

## The limits of organisational change

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In the 1960s, sociology became the ‘in’ subject thought most likely to change the world. One of its influential components was organisation theory. The bible was Amitai Etzioni’s (1961) *Complex Organizations* which explored the relationship between goals, structures and compliance. He distinguished three types of goals: instrumental, expressive and organisational.<sup>1</sup> The first are concerned with transmitting useful skills or achieving technical solutions, the second focus on producing end states and promoting esteemed values, while the third cover what is necessary to make the organisation work. Various combinations were identified and assessments made of whether they were functional or dysfunctional for different types of organisation, for instance contrasting what was appropriate for a convent with what worked for a tax office.

In the 1960s, the researcher Royston Lambert applied this model to British boarding schools and concluded that rather than consider the three types of goals as alternatives, it was more fruitful to look at their relationship with one another. This perspective looked at various patterns, such as when all three are in balance, i.e. when  $I=E=O$ , or when one or two dominate the others, such as when  $I + E$  are more salient than  $O$ . The worst combination for a social or educational service was deemed to be when  $O$  dominates  $I$  and  $E$ ; that is when the organisation becomes obsessed with its internal running and outside reputation at the expense of everything else.

But this static analysis only went so far. It was confounded by the tendency for individuals to perceive their role in ways that did not always mirror their function. Officials with clear organisational responsibilities often endowed their task with expressive qualities, such as accountants admiring their neatly laid out balance sheets or administrators looking pleasurably at their empty in-trays. Indeed, Lambert cited a headmaster who toasted himself each evening with a pre-dinner cocktail on the social contribution he believed he had made via his floggings that day.

So a 64,000-dollar question that this discussion poses is what balance of goals is best for a good fostering service? Providing substitute care obviously has many instrumental and expressive aspects; we want children to achieve educationally and develop social skills but also to be happy, secure and personally fulfilled. But where do organisational goals fit into this?

In public services considerable opprobrium is often directed to administration and there is a feeling that managers and accountants run the show. One recalls the ambitious parent telling their child, ‘Work hard at school and you could be a doctor, work a bit harder and you could be a consultant, and work harder still and you might be a NHS manager.’ In this cynicism, it is easy to forget the critical role of good management. We turn up at A&E

expecting it to be equipped, staffed and financially viable as well as efficient at treating our condition. But my own experience as a research director shows how easy it is for the task for which I was paid (research) to get displaced by things like HR, ethics, finance and smoothing ruffled feathers. Indeed, some observers argue that social work is now so dominated by child protection that as long as children aren't abused, the rest doesn't matter. To paraphrase Brahms, they are 'safe but lonely'. At ground level, this is further reflected in social workers' beef that bureaucratic demands leave little time for work with children and families.<sup>2</sup>

The October 2017 editorial highlighted the dearth of fundamental research into foster care in the UK (adoption has fared marginally better) and the fact that most of the studies are small scale and qualitative, which does not impress the wider scientific community. It drew on the conclusions of the Department for Education (DfE) report, *The Fostering Service in England: Evidence review* (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017). This survey has now been complemented by a second publication, *An Independent Review of Foster Care* by Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers, discussed by Sonia Jackson in this edition.

In combination, the two inquiries certainly offer a comprehensive assessment of the current situation but tend to confirm what is known rather than revealing much that is new. The evidence review is inevitably dispassionate but occasionally shows its slip by expressing concern about matters like young children's isolation from the planning process and whether different training approaches improve placement stability. The conclusion is optimistic, arguing that for many children, being fostered is better than the alternative and claiming that most go on to lead happy, healthy, productive lives as adults and are generally positive about the care they receive (Baginsky, Gorin and Sands, 2017: 22).

The Narey and Owers report is much more managerial and prescriptive, with 36 recommendations covering issues like the role and involvement of carers, payments, recruitment, commissioning, matching, family contact and appropriate uses of foster care. In the DfE's publication notice (p. 2) Sir Martin writes:

If all were to be implemented, then local authorities will have foster carers who are better motivated and better appreciated. At the same time, local authorities should make significant financial savings through obtaining better deals from most of the independent fostering providers, the commissioning of which is often inadequate.

But although we now have 395 pages of audit, concerns about the quality of the knowledge base persist. Baginsky and colleagues (Executive Summary, 2017: 23) say:

Some very reliable data and evidence have emerged from well-structured projects conducted by experienced researchers, but evidence is not equally distributed across all the domains of fostering. There are references to innovative practice and services and in many cases they have been evaluated, but the studies are often small-scale pilot evaluations that can only ever give tentative indications of effect. They do not provide sufficiently robust evidence to inform commissioning of services and there have been very few attempts to provide the quality of detail on which to judge either success or value for money. This impedes our understanding of issues that are proving difficult to address, such as supply and capacity.

If the evidence base is really this suspect, can we be sure that the right children are being fostered or are living in the right type of placement? Or, looking more widely, would things be better if the whole caboodle was privatised? Should innovators, philanthropists and mavericks be encouraged? The continual administrative reorganisation of local authority departments and charities seems to divert attention from these more fundamental questions.

Although considerable efforts have been made to improve the I=E=O balance for looked after children, the pattern where O dominates is always attractive because it is the easiest to handle and say something convincing. The danger is that it also favours organisational solutions to instrumental and expressive problems, for instance by introducing more bureaucracy and control that make little difference, and enhances the status of administrators with expressive aspirations.<sup>3</sup> It fails to reassure us that we are not propping up a moribund system.

Present-day services are an evolutionary mixture that we struggle to improve. If we were to begin with a tabula rasa and were given the £100 billion currently spent annually in the UK on children's services,<sup>4</sup> would what we create bear any resemblance to the pot-pourri that exists? A daft question, maybe, but a bit of blue-sky thinking would add some welcome sparkle to the proceedings.

## Notes

1. Etzioni uses different terms, such as utilitarian, normative and coercive, but the I, E, O categorisation is clearer for the purposes of this discussion.
2. See the discussions in 'The future of children's social work', special edition of *The Journal of Children's Services* 12(2&3), 2017.
3. Interestingly, Narey and Owers propose reduced bureaucracy by recommending freedom to dispense with Independent Reviewing Officers, p.101.
4. About £85 billion on education and £15 billion on child and family social services.

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