mullender, 2006). Be that as it may, defining the field encompassed by social work management is at best a challenging task, as boundaries in human affairs tend to be arbitrary. Various disciplines (specifically within a social development paradigm) also compete with one another in establishing their respective domains, and new domains emerge throughout time, challenging jurisdictional claims.

For example, administration in social welfare is historically concerned with those aspects of professional practice which organise the means to make social work practice possible, and which has borrowed theories from other disciplines (Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014). Furthermore, supervision in social work has always been regarded as a middle-management position by authoritative authors such as Kadushin and Harkness (2014). Other prominent commentators on supervision, such as Ray and Eison (1983), unequivocally declared several decades ago: supervision is management. To this end Austin (2002), whose seminal work was influenced by Mary Parker Follet, a North American social worker and pioneer in management of labour relations in the 1920s and 1930s, described human services management as a complex version of the general field of organisational management. This resulted in many social welfare organisations replacing the term “social administration” with “social work management” and “social work supervision”. For this reason, Veronica Coulshed (Coulshed & Mullender, 2006:8), one of the international commentators most cited on management in social work, together with renowned authors such as Weinbach (2003:5), use the terms “manager”, “administrator” and “leader” interchangeably, while regarding all social workers as managers. Therefore, it is not within the ambit of this paper to draw sophisticated distinctions between concepts such as management, administration and leadership, as the definition of these terms is a complex exercise, and depends on variables such as a particular management school of thought (Engelbrecht & Terblanche, 2014). Hence the terms “manager” and “management” will be used throughout this paper, encompassing administration and leadership. Supervision of social workers will, however, be conceptualised separately, as this term refers to a distinct activity in South African social work policy directives (Department of Social Development & SACSSP, 2012).

Management

Typically, the body of knowledge on general management can be found in literature on business, commerce and industry. Various authors (DuBrin, 2012; Dyck & Neubert,

2009; Hellrieger, Jackson & Slocum, 2002; Lussier, 1997) concur that general management involves the utilisation of organisational resources for the optimum achievement of organisational goals by utilising processes of management functions such as planning, organising, leading and control. However, in the context of human service programmes, Lewis, Packard and Lewis (2012:8) define management as “a set of systems and processes designed to help employees accomplish organisational and individual goals”. More specifically, management functions can be operationalised in social work by means of specific social work management tasks, shaped by a unique configuration of systems which come into play in social work, such as *places* (welfare structures, organisation/service provider); *policies* (statutes, regulations and directives); *people* (individuals, families, groups and communities); *problems* (needs/challenges of the individuals, families, groups and communities); *processes* (social work intervention by means of individual, group and community work methodologies); and *personnel* (social workers, with their distinct knowledge, skills and values) (adapted from Perlman, 1967). These systems are all influenced by the social, political, economic, legal and technological environment (Engelbrecht, 2014a) within the ambit of social work’s defined remedial, preventive and change functions.

With this extended conceptualisation of social work management in mind, the comment by Bertha Reynolds (1942:35-36), one of the founding scholars in learning and teaching in social work, although made more than 70 years ago, is still relevant for drawing a distinction between social work management and general management: “Skill in [social work] administration consists not only in building organisational machinery which is adapted to the work to be done, but also in so dealing with the human parts of the machine that they will work at their individual and collective best.” Social work management thus arises from a heritage and culture very different from that of the business or general manager – specifically when considering the remark by Slavin (1978:xxv-xxvi) in his ground-breaking work on management of social services: “The primary staff group reflects the norms and standards of the profession to which it belongs and to which it refers when questions of professional practice are raised.”

These distinctions between general management and social work management are usually raised in many leading and fundamental texts on social work administration and management (see e.g. Coulshed, 1990; Skidmore, 1983). When analysing these distinctions, it becomes clear that social work management chiefly involves management of professionals with a specific knowledge, skill and value base in contrast with general management of a mixed professional and a non-professional workforce. The table below illustrates an exposition of the differences between social work management and general management.

TABLE 1
EXPOSITION OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SOCIAL WORK
MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT

(partially adapted from Tsui & Cheung, 2009:151;
 Rankin & Engelbrecht, 2014:15)

CHARACTERISTICS	SOCIAL WORK MANAGEMENT	GENERAL MANAGEMENT
Values	Social justice; equality	Self-interest; growth through competition
Targets	Vulnerable individuals, families, groups, communities and grassroots movements	Consumers
Accountability	Multiple	Usually single
Primary beneficiaries	Citizens, clients, service users, emerging organisations	Owners, shareholders
Primary funding sources	Government; donations	Fees; charges
Products	Social welfare services	Commercial products and services
Legal considerations	Citizens' rights; government's statutory requirements	Consumers' rights; purchasing power
Strategies	Enhancing independence	Creating dependence
Ultimate goal	Enhancement of people's well-being; social development	Maximum profit

This illustration clearly shows that social work management has a distinct normative nature and is influenced by value judgments, since all social work activities are ultimately informed by one or another view of what social justice is. A normative orientation on its own, however, is not sufficient. It must be combined with substantive knowledge about institutional dynamics in order to be consonant with the scope, nature and purpose of social work institutions, as social work takes place almost exclusively in the context of organisations.

Supervision

Supervisors perform the fundamental segment of the management effort, even though, in many contexts, they do not execute the full component of management functions and tasks. Supervision in any management context is actually part of human resources management (Engelbrecht, 2014a).

In social work the terms and practices of supervision are more often regarded as outdated, unnecessary and an insult to the profession (Engelbrecht, 2014b). However, regardless of how it is perceived nowadays, the format and structure of supervision has remained constant worldwide over the past 80 years in the social work profession. Usually supervision is defined by its administrative, educational and supportive functions (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014).

In South Africa the Social Service Professions Act, Act 110 of 1978 as amended (RSA, 1978) and Policy Guidelines for the Course of Conduct, the Code of Ethics and the Rules for Social Workers (SACSSP, 2007) specifically determine mandatory and interminable supervision of social workers. This Code of Ethics inter alia determines that a social worker should be supervised on social work matters by a supervisor who is registered as a social worker (5.4.1 [f]); the supervisor could be held liable in an instance where a complaint of alleged unprofessional conduct is lodged against the social worker (5.4.1 [e]); supervisors should have the necessary knowledge and skills to supervise appropriately and should do so only within their areas of knowledge and competence (5.4.1 [a]); reasonable steps should be taken to ensure that adequate organisational resources are available to provide appropriate supervision (5.4.5 [c]); and the lines of communication within the organisation should be clarified in order for clients to understand that they may have access to the supervisor (5.2.2). These rules specifically imply that the onus for supervision is on the social worker and supervisor, and not on the institution or organisation.

Nevertheless, social work supervision, or supervision of social workers described by any other name is both context-dependent and context-specific. No universally accepted definition of supervision exists as such a definition would depend on who sets the agenda. The national Department of Social Development and the SACSSP, however, developed a Supervision Framework for the social work profession (Department of Social Development & SACSSP, 2012:8) and defines supervision in South Africa as follows:

Supervision is a formal arrangement through which supervisees review and reflect on their work. It is related to ongoing learning and performance. Social work supervision is an interactive process in a positive non-discriminatory relationship, based on distinct theories, models and perspectives of supervision. It entails educational, supportive and administrative functions that promote efficient and professional social work services.

Noticeably, the Supervision Framework (Department of Social Development & SACSSP, 2012:20,21,24) in contrast with the Ethical Code (SACSSP, 2007), also addresses the organisational context of supervisors and supervisees by stating the following:

- Employers of social workers must have a context-specific supervision policy in place for their organisation, aligned with the Supervision Framework for the social work profession in South Africa.
- It is the responsibility of the employer of a social worker to appoint a supervisor who takes primary responsibility for the supervision of the social worker, and to provide the supervisor with an appropriate job description.
- The organisation should state the ratio of supervisor to supervisees in its supervision policy and capture this in the contract with the supervisor.
- The organisation must promote participatory management between the supervisor and management by establishing proper communication channels.
- The organisation must provide administrative, educational and developmental support to supervisors in order for them to render effective supervision.

Of special importance is that the Social Service Professions Act, Act 110 of 1978 as amended (RSA, 1978), the Code of Ethics (SACSSP, 2007) as well as the Supervision Framework (Department of Social Development & SACSSP, 2012) specifically indicate that only registered social workers may supervise other social workers. This statutory regulation of social work and supervision constitutes the invaluable strength of social work in South Africa as this is the ultimate aspiration for many other countries (Bradley, Engelbrecht & Höjer, 2010).

Yet this does not prohibit many organisations and institutions from appointing non-social workers to supervise professional social workers in South Africa, as observed in practice and articulated in the national Supervision Framework. This state of affairs usually results from two assumptions: first, there is a scarcity of supervisors; and second, designated supervisors do not possess the knowledge and skills to provide quality supervision. These assumptions were refuted by empirical findings (Engelbrecht, 2012), which proved that it is rather financial and structural impediments contributing to a so-called scarcity of supervisors and inadequate supervision. In fact, the strengths of supervisors in South Africa are indeed identifiable. In recent research (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2015) the signature strengths of 100 social work supervisors were reflected and clustered in terms of their intrinsic strengths, strengths towards supervisees and strengths in supervision. Table 2 illustrates these strengths.

TABLE 2
EXAMPLES OF SUPERVISORS' SIGNATURE STRENGTHS
(Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2015)

Intrinsic strengths	Strengths towards supervisees	Strengths in supervision
Confident/dynamic	Accessible/approachable/attentive	Competent
Creative/initiative	Communicative/assertive	Accountable/responsible/committed
Modest/grateful	Compassionate/kind/benevolent	Analytical/critical/evaluative
Emotionally mature/	Patient/persevering	Reflective/practical
Independent/self-aware	Empathic/engaging	Future-minded/
Self-directed/self-regulation	Friendly/goodwill/helpful	prudent/strategic
Energetic	Supportive	Hard-working/diligent/loyal
Positive	Discreet/respectful	Planning/organising/
attitude/optimistic	Sincere/spontaneous	coordinating/leading
Honest/integrity	Transparent/trustworthy	Meticulous/multi-
Humoristic	Objective/fair	tasking/focused
Inquisitive/curious		Structured/systematic
Eager to learn/open-minded		Passionate/enthusiastic
Adaptable/open to change		Open to criticism
Spiritual		Team player

(*N=100*)

Although the scope of signature strengths captured in Table 2 is not indisputably an indication of supervisors' success in supervision, the vast range of identified themes nevertheless suggest supervisors' subjective experience of their intrinsic supervision competences. Be that as it may, lack of resources and unfavourable working conditions are explicit determinants in the provision of adequate supervision, which may easily be unfairly blamed on social work supervisors and managers (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2015), chiefly owing to the impact of neoliberal tenets on the social work profession.

THE IMPACT OF NEOLIBERAL TENETS ON SOCIAL WORK

Negative outcomes of management and supervision practices are not apparent only in the South African social work fraternity. Fook (2012:9) for instance, observes in an English context:

“Supervision thus becomes a political site, where the often competing demands for managerial accountability, professional support and development are often played out in interpersonal interactions between supervisors and frontline workers.”

This observation points to impediments existing beyond the actual management and supervision of social workers, which social workers should recognise in order to avert self-blame and unqualified accusations. This insidious denigration of the social work profession is increasingly being ascribed to neoliberal utterances and resultant managerial discourses, which prevail not just globally, but infuse social work practice in general and specifically management and supervision on the national front and in every local social work setting (Spolander, 2014). The irony, however, is that front-line social workers, and social work managers and supervisors alike, often unwittingly play into the hands of detractors by “diagnosing”, social work practices, and their supervision and management as ineffective without taking the impact of neoliberal and managerial tenets on social work into consideration – and ultimately contribute to the handover of management practices to non-social workers. Therefore, to address the question under discussion in this paper, it is imperative to closely examine the impact of neoliberal tenets on social work.

There is a growing belief among many global policy makers, also in South Africa, that there is no economic alternative for emerging economies than donning the neoliberal cloak as a result of globalisation. The impact of globalisation on social welfare in the world has been explored by several authors: globally (see Ife, 2000; Midgley, 2004; Spolander, Engelbrecht, Martin, Strydom, Pervova, Marjanen, Tani, Sicora & Adaikalam, 2014) and also within a South African context (see Bond, 2005; Desai, 2002; Hart, 2002; Sewpaul & Hölsher, 2004; Terreblanche, 2002).

The term “neoliberalism” was coined as a macro-economic philosophy after the Second World War, but is more closely associated with the economic policies introduced by Margaret Thatcher in the late 1970s in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States. A neoliberal school of thought expounds a belief in the absolute supremacy of the free market, and prioritises the rhetoric of efficiency, cost-effectiveness and economics above that of other highly prized values such as social

justice, which is fundamental to social work. This doctrine is thus not just an economic philosophy, but also has distinct moral implications. Harvey (2010), one of the international commentators on the topic, views neoliberalism as a mostly political project to facilitate capital accumulation and to roll back previous gains made in societies in respect of social equity, as well as to restore power to the economic elites. Harvey (2010:2) furthermore defines neoliberalism as:

“...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.”

This line of thinking has been relatively successful judging by the centralisation of wealth and power apparent in those countries that took the neoliberal road. The widespread acceptance and implementation of neoliberal-oriented policies across the world have not just resulted in noticeable changes to economies, but can also be observed in other spheres of social life, such as on political, cultural and welfare levels. This has revealed the true nature of neoliberal projects, which are often disguised or presented as fresh, modernistic and reformist via political spin (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2004). In its most concrete form, the implications of a macro neoliberal discourse are exceptionally explicit in social work practice, resulting in distinguishable but inseparable, covert managerial features in management and supervision of social workers.

Managerialism

As politicians and policy makers turned to the principles of the marketplace to inform welfare policy and social work practice, so too did they increasingly rely on the current developments of business management as a school of thought to govern social welfare organisations. Also, for welfare organisations to be competitive, they constructively synchronise their management activities with those of the business market, relying on the prevailing practices and jargon which are most popular at the time (Spolander *et al.*, 2014). The following tenets are a synthesis of some of the most salient managerial practices featured in the world, and are also observable in the South African social development paradigm.

Changing management language

Hafford-Letchfield (2010:11) rightfully avers: “The introduction of market and, subsequently, business principles into care environments since the 1980s has meant that its associated language and terminology has deeply permeated current management ‘speak’.” Some examples are: “clients” and “citizens” became “consumers”, “service users” and “service recipients” (Cowden & Singh, 2007); social welfare organisations became merely “service providers”, equal to the provider of any product or goods; “evidence-based practice” is supported, and only those practices with high quantitative success rates and promotional value are regarded as worthy of replication, regardless of debates about who is defining success and by what it is measured (Lymbery, 2003); and

also “modernisation” (Spolander *et al.*, 2014:307) of organisations is the ultimate proof to the public and “stakeholders” that the organisation is keeping up with the times. Even more blatant: although the etymological roots of the phrase “tools of trade” are indefinite, social workers at a national social work indaba (Department of Social Development, 2015a) acknowledged the role and influence of business markets on social work by frequently using this phrase in commissions, when in fact referring to “resources” or simply “skills” needed in order to do social work. The replacement of established social work academic terminology by popular jargon of the day, typically of a neoliberal discourse, is thus proof of an increasingly managerial frame of mind in social work.

Employing efficiency and cost-effectiveness as yardstick

Management becomes a central mechanism to drive quality, efficiency and cost-effectiveness. Efficiency and not effectiveness is the yardstick. The focus is merely on quantity (how many people are addressed) rather than on quality. Quality is furthermore equated with standardisation and documentation, and funding for social work services is awarded on the basis of successful demonstration of value for money (see, for example, the application for funding in terms of the policy on financial awards [national business plan] of the Department of Social Development, 2015b). Cash and contracts and not care and concern have become the foundation for the partnership relationships between public and private organisations, and are measured in terms of job performances. Total quality management (TQM) is the norm for best practices, and evidence-based practice (EBP) is ensured by practice guidelines, norms and standards (Spolander *et al.*, 2014). Accountability is thus overarching in all social work practices and social workers find themselves endlessly busy filling in forms and documentation to be accountable.

Preoccupation with procedures, norms and standards

The overall belief is that setting standards, norms and redesigning accountability will lead to improved quality of services and performances of social workers. A preoccupation with protocols and procedures thus became the norm, with checklists to ensure tasks are done. Social work intervention, management and supervision practices are supported by technical “must do” simplistic tick boxes instead of context-relevant and discipline-specific substantiated theories, models and perspectives which require critical thinking to be applicable (see, for example, the guide on performance management for social development by the Public Service Commission, 2007). In this regard, Ife (1997:53) claims: “In managerial discourse, social workers are seen as largely accountable to their organisational superiors, namely managers and supervisors, through normal bureaucratic channels. [This]... requires that social workers ‘do as they are told’, following policies, procedures and regulations laid down ‘from above’.” From “above”, excessive procedures are thus laid down to monitor and control services via frequent auditing and other techniques (see for example the Framework for Social Welfare Services by the Department of Social Development, 2013a).

Reducing professional discretion

The emphasis on technicalisation instead of a balanced intellectualisation of social work in general, through paperwork for auditing and managerial oversight, is likely to impact on the use of social workers' professional discretion. This increase in routines and standardised procedures encourages social work managers and supervisors to vigorously develop and employ targets and occupational standards in intervention methods that ensure defensible decisions, rather than necessarily the right ones. Procedures and protocols thus have the potential to discourage the use of established theories and reduce critical reflection in the workplace (see, for example, the Generic Norms and Standards for Social Welfare Services by the Department of Social Development, 2013b). The focus of work also potentially shifts to the mere assessments of needs, identification of risk, analysis of formal and informal resources, and debating the rights and responsibilities of service users (Spolander *et al.*, 2014), rather than seeking to engage in specialised theoretically informed social work intervention.

Deskilling social work

The reduction of professional discretion results in mechanical social work practices, which in turn contribute to the deskilling of social workers, as they essentially become “doers” with little room for divergent thinking. This process is often referred to as McDonaldisation, where larger tasks are broken down into constituent discrete tasks so that the precise amount of resources can be calculated for their delivery (Ritzer, 2011). In a way similar to the McDonald production process, managers and supervisors are required to follow clear management policies and instructions to undertake work in a particular way. As a result, there is control of social workers, who are reduced to objects, client systems become customers and the social work process is diminished to a mere production process (Spolander, 2014), following prescribed “recipes” by means of frameworks, norms and standards with associated checklists (compare Department of Social Development, 2013a, 2013b). Within this context, Beddoe (2010:1284) avers that the use of checklists “may reduce some of the anxiety that supervisors feel, but not necessarily improve the practice”. In the same vein, the theoretical underpinning by appropriate theories, models and perspectives of these “recipes” has the potential to “get lost in translation” in managers' and supervisors' quest for excellence in “ticking the right boxes”, while executing standardised frameworks and norms.

Deprofessionalisation and diminishing of professional identity

Whilst social workers formed the nucleus of social welfare services over the decades, the profession came under attack within the changing global welfare context and this resulted, also in South Africa, in the greater use of non-professionals and diminishing of professional identity. For example, the present SACSSP evolved from the erstwhile SA Council for Social and Associated Work (established in 1980), the SA Council for Social Work and the SA Interim Council for Social Work, which was established and functioned in terms of the Social Work Act, 1978 (Act 110 of 1978). This act was amended in 1998 to make provision for the establishment of professional boards for various social service professions, under the auspices of the Council.

However, by assuming the title of social service professionals, social workers lost their previous dominant position in welfare services. In consequence, tasks that might previously have been undertaken by professional social workers are now undertaken by para-professionals, who may also be cheaper to employ. Ultimately, fewer professional social workers are required. The use of this more technocratically orientated social service workforce furthermore implies that skills, knowledge and values do not have to be drawn from higher or tertiary education. This state of affairs, however, reduces social workers' academically founded critical voices, lowers resistance to the use of market-based solutions and defines professional social work staff as ordinary employees of a conventional enterprise, without taking cognisance of social work's unique historical intellectual heritage, professional identity and the dynamics of a social work organisation. For example, debates in a social work indaba, ironically on the theme of revitalising the social work profession (Department of Social Development, 2015a), centred chiefly on structural issues in social work service delivery, and to a lesser extent on professional, critical and intellectual theoretically-based issues. Furthermore, the Recruitment and Retention Strategy of the Department of Social Development acknowledged that social work professionals are being increasingly utilised in non-professional tasks (Department of Social Development, 2006). Ultimately, this deprofessionalisation is one of the underlying reasons for social workers' disillusionment with their profession, leading to a constant brain drain (Engelbrecht, 2006) and staff vacancies.

Blaming social workers

Globally, frontline social workers, rather than their managers, supervisors or political decision makers, increasingly have to face public disquiet and shoulder the blame for resource shortfalls (Lambley, 2010). As a consequence of these shortfalls, social workers are often regarded as incompetent in their interventions. This was, for example, explicitly stated in the Retention and Recruitment Strategy document of the Department of Social Development (2006:33): "There is a perceived unresponsiveness and decline in the productivity and quality of services rendered by social workers." This type of comment has detrimental consequences for social workers' professional identity and professional wellbeing, often leaving social workers feeling helpless and alienated from their professional roles (Pullen-Sansfaçon, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2012). The irony, however, is that this "blame game" is seldom corrected by policy makers or politicians, as the causes for service omissions are in turn ascribed to inadequate training by academic institutions of social workers and/or inadequate trained supervisors and managers, resulting in the introduction of a plethora of norms, standards, frameworks and checklists to uplift service quality – thus a vicious circle generating managerial tenets once again. Without strong professional leaders, associations, and a reputable professional identity and public profile to critically analyse the service delivery status quo, or to defend the social work profession, this situation is unlikely to change (Spolander, 2014).

Predominance of management knowledge

In order to deliver efficient and cost-effective social work services and regain public approval, the most obvious instrument for social work policy makers and top level managers would be to replicate a corporate business model of management in social work, based on the success of managerial efforts in markets. Since social workers specialise in social work interventions, management knowledge which supersedes experience in professional social work practice is preferred as core technology by many organisations, as this may guarantee a liquid organisation within a financially competitive and evidence-based environment. This is one reason why supervision of social workers remains a merely administrative function (Engelbrecht, 2013), despite international and local outcries throughout the historical development of social work that social work supervision should include educational and supportive functions (Botha, 2002; Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). The requisite to “balance the books” and to show “return on investment” thus exceeds the core remedial, preventive and change functions of social work, resulting in a discreet shift in the meaning of “sustainable” practices. Sustainable social work practices, for instance, refer more often than not to the sustainability of change in the service users’ wellbeing, inter alia as a result of expert social work intervention, but imply financial sustainability of the intervention programme, as a result of the expert management of intervention programmes’ finances (compare Department of Social Development, 2015b).

Commodification of social work

The transferability and transformation of social work as a commodity, measurable in monetary terms (Department of Social Development 2013a, 2013b, 2015b) within a neoliberal environment and concretised by managerial practices, is a key reason why non-professional social workers are employed to manage and supervise social workers. Non-social workers with training, knowledge and skills in the management of commodities and/or with an entrepreneurial disposition (particularly with the economic development aim of a social development approach in mind) would thus be the favoured appointees as managers of social workers and practices. Tsui and Cheung (2004:441) refer to this tendency to elevate management in a social work context to the level of an “-ism” (as in managerialism), as imbuing management with a comprehensive power beyond social work’s core functions. These authors (Tsui & Cheung, 2004:439) conclude that managerialism in social work may ultimately mean that social work managers and social workers alike “count instead of judge, measure instead of think, and care about the cost instead of the cause.” This would, tragically, fly in the face of all that has ever been written, practised and said about the significance of social work in the world.

DISCUSSION

The South African social development paradigm, including social work as one of the professions, is prone to be absorbed into the neoliberal world we are living in. Management is not an end unto itself. Therefore the danger of over-inflating the

importance of accountability and cost-benefit analyses about social service delivery and social work organisations' missions, is equal to the danger of ignoring them altogether.

Admittedly, training in business administration such as an MBA can most effectively provide managerial leadership to all social work organisations. Conversely, it is also true that knowledge of and experiences in a particular venture are essential. Theoretical knowledge can never replace hands-on experience in the social work field. That is why social work students all over the world are engaged in fieldwork practice in order to integrate theoretical and practice education.

Social workers have been drawn to the field because they are interested in making a difference in vulnerable people's lives – and not to manage people, specifically not to undertake human resources, financial and other administrative tasks. Though social workers should certainly take cognisance of the impact of global political, economic, social, legal and technological environmental changes. Organisations are living organisms according to the systems and functional theories (Von Bertalanffy, 1974), which are part and parcel of the theoretical undergirding of social work as an academic discipline (IFSW, 2014). But should tangible proof of success be the only criterion for judging the competence or standards of professional social work in organisations? Surely social work has to provide some evidence, but social work is inherently a human rights profession, implying critical ethical judgement and decision making.

In applying critical, ethical, human-rights based judgements to the management of social work, Slavin (1978:xxvi) concurs that social work management “has its technical and scientific aspects, but it is also in part an art, enlightened by practice wisdom, disciplined role performance, and balanced judgment”. He furthermore maintains:

“Social work management is an identifiable field of practice, more or less bounded and distinct from other management pursuits and rooted in the organization of social services. While aspects of its work find parallels elsewhere, as a constellation of skills, knowledge, and values, it is sufficiently unique to warrant special study, application, and training. Although interdisciplinary in many ways, it relies heavily on the accumulated and recorded experience over many decades of the core profession in the social services, social work.” (Slavin, 1978:xxi-xxvii)

For successful management, any enterprise requires a profound knowledge of the technology it employs. Social work managers thus need a firm grounding in social work not only to understand its underlying values, but also to execute associated organisation policies. This implies that managers of social workers need to have a profound knowledge of the places, policies, people, persons, process and personnel encompassed in social work. As business managers need to understand how retail customers differ from wholesale customers and relate accordingly to organisations, social work managers need to understand how vulnerable people, who are the target group of social work, will ultimately be affected by social work services.

Thus, can one manage any practice, in this case social work, without knowing how to execute the practice? Are knowledge and skills in management more important than

knowledge and skills in social work? Could one regard the four years of undergraduate social work higher education in South Africa, and registration from the second year of study onwards, as unnecessary towards the management of social work?

The Department of Social Development and the SACSSP partly answered these questions by the construction of a national Supervision Framework for the social work profession (2012:4) “to put measures in place to contribute towards the passing on of a scholarly, theoretical body of knowledge as well as tacit practice experience and wisdom to subsequent generations through establishing effective supervision practices, and consequently a competent professional social work heritage in this respect”. As a positive step, this Framework also addresses the organisations employing social workers, and not just the social worker, as done by the current Code of Ethics (2007). However, alignment of the Social Work Act, 1978 (Act 110 of 1978) as amended, and this Framework would be crucial in order to give effect to the management and supervision commitments of organisations employing social workers. Also, in order to establish scholarly supervision practices, more is needed than just training of supervisors in the execution of the Supervision Framework, which could be regarded as merely a safeguarding of compliance. Managers and supervisors’ understanding of neoliberal discourses and managerial tenets, together with a relevant, grounded theoretical underpinning of management and supervision, would ensure public confidence in social workers as managers and supervisors, for this would enable them to adhere to both macro and micro management challenges in the political, economic, social, technological and legal environments.

Still, why are so many social workers complaining, not only in South Africa, but all over the world (compare Pecora, Cherin, Bruce & Arguello, 2010:2; Department of Social Development, 2015a) about “toxic organisational environments” characterised by unclear missions, overcrowded office space, poor supervision, low salaries, large caseloads and troubled working relations? An explanation for this state of affairs is that organisational excellence is primarily rooted in understanding the potentially positive and negative impacts of neoliberal and managerial discourses on social work management and supervision, as well as close adherence to the actual delivery of social work services. Both elements in a combination are essential, as well as a “humanising of managerialism” (Trevithick, 2014:287) to survive in the world of today. The challenge is thus to balance both service capacity and quality as the hallmark of organisations (Pecora *et al.*, 2010:3).

Balancing considerations (on a continuum of ends and means) of costs with satisfaction, effect with cost-effectiveness, and especially, knowledge, skills and values, is an important aspect of professional social work management practices. Maintaining the pivotal centre in a balancing act is vital, and to move in either direction of the continuum would be to abandon both social development and management principles. Hence, the ideal manager and supervisor is one that combines expert social work education with a managerial role; and one who combines the normative background of social work as an academic discipline with the ability to operate as a specialist in an administrative capacity.

Moreover, the assumption persists that “many social workers and political leaders feel that one of the great needs and challenges of social work today is to develop more capable, dynamic leaders who can help to formulate and carry out social policies, plans, and decisions that affect the peoples of the world, directly and indirectly” (Skidmore, 1983:6). In contrast with this assumption, local recent research (Engelbrecht & Ornellas, 2015) reveals that capable, dynamic social work leaders do exist in South Africa. The management and supervision cadres in South Africa in fact represent distinctive signature strengths. However, it appears that the actualisation of these leaders is diminished by a range of structural organisational issues. The employment of non-social workers to manage and supervise professional social workers, in many cases, is thus a result of neoliberal and managerial tenets, rather than of incompetence or a scarcity of senior and competent social workers.

CONCLUSION

From a social work perspective, the answer to the question whether non-social workers should manage professional social workers tends to support the ideal, rather than the reality, since neoliberalism and resultant managerialism significantly changed the face of social work forever. The concern, however, as illustrated in this paper, is that management and supervision of social workers may become just another technology of surveillance (Beddoe, 2010) in order to shape social workers into organisationally preferred ways of practice. Therefore, as “social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people” as expounded in the “Global definition of social work” (IFSW, 2014), a “we-they” dichotomy between professional social work managers and non-social work managers may defeat the purpose of social work’s functions and purpose. The best way in which people and structures could be engaged in social work to “address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”, according to the Global definition (IFSW, 2014), should ultimately guide the management of social workers, regardless of whether it is by non-social workers or professional social workers. Conversely, supervision of social workers in South Africa is statutorily mandated and a specialised social work matter guided by a constituted ethical code. Supervision of social workers by non-social workers should thus not be permitted. However, these social work supervisors should protect social work practices not to become “reactive and mechanistic rather than reflective and creative” (Beddoe, 2010:1284) in accordance with the Global social work definition (IFSW, 2014) and the Global Agenda for social work and social development (Jones & Truell, 2012). Politicians, policy makers in social work, managers and supervisors alike should furthermore act as mediators to ensure that social workers recognise and exercise their accountability, but in turn, should also ensure that social workers are not exploited. After all, in the words of Pecora *et al.* (2010:4): “excellent service quality and outcomes are achieved with fundamental organisational commitment to providing staff with appropriate and adequate resources”. Indeed, this should be the point of departure in social work management and supervision, regardless of who manages and supervises whom.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper stems from an EU-funded research project: Marie Curie Action: International Research Staff Exchange Scheme (contract no. 318938: EU FP7-PEOPLE-IRSES, Grant Agreement Number: PIRSES-GA-2012), CIVIL_SW (Civil engagement in social work: Developing global models).

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