

“Reclaiming our Humanity?”

by Mavis Airey

Concern that market forces are taking over community organisations, and threatening their ability to meet the needs of the people they serve, are behind the latest research by Anthony Paine and Maria Humphries of the Waikato Management School at the University of Waikato.

Three managers of community organisations* were invited into conversations about their service delivery processes. To what extent are calculations of cost, benefit and efficiency replacing notions of freedom, responsibility, creativity and compassion? Has meeting human needs become tailored to meeting the administrative needs of the bureaucracy, with the result that some human needs – especially difficult or complex needs – get ignored or set aside?

The research aimed to examine and challenge the extent to which human relationships in social services have been transformed into customer relationships.

Service users often lack the power or ability to be consumers. They may be frail, poor, intellectually disabled or simply lack the information required to make decisions. Their ability to complain or seek redress for inadequate service may be severely constrained by fears that to do so could jeopardise access to the very services they rely on.

Approaches to audit, accreditation and quality assurance can be unhelpful or inappropriate, as when policies and procedure for a large organisation are applied to a smaller support one. “I think there’s lots of things that have been done to get ticks in boxes,” said one participant. “Everyone gets to fill out customer satisfaction forms now ... but I also know what happens to that material – it doesn’t really go anywhere near the people who need to hear it,” said another.

Participants struggled to find a balance between an appropriate approach to providing people with what they said they needed, as contrasted with an externally imposed, token or unhelpful approach to working with – or viewing – people as customers. On the one hand, they talked about being “responsive to need”, “engaging with clients” and “an awareness of the human experience”. On the other, they used the language of the market, in phrases like “customer satisfaction”, being “accountable” and “outcomes based performance”. The tensions within that ambiguous position were apparent throughout the conversations.

However, the researchers also noted some potentially positive ideas in the part that organisational and personal values play in “protecting” human service organisations from allowing the commercial model to take root. One participant pointed out that not-for-profit organisations tend to attract people whose values are commensurate with those of the organisation, which tends to bring some goodwill and flexibility – even tolerance of poor management.

Another suggested that the strengths-based philosophy in which many social workers are trained is likely to permeate the organisation's services. "We're trying to create change in people's lives not by prescribing how they do that but by operating with people in a relationship which is encouraging, motivating ...It's almost always only when we relate our work to others, that we have to find a term to define the group, that we start depersonalising it."

But the conversations also revealed that while values like "social justice" and "community development" are important, other values (for example risk management and quality assurance) are growing features of community organisations and may be seen by some as ends in themselves. The systemic requirements of funders and people further up the hierarchy can threaten to overwhelm values and concerns for people, and appropriate ways of doing things. Being able to distinguish between the positive and negative use of the market approach, and see it in a wider context, is crucial if we are to generate services that genuinely address individual and social need, the researchers concluded.

- *The "community organisations" referred to in this article are termed "voluntary organisations" by Volunteering Canterbury, in order to distinguish them from the wider community of which voluntary organisations are a part.*

This article refers to research titled: De-instrumentalising Humanity: "...research that disrupts, educates, engages, inspires, demystifies and democratizes."

Authors

Anthony Paine and Maria Humphries
Waikato Management School
University of Waikato
Hamilton, New Zealand
Email: Mariah@waikato.ac.nz
Phone: 027 292 8809