

The Influences of Managerialism in the Professional Intervention of Social Workers

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Abstract

Social work, like other professions, has undergone changes in its structural basis, as well as a re-dimensioning of the professional work, which cannot be dissociated from the inevitable administrative reforms of the State and of the social policies themselves. In this research we sought to understand how the state administrative reforms, namely the managerial model of New Public Management have influenced the professional intervention of social workers in the public sector. We did so through the perceptions of the social workers about the implications of managerialism in their professional practices. It is a qualitative research, with exploratory characteristics and was carried out in a municipality in a district of Portugal. It was conducted a semi-structured interview with six social workers in the public sector, from four different sectors: Justice, Local Power, Health and Social Security. After the interviews were collected, a Characterization Grid of the sample and a SWOT Analysis Grid were used for each of the participants to assist the researcher in the Content Analysis of this investigation. The data we analyzed revealed that in all services and intervention areas there was a prevalence of characteristics of managerialism influences, which necessarily induced changes in professional practices. The collected data revealed that there are characteristics of managerialism perceived as beneficial and positive for the professional exercise and other characteristics that have brought constraints.

Keywords: Managerialism; Social Work, New Public Management, Social Workers, Social Intervention.

Introduction

The present research had the objective of understanding how the administrative reforms of the State, namely the managerial model of New Public Management have influenced the professional intervention of social workers working in the public sector.

Throughout Europe and other developed countries we are witnessing changes in the public and private sectors and changes in policy development, increasingly geared towards a 'market-society' changing the way we contribute how we benefit from state protection and where techno-economic determinism is a fact (Garcia, 2010, p.86).

In times when professionals' practices and ways of acting are being discussed, we consider it is important that the discussion is also focused on the professionals' perceptions about how the changes in work settings have influenced their practice. It is well known that administrative reforms have led to changes in the working context of all civil servants to which Social Workers have not been indifferent, having undergone relevant changes in their work place in contemporary societies and in the functions assigned to them (Ramalho, 2012, p.361).

The emergence of New Public Management and the challenges for Social Work

The literature review enable us to understand and characterize the New Public Management model. We highlight some principles and concepts such as the disaggregation or decentralization, i.e. the division of sector hierarchies into smaller units and by introducing new management systems and more innovative forms of organization (inspired by private / business management). The modernization of systems and the introduction of measurable and clearly defined performance standards and the consequent concern with results are also some characteristics of the New Public Management model, as well as the simplification of procedures; worker encouragement by introducing better performance bonus schemes.

Reregulation is another one, which resulted in the privatization of sectors where the state was traditionally the provider (liberalization of economic and social activities), such as education, health, telecommunications, the energy sector, etc. The "thinning" of the state and public administration with regard to the reduction of civil servants and the creation of autonomous management agencies that guarantee a separation between politics and administration also make another principles of how managerialism works (Rocha, 2000, 2014; Nunes, 2006; Araújo, 2007; Madureira, 2014; Green & Clarke, 2016).

With the introduction of the New Public Management model, one would expect to see an increase in employee autonomy and discretion over their work. However, according to José António Rocha (2014, p. 131) the opposite occurred, administrative reforms disempowered workers, there was a decrease in morale and responsibilities imputed to civil servants resulting in the popular caricature of the civil servant who is typically apathetic.

Thus, it is understood that this model also brought positive aspects and potentialities. It has brought a reduction in expenses and a more positive balance of accounts showing a concern with profitability. Organizations began to define their missions and objectives more clearly, adopting guides and strategies which was not the case before. There has been an increase in accountability in the services that provide to users as well as innovation through administrative and technological simplification. Also it is expected a greater participation by citizens which decreases the distance between the state and citizens, opening doors so that recipients of services are key stakeholders to participate.

Managerialism nonetheless presents major problems in practice rather than theory. Christopher Hood (1991, cit in Rocha, 2014, p.68) argues that managerialism, despite the supposed benefit that budget and service quality controls could bring has in fact not brought improvements to the services, besides having being used as a vehicle for private interests among public managers rather than during the old administrative models.

In Portugal, the New Public Management started to become a reality in a very timid way, the first adaptation efforts began in the 80's of the last century. More intense efforts have been made from 1995 at a time when managerial revolution in the Portuguese public administration begins. During this time, European influences began to be introduced. Issues such as the quality of services became a reality, and the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency, namely with regard to reducing the role of the state and the budgeting of public services.

The New Public Management not only changed the form of state administration but also the formulation and application of social policies. There has been a gradual disinvestment in public services based on neoliberal ideologies even though it is curious to note what Eduardo Rodrigues (2010, p.197) comments about these facts: the public disinvestment itself based on the idea that public services were inefficient, it becomes the direct consequence of their inefficiency.

We know that the crisis of the welfare state has brought many challenges and changes, affecting various domains of society, affecting the financial, economic, social and cultural realities, and all these profound transformations in the contemporary world require a rethinking of Social Work and its repositioning in society and the way it acts.

Social workers are asked to do more in less time, prioritize the quantitative over the qualitative, rationalize access to services by restricting their access to rights and replace technical competence with routine tasks. It seems that the demand for productivity removes the autonomy and discretionary power of social workers.

Globalization together with managerialism has been challenging Social Work for increasingly unpredictable and dynamic issues as professionals face global situations that cross borders. Lena Dominelli (2010, p.604) warns about the risk of professionals not updating in relation to current issues running the risk of becoming sloppy professionals as practices become bureaucratized and comfortable.

When state administration started to be organized differently social public policies changed as well (through the introduction of active social policies increasingly focused on the population most vulnerable). Efficiency and effectiveness factors is now embedded to the performance of social workers accountability is also on the agenda and the private market and civil society flourish and social services provided by public services are. What is required of a social worker today is that he/she should be able to manage and be accountable for his own work, contribute to the management of resources and services, present and share records and reports, and know how to work in multidisciplinary teams (Coulshed et al., 2006, p.3).

The introduction of computer systems and new information and communication technologies at work, as a result of a globalizing world, has brought new challenges for Social Work and has facilitated the introduction work control systems

(accountability). According to Sarah Banks (2007, cit in Green & Clarke, 2016, p.113), electronic data recording and management systems have several purposes, one of which is to facilitate interprofessional work but Banks also agrees that they are used to increase control and monitoring of social workers and other professionals.

Stuart Kirk et al. (2002) describe the ambiguity felt by social workers with the introduction of what they call "computer-assisted practice". They recognize the two sides of the coin that this issue has brought: on the one hand the fear of dehumanizing social work practices with information systems and on the other hand the numerous (positive) possibilities and capabilities that these systems have.

At first glance, social workers' professional practices appear to have become managerialism-based practices. It is important to understand whether social workers individually and as a professional class can resist emerging threats such as: proceduralisation, bureaucratization of practices and loss of discretion or even disconnection from the ethical-political roots of professional intervention. While taking into account that Social work operates under the pressures of legislation, control and political imperative and media attention, numerous influences that go well beyond strictly professional ones (Coulshed et al. 2006, p.6).

Taking all of this into consideration, what was intended for this research was to understand if all of this perspectives really happen through the perception of real social workers in the public sector.

According to the literature review, the measures introduced in the neoliberal public administration and strongly influenced by the New Public Management show advantages and disadvantages, both for the state itself and for the citizens.

The research problem of the present investigation it is to what extent the administrative reforms of the Portuguese State as external / internal and contextual factors will have any impact on the social workers' professional practices. Recognizing this phenomenon and the implications it can bring to social intervention as well as the empirical gaps that exist at this level, the present study seeks to understand the advantages and disadvantages pointed out by the Public Sector Social Workers, taking into account the managerial requirements of the administrative reforms and how these influence the practice of social work.

Methodology and Analysis

The research design is qualitative in order to provide a more enlightened and approximate overview of a phenomenon little studied in the area of Social Work in Public Sector organizations in Portugal.

It was firstly designed an Analysis Model in which it was distinguished two central concepts: Managerialism and Professional Practices and the dimensions for each one were then described. For the concept of Managerialism the main characteristics were defined from what was previously identified in the literature review, and then listed the possible practical impacts that a Social Worker would feel by introducing a State Administrative Reform with Managerial characteristics.

Various methodologies were used during the investigation process such as Bibliographic Research and Documentary Analysis as a start. The main methodological procedures begun by the delimitation of the research field, the research universe, the constitution of the sample and its requirements, the choice of data collection techniques and their construction. These techniques included a Semi-Structured Interview Guide, a Sample Characterization Grid and a SWOT Analysis Grid. After the construction of the instruments the data was collected through the semi-structured interviews and the content analysis and SWOT analysis of the interviews were performed so then it was used the Content Analysis technique.

Through content analysis the researchers looked for points that often appear in the data to later organize them into conceptual categories, which allowed a systematic and objective description of the content present in the interviewees' discourses (Coutinho, 2011, p.193). The Content Analysis was done based on four main Categories, which unfold into twelve Subcategories and subsequently into twenty-six Indicators constructed from the transcript of the interviews using a categorical analysis.

Sample and Research Data

This study focused on the Public Sector, namely the sub-sectors of Social Security, Health, Justice and Local Government were chosen as the areas with the highest expression of Social Work professionals. The researchers opted to collect a sample of Social Workers who worked in each of these services.

Because it is impossible to collect data from all Social Workers in Portugal who work in these sectors in the time frame available for the research, for reasons of accessibility to participants it was opted to use a sample confined to a municipality using the non-probabilistic sampling criterion thus as the accessibility criterion.

The survey had a sample of six Social Workers, distributed in four different sub-sectors - Local Government, Justice, Social Security and Health. The participants' ages are between 36 and 62 years old, with an average age of approximately 49 years. The years of experience as a Social Worker of the participants range from 6 to 39 years of professional experience, with an average of approximately 20 years of experience. The main condition required for the selection of respondents was to have at least 5 years of experience as a Social Worker.

Discussion of Results

In general, from the social worker testimonies that participated in this study, the characteristics that belong to Managerialism are present in all sectors / intervention areas studied here. Some aspects of Managerialism were identified in the speeches of the social workers as having brought benefits, constraints and some considered ambivalent which bring both benefits and constraints.

The Modernization of Services is pointed out by the Social Workers as a benefit since it has allowed a better organization of records, as well as greater access to data, both among various professionals from different areas, as well as between multidisciplinary teams and central services. This is necessarily a networking tool today, which has been touted as having many potentials.

Decentralization of Services is a feature of managerialist reforms which is seen in all services and areas of intervention analyzed here, and was pointed out by the social workers participating in the study as an asset to both service users and for the work performed by the professionals themselves. According to them Decentralization allows greater accessibility to services, as well as a greater monitoring of users, being able to perform a work of proximity. This would not be possible to happen in the same way in centralized services, like the testimony of one of the social workers: *"it is easier for people to resort to decentralized services (...) there is a closer approach, and it is also easier at this time for us to articulate with central services"* (SWLG)¹

Equity in access to public services is perceived as being assured, and there are even internal mechanisms to ensure such accessibility. In most cases, social workers report it as a direct benefit to users and professionals.

Maximizing resources whether human or material is undoubtedly one of the major constraints pointed out. Both with regard to the capacity of social workers to perform their technical functions to the fullest (because there is a lack of workers), or to their ability to provide the necessary answers to the population. While most recognize that, the number of technicians is appropriate for the job others recognize that there are flaws at this level, admitting for example that they are unable to leave their offices for home visits. On the other hand, it is generally stated that material resources are not at all adequate and sufficient for the identified needs.

Over-bureaucratization is another² constraint on the social workers' professional practice, which can often undermine the success and quality of the intervention itself. This constraint requires a great flexibility of professionals and ironically, demands efficiency in the management of times, a situation that most of the social workers reported to be successful despite acknowledging the difficulties. An example of this are the words of two of the participants: *"In practice we are always fighting against time" (SWH), "I think that this platform's bureaucracy it is very demanding, but it works, and everything is accounted for, it ends up hurting a little, and if we didn't have to do that, we would had time for other things. But I think this has problem at its base, which is the lack of staff, because if we had more people, we could easily do everything."* (SWJ)³

Accountability is one of the ambivalent situations that was one of the identified in this study. It is understood as a situation that adds bureaucratization to the tasks of social workers, and can translate into an effective control of the efficiency and effectiveness in the work production of professionals. One of the social workers in this research said: *"We have to be*

¹ SWLG – Social Worker from the Local Government sector

² SWH – Social Worker from the Health sector

³ SWJ - Social Worker from Justice sector

accountable to the Social Security, and to the Board, we report to both sides (...) we have to make half-yearly reports counting everything we do, which is brutal, display statistical maps every month, we have to make annual maps, annual reports, we have goals to fulfill from Social Security..”(SWSS)¹. However, accountability can also become a tool for testing the quality of their work, and it can be used reflexively and as a planning strategy. Even so, there is a risk of accountability distortion, when the purpose becomes solely and exclusively the monitoring of work as a means of achieving pre-defined objectives, which do not reflect the subjective importance of the work performed.

Finally, the issue of Standardized Procedures is identified as ambivalent. This means that although standardization seeks to ensure equality, transparency of procedures while appealing to the quality of interventions and the scientificity of techniques, the problem lies in lack of equity. Standardized procedures reduce the subjectivity of social problems and risk leaving out some fields of intervention that would need to be taken into account depending on the case at hand. Although it might be a problem, the interviewed social workers said: “The quality factor requires us to have a formalization in the way we work, a homogenization of procedures. (...) There is a matrix, people know that they should proceed according to that matrix, but then they also work a little bit differently.” (SWH), but also recognize the need to adapt the ways of doing their work: “we make always the same procedures, but the service is different, we adapt our posture...” (SWSS).

Conclusion

Since the 1980s, several countries including Portugal have been reforming their administrations by aligning their views with the New Public Management model. The changes these reforms have brought are described as having brought new ways of managing and controlling public organizations. In the Analysis Model of this investigation it was as characterized the concept of Managerialism as a way for decentralization, market liberalization, resource maximization, the logic of service consumers over the logic of service beneficiaries, accountability or service delivery, audits, standardized forms, fair access to services and technological modernization.

In addition to identifying these changes in the forms of organization of public administrations, it was found evidence that there have also been changes in the front-line bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). The professional environment of public social services is changing and the literature indicated some of these changes: doing more in less time and with fewer resources, evoking the principles of effectiveness and efficiency, increasing bureaucratic and standardized procedures by filling out forms, mandatory computerized records and also employee accountability through activity reports, with the quantification of all procedures and steps taken.

These trends also represent a change in the social workers' professional practices, particularly with those who work in public organizations and are under this legal framework.

From the work put in place in this research it was found out that in general the Professional Posture presented by the social workers revealed a relatively reflexive and critical posture regarding their own practices. Even so, it was found that in half of the sample, mostly the managerial models of practice stand out, in which a performance oriented towards the rationalization and instrumentalization of results predominates, i.e. an orientation that follows the prescribed organizational rules and procedures, these are two examples: “I have to comply with the insertion contract (...) it might reach a limit that I will not put my profession at risk, it has to be, (...) but I always practice my profession based on the principle of honesty, my obligations to the state...”, “We always have to do everything on the basis of our internal guidelines, we have to, because we have internal guidelines for everything.”(SW3).

When the participants were asked to describe what they feel are the biggest challenges for Social Work half of them answered that the biggest challenge is that there are not enough resources to meet the needs of both goods and services, addressing the most practical issues with direct implications for his work. Still, it should be noted that one third of the participants refer to the lack of recognition of Social Work by society in general, and the need for the profession to assert itself. Regarding this one of the social workers we interviewed said: “I think that Social Work has already went through good changes, but I think it needs to affirm itself, social worker's need to not be afraid and to assume themselves as an important profession like any other (...). one thing I've been watching for a few years back is that everyone thinks they know how to be a social worker (regarding to other professionals)”(SW5).

¹ SWSS – Social Worker from the Social Security sector

Regarding Professional Sensitivity of the participants, it was observed that the establishment of the relationship of trust with the users is very valued, as well as the need to create empathy, to use active listening, one of the participants have said: "I think the best way for us to build trust with anyone, regardless of whether they are our users or just a customer asking for information, is to listen to them in the first place." Evidence shows that the reflective capacity of these professionals is also in tune with the values of the profession, and the need to promote the training of users, and not to base professional practices only on immediate and assistance responses, has been mentioned several times.

With regard to Discretion, the vast majority of the participants believe that they retain the possibility of making autonomous decisions, i.e. they do not recognize a loss of their discretion. Although they always put in quotes, saying that is always a "relative autonomy". And yet, it was found that in some cases, Social Workers describe situations where they feel their professional autonomy is directly affected by what they describe as "political wills" or institutional wills: "I have some autonomy, although it is always relative... but is does not feel like I have lost it (...) [the decisions] always have to go through the superiors, because we have to be always safeguarded with some of the important decisions, even though sometimes political wills overlap the work a bit..."(SW4)

Thus, it can be said that in this specific context that the managerialist administrative reforms brought both potentialities and constraints to the exercise of Social Work. With regard to the constraints, overcoming them will necessarily require the ability of Social Workers to reflectively plan their interventions and resist excessive and limiting bureaucratizations. It will also reinforce its role as mediators in the community, solidifying its technical-operative skills as well as having the ability to adapt to new demands, gaining recognition through greater argumentative capacity and positioning in defense of the principles of justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity.

The data suggests that there may be a gap between the opinions and perceptions of the social workers' interviewed and their actions. However, as an exploratory study this one could be used as a background for future investigations using another type of methodologies to understand why discourse and practice can be different.

There is still much to study and explore in this field. One of the topics that we consider pertinent to explore further is the application of risk management instruments, which we found in half of the intervention areas analyzed (most prevalent in the justice sector). It would be interesting to assess what effective implications these types of instruments have in determining the intervention.

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