Mutual benefits: Developing relational service approaches within Centrelink.

Greg Hall a, b & c, Jennifer Boddy a, Lesley Chenoweth a & Katherine Davie b

a   Griffith University, School of Human Services and Social Work

b   Centrelink, Social Work Services

Abstract

The machinery of income support can have considerable influence in people's lives, creating opportunities for social work but also tensions: access to vulnerable people, but not always on their terms. This paper argues that the challenge to social work is about more than holding on to professional discretion. It considers how social workers can influence service delivery approaches to work more relationally, pursuing a more equal involvement of clients and recognising the complex interactive context of social and community life. The authors trace the development of such an approach within the Australian Government human services delivery agency Centrelink in Logan, Queensland, and briefly consider a parallel innovation in Newcastle, New South Wales. The authors suggest that grounding a large institutional social service agency in the realities of client and community experiences has mutual benefits, creating a more humanising, cooperative space and displacing inefficient and sometimes tragic cycles of misunderstanding, confrontation and disconnection.

Introduction

One of the securities of democracy, in the words of pioneering social worker Jane Addams (1902:276),

> is the curious sense which comes to us from time to time, that we belong to the whole, that a certain basic well being can never be taken away from us whatever the turn of fortune.

In Australia, people who encounter misfortune or struggle on an ongoing basis to achieve basic well-being often seek some kind of security through Centrelink.

Centrelink is on one level, a transactional, government institution dealing with thousands of social security claims and enquiries on a daily basis. On another level, it is an interface to which people bring their vulnerabilities and sometimes tragedies in the process of looking for help. Centrelink staff encounter stories of people who are struggling with complex difficulties such as long term unemployment, incapacity, undervalued caring roles, histories of violence, abuse, homelessness and mental health issues. In this environment, to paraphrase Mills (1959), 'personal troubles' and 'public issues' meet.

The nature of this meeting is critical to attune social welfare to peoples' needs, particularly with marginalised or vulnerable people whose 'natural helping networks' (Folgheraiter, 2004: 166) may be fragile. Centrelink deals with many people who may be disengaged from other services or connections (Institute of Child Protection Studies, 2009; Social Inclusion Unit, 2009; Grace, Batterham & Cornell, 2008; Hall & Scheltens, 2005). This creates possibilities for it to play a role in early intervention or re-connection, but it also carries the danger, common to all powerful institutions, of dominating clients (Dominelli, 2002; Coy, 2008) or replicating experiences of prior marginalisation (Pozzuto, Averett & Arnd-Caddigan, 2009).

Centrelink has been criticised as punitive and directive in its involvement with vulnerable people, particularly in regard to jobseekers (Marston & McDonald, 2008), people with mental health problems (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010) and the recent Northern Territory Intervention (Atkinson, Taylor & Walter, 2010; Hill & Thompson, 2009). McDonald and Chenoweth (2009) have argued that the shift of Centrelink, along with many other welfare institutions influenced by New Public Management, to a transactional business setting, has tended to limit the scope of engagements with vulnerable people. Within this setting, even social workers, who usually have more license for in depth contacts than other staff, can fall into 'informational' (Parton, 2008) processes oriented around cataloguing problems (Dearman, 2005) and be challenged in their exercise of professional discretion (McDonald & Marston, 2006).

For social workers, whose claims to legitimacy are intertwined with the actions of their agency, these criticisms indicate a broader concern than maintaining their professional discretion. If a key to engaging vulnerable people is for a service to be perceived as 'humanising' (Institute of Child Protection Studies 2009:6), social workers may need to influence the service delivery experience as a whole to better accommodate and respect the reality of people's lived experience. A more relationally oriented service approach might deliver in Folgheraiter's (2004:144) words

> 'a margin of freedom in the interaction between organization and... the real problems of
>
> people in flesh and blood.'

Methodology

This paper utilises a case study method, exploring alternative service delivery within Centrelink with a focus on the Centrelink SaiL (Shared Assessments in Logan) initiative and a subsequent discussion of the Newcastle Community Support Unit (CSU). The paper focuses on the development of SaiL as an alternate service approach over the last two years. Ethics approval was obtained through the 'Families Social Inclusion and New Policy' (FSINP) branch of Centrelink.

Data sources

The paper draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data was gathered through: participant observation; reflections from several small forums with fifteen Centrelink clients and similar forums with local workers; individual and group discussions with SaiL workers; management and supervision discussions and client case studies/vignettes.

A thematic analysis is provided drawing on several client case study/vignettes with reference to quantitative data around new connections for clients. De-identified quantitative data around client outcomes was obtained from SaiL's computer database.

A polyphonic narrative

In exploring how things are and how things could be different for marginalised people dealing with Centrelink, the paper pursues a polyphonic narrative in which the multiple voices of practitioners, clients and managers are considered against theoretical insights from recent literature. Attitudes, views and experiences around 'normal' service delivery are overlaid with descriptions of experiences from the altered service model. Insights into

implications for practice are made following consideration of the Newcastle CSU as a

parallel program. Reflections on the CSU draw on participant observation, notes from

supervision and discussions with CSU workers as well as a detailed client case study.

All client case study/vignettes were constructed in consultation with clients, who were given

the opportunity to provide criticism and corrections. Names and identifying details have been

changed.

The first named author, as a Centrelink 'insider' involved with SaiL and the CSU, has

attempted to mitigate any loss of critical distance (Padgett, 1998) and enrich the polyphonic

process through a process of reflection and supervision undertaken with two 'outsider'

academics over the past twelve months.

Setting SaiL

Social work practice approaches associated with a more democratic relationship with clients

have attracted interest within Centrelink over recent years. Interest in strengths-based,

solution-focused and 'narrative' approaches (Hall & Davie, 2009; Young, Lonne, Hall &

Scheltens, 2004; Dalyell, 2008) echoes Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) call for innovation in

institutional social work practice in the United Kingdom. There are parallels too in recent

Australian Government human services directions which focus on inclusion (Social Inclusion

Unit, 2009), democratic approaches (Advisory Group on Reform of Australian Government

Administration, 2010:20) and 'egalitarianism' (Plibersek, 2010).

A number of Centrelink 'place based' initiatives aimed at marginalised communities have

taken shape over the last two years. These initiatives have taken different forms in a number

of locations across Australia. The exact nature of each initiative was to be guided by local

circumstances through consultations and service designs constructed on the ground in each

location (Darcy & Gwyther, 2010). This approach is consistent with Australian Government

directions on social inclusion (Social Inclusion Unit, 2009).

In one of these locations, Logan in South East Queensland, social workers have worked

closely with the 'Families Social Inclusion and New Policy' (FSINP) branch of Centrelink as

well as Senior Area and National Executives to develop SaiL, a service approach influenced

by a relational understanding of working with vulnerable people.

Located between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, Logan was identified as an area of significant

disadvantage through a range of data (Centrelink, 2009a). The first step towards developing

an alternate way Centrelink might work in Logan involved discussions between the FSINP

Branch, Social Work Service and Area Executive (responsible for Logan offices). There was

a combined commitment to a local consultative process. Consultations with staff, clients and

agencies in Logan produced a number of ideas for change.

Talking with clients and staff

Discussion with Centrelink staff (a mix of customer service, social workers, team leaders,

specialists and managers) revealed a concern that they were regularly dealing with what they

referred to as 'challenging' or 'difficult' people presenting at reception with ongoing

complex life situations. These people were difficult to engage with or refer to other help in

the community. This affected worker well-being, as staff were distressed when they were

unable to help, or were worried about customer aggression. Most staff, including social

workers, felt they had limited time to spend with some clients who would not be helped elsewhere.

Staff reported seeing people repeatedly who, in the words of one staff member, seemed to be in a 'never-ending crisis'. The view that these clients' lives seemed 'chaotic' was commonly held and staff felt it was not easy to refer clients to other agencies as helping services did not always respond or clients did not pursue referrals. People with mental health issues were seen, in line with later research, as consistently 'falling through the cracks' (Commonwealth Ombudsman, 2010). The social workers in the group noted that people experiencing or fleeing domestic violence (Centrelink Social Work Information Database 2008) and young people leaving state care were over-represented in the region (Hall & Davie, 2009).

Clients disengaging from help but regularly appearing in Centrelink were a source of frustration for staff. People may have dropped out of their mental health treatment, counselling support, and relationships with family or friends, but they continued to visit Centrelink.

' Centrelink keeps secrets '

Frustration was a key theme in discussions within small groups of local Centrelink clients. These were run with the support of local Non Government Organisations (NGOs). Participants were drawn from the key marginal groups identified through the Logan staff consultation. All had either experienced state care, domestic violence and/or serious mental health issues. Discussions looked at what was or was not helpful in interactions with Centrelink and what changes they might recommend. These were informal sessions in which clients could share experiences with the knowledge that these might help inform service

delivery but would be treated anonymously. Subsequent reflective discussion within the local social work team led to a collation of key themes which were presented to the Centrelink Network Operational Executive (Hall & Davie, 2009).

Given that staff spoke of having insufficient time, it is perhaps not surprising that a key theme for clients was 'more time to talk' when dealing with important issues. However, the focus of this desired time was somewhat different to what might have been underlying staff views. Staff tended to take the view that more time would allow for a focus on problems and appropriate referrals. Clients on the other hand, felt more time was linked to a sense of being shown respect and trust. Some clients wanted more time to have payment issues explained, but also to have their own circumstances listened to. This is consistent with Serr's (2006:80) findings that Centrelink clients who experienced difficulties associated with homelessness, wanted more 'responsive and caring' approaches from Centrelink.

Clients did not see themselves as 'challenging' but felt their 'payment problems' often unearthed sensitive issues. In this sense, a more positive engagement which acknowledged their strengths in coping with difficult circumstances was desired. Clients did not appear to be looking for dependent relationships with workers. In the words of one participant, they did not want 'special treatment all the time', but a recognition that they sometimes needed extra consideration. Centrelink was seen by clients as a point of contact when changes occurred because of the importance of stable income. It was seen as a place where one could 'just turn up'. It was in the words of one participant, 'neutral', as it was not associated with, for example, mental illness.

A lack of trust was an underlying issue which was encapsulated by one young person (to significant head nodding around the room) in the statement 'Centrelink keeps secrets'. There was for some clients an underlying sense of mistrust and some fears that payments, which were essential, might be held up. Mistrust was also evident within staff attitudes: it is worth noting that the notion of the 'difficult' and sometimes aggressive client was a theme which emerged with staff. To re-phrase Thomas Jefferson's famous words, there appeared to be elements of <u>both</u> a people's fear of government *and* a government fear of the people.

Talking with other agencies

Carson and Kerr (2005:172) argue for the importance of "informal networks" in community collaboration. In talking with community agencies in Logan, Centrelink had the benefit of having already established considerable informal relationships in Logan over the previous year through an Area focus on improving community connections.

A broad range of NGOs and other government agencies were consulted. In some cases, this involved discussions around how Centrelink might work better across the sector through participating in more coordinated planning. In others, it involved bilateral discussions around how to better work together between agencies. Representation on the governance committee of a Logan based, State government social inclusion pilot project created closer connections with a range of state government oriented agencies.

Agencies were hopeful that any new Centrelink approach would show more capacity to introduce flexibility on a case by case basis for vulnerable clients. Agency workers were keen to have clearer relationships with key Centrelink 'fixers' for particularly challenging

situations. One agency expressed a concern that Centrelink not provide 'just another co-ordinator' but that it make some tangible addition to the actual service system in Logan.

Initiating a new service approach: SaiL

A small team of staff made up of social workers and Senior Customer Service Advisors (SCSAs) were brought together to offer help to disconnected people who attend two Centrelink sites in Logan. Having operated now for almost two years, this team's focus is on people without significant connections in the community who are experiencing ongoing difficulties due to domestic violence, mental health issues or difficulties after transitioning from care. The intake process is voluntary and clients are often multiply disadvantaged (e.g. domestic violence <u>and</u> care history).

SCSAs focus primarily on developing positive relationships with clients around payments but also develop trust and in many cases connect clients immediately to services in the community where this is possible. In some instances clients develop a connection with SCSAs but are not looking for more intense support from the social worker. In such cases the social worker supports and advises the SCSAs. For some clients, getting help to access another service such as housing, transport or counselling is a solution, but for many people in complex situations, options are not available or are not what a client needs or wants. A key finding of SaiL has been that many clients do not want help around what might appear the most obvious servicing option. In this sense, the notion of risk categories, such as mental health or domestic violence, whilst underlying aspects of interaction where there have been concerns around immediate harm, have also to be put aside at times so they do not obscure a more complex understanding of the client's world.

SCSAs are coached by social workers and participate in reflective team discussions led by a senior social worker. The gradual and consistent development of SCSA skill through close proximity and open group conversations is a critical element of SaiL and would be a significant consideration in any mainstreaming or adoption of this approach elsewhere. It is also noteworthy that SCSAs in turn bring considerable life experience and other skills to team reflections and when given encouragement and scope to explore this, can enhance group learning as well.

A relational framework

The team operates within an overarching relational framework. It could be said that social work is an inherently relational activity, interested in relationships and connections between people. This was evident in some of social work's modern historical origins assisting people where social relations were fragmented by massive industrial and demographic changes at the end of the nineteenth century, but it has been less evident with the emergence of more individualising paradigms (Jordan, 2007; Murdach, 2007; Horowitz, 1998; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Over the last decade or so, the term 'relational' has become associated with social work approaches which foster a more mutual engagement in therapeutic (Zindel, 2001; Freedberg, 2007) and psychoanalytic settings (Ornstein & Ganzer, 2005), a more sophisticated approach to networking (Folgheraiter, 2004; Pozzuto, Arnd-Caddigan & Averett, 2009) and complex cross agency casework (Keene, 2001). Despite their disparate practice contexts, relational approaches share an interest in participatory, collaborative frameworks and emphasise the importance of understanding the client's relationship to the helper(s): how does a client relate to anticipated assistance and how does the service approach or available help influence

clients' choices? This differs from traditional helping approaches which, as Folgheraiter (2004) argues, tend to obscure the lively ways in which problems are constructed and how priorities are determined according to how services interact with and view clients. In this sense, a relational framework for helping involves recognising the role which clients and workers (or networks) play in developing outcomes interactively. This entails workers and clients developing a shared picture of complex social reality. Within the SaiL framework this has been operationalised in terms of a shared understanding of goals, strengths, needs and interests. Social workers within the team work with customers who choose to undertake a 'shared assessment' aimed at identifying and developing a shared understanding of resources and strengths. The shared assessment involves a strengths-based conversation (McCashen, 2005) and incorporates narrative and visual tools developed at a local level (Dalyell, 2008).

A peculiarity of SaiL is that it pursues a relational approach within an individual practice and a networking framework. Guiding networks towards a greater sense of openness to clients needs is a 'macro' task of relational social work in SaiL. Over time, via modelling, strengths work and increased trust developed in the 'micro' world of the shared assessment and in positive and secure relationships with SCSAs, clients also take charge of developing and negotiating their own connections. In this sense SaiL might be described as an interim connection which facilitates change at micro and macro levels. Clients move on from their relationship with SaiL after three to six months (often earlier), at a stage when most have made two to three other sustained connections.

In responding to clients, SaiL workers continually reflect on their own role and impact on clients, particularly how the structures and expectations of their institutional setting impact on the clients ability to relate. In the early stages of SaiL it was found that whilst clients often

'fail' to attend appointments they do often 'show up' at other times. Rather than interpret this as chaotic or dysfunctional behaviour, SaiL workers came to understand how clients were often managing well within complex circumstances, and that the agency needed to be more flexible around planning contacts which suit the circumstances of clients. Over time, SaiL workers have expressed the view that clients appreciate this consideration and reciprocate by being more respectful and understanding of the workers too.

Mutual understanding as anti-oppressive

This focus on mutual understanding involves elements of an anti-oppressive approach (Dominelli 2002). Such mutuality is not simply a personal or professional quality. The SaiL approach structures regular critical reflection sessions (for SCSAs and social workers), as well as regular feedback from clients. Strier and Binyamin (2010:1919) in articulating the nature of anti-oppressive services remark that "forging of a relationship based on trust and intimacy...[diminishes] the social isolation of clients and the professional isolation of workers". SaiL workers consistently report high levels of satisfaction in their work, despite dealing with many of the clients whom their colleagues have previously identified as 'difficult' and 'challenging'. In discussions with SaiL workers around this, they commonly relate experiences prior to SaiL where they experienced frustration with too rigid processes, yet were concerned that they not 'rock the boat' in trying to help people outside of those tight limits. Somewhat like Pirandello's hero Gori, struggling in frustration to help, yet embarrassed at tearing the formal attire which restrains his compassion (Pirandello, 1961).

Extra time and an alternative focus has in fact given workers the opportunity to create some mainstream service enhancements. For example, an official Centrelink booklet was co-produced with young care leavers to give advice to young people leaving care in Queensland

improving their understanding of options and pathways. The same client feedback process led

to the creation of new avenues to prove identity to make dealing with Centrelink and other

departments less complicated, as well as some new referral pathways with the Queensland

state government.

At a community level, SaiL has drawn together disparate strategic and operational players in

forums which have mingled people from diverse agencies including the Prime Minister's

Social Inclusion Unit, state and commonwealth government departments and local non

government organisations.

Client connections

A total of two hundred and twelve SaiL clients have been involved in shared assessments,

with approximately forty of these involved in SaiL at time of writing. Clients were all

multiply disadvantaged: reliant on income support; disconnected from other services in the

community and undergoing difficulties related to experiences of domestic violence, mental

health issues or histories of care. Workers reported that clients typically had little or no

supportive network. Figure 1 represents new connections which clients made and fed back to

SaiL workers as valuable. This data was collected as part of ongoing feedback and

consultation which SaiL workers regularly undertake. Outcomes in Figure 2 reflect client self

reporting of achievement and encompass both market inclusion (such as some paid work) as

well as more generic inclusion (such as voluntary work, education and personal development

activities).

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Insert Figures 1 & 2 here

Findings and discussion

> I can actually go out in society now and be not afraid to say what I think or how I feel ... ... I'm more
>
> positive and I'm more ... trusting.

<div style="text-align: right">SaiL client (Centrelink 2009)</div>

Feeling connected to community and having someone to turn to when there are serious

concerns in their lives are basic omissions for some people who deal with Centrelink (Grace,

Batterham & Cornell, 2008). A failure of Centrelink to engage at a meaningful level is often

not offset by care from another network player. Creating new connections can take time but

helping develop a client's trust and ability to participate can create benefits for the client and

the community.

Katy* had a history of anxiety and had been isolated from family and friends through past abuse and

ongoing domestic violence. She struggled to communicate her needs to service providers and had

been living in a tin shed for around a year. She was referred to the social worker in SaiL after a

discussion around her Centrelink payments. The social worker worked with Katy around her previous

experiences of accessing help and her current options. The shared planning process explored Katy's

priorities, mapping strengths and resources and encouraging her in areas where she could develop a

sense of achievement. The social worker assisted Katy to access more suitable housing and Katy

sought and accessed other personal support for herself and chose to participate in some community

activities. Katy has since started significant volunteer work helping people experiencing serious

illness.

Closer relationships between Centrelink staff and other agencies have enabled workers to

constructively resolve problems that participants have experienced in sustaining connections

(Centrelink, 2009a). This has also occurred directly through SaiL supporting and strengthening the skills and confidence of clients to clarify their needs and concerns.

Dianne had been extremely isolated for a number of years and had significant physical and mental health issues. She rarely left her house, used a wheelchair and had disengaged from support services. She had only one social contact, an elderly lady who was quite frail herself. Dianne showed an interest in meeting the SaiL social worker during a contact around the Disability Support Pension. Subsequent meetings with the social worker occurred at Centrelink and also at Dianne's home. These focussed on increasing Dianne's supportive network as well as developing her interest in community activities. Dianne reported that building her sense of clarity and confidence around what she could do well was particularly helpful. As Dianne developed confidence she began to advocate for and access support of her own accord. Dianne re-engaged with mental health counselling and became involved with a consumer feedback group. She has since gone on to undertake administrative work for a local charity.

When an institution has expectations around limiting or speeding up transactions (Garrett 2003), there is a tendency to focus on "risk", dysfunction and control (Webb, 2006). The challenge in this is that vulnerable people can themselves be seen as 'risky', the bearers of individualised problems (Pollack, 2010) with limited capacity to determine their own directions. Dianne, for example, was described within the Disability Support Pension framework as as having 'very limited capacity'. If services become geared to managing clients rather than looking at more flexible options or exploring the client's own perceptions (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White & Pithouse, 2010; Harris, 2003) opportunities to activate a clients own potential are missed. When clients are given more appropriate opportunities, (which often involves some flexibility on behalf of service providers), their strengths appear more evident. Positive SaiL experiences with clients previously labelled as 'challenging'

suggest that even client histories of resistance, rebellion or avoidance can indicate strengths, but that these are not recognised until a degree of organisational flexibility is exercised (Guo & Tsui, 2010, Garcia & McDowell 2010).

Wayne, a young man in receipt of Youth Allowance, had experienced mental health issues including depression. He reported very low self esteem and had limited supportive networks. He was no longer in school, having left after experiencing trauma there. Wayne found it difficult not to think negatively given his experiences. In thinking about accessing education courses and voluntary programs he tended to become stuck looking at barriers and what he was not able to do.

Wayne made a strong connection with the SaiL SCSA who initially assisted him by fixing problems around his payments which would have resulted in significant hardship for Wayne. The SCSA helped Wayne construct an alternative plan which met his Centrelink requirements but acknowledged Wayne's individual circumstances. Based on the trust established, Wayne kept in touch with the SCSA over several weeks. The social worker did not work directly with Wayne, but gave advice and support to the SCSA.

Utilising his connection to Wayne, the SCSA was able to pursue several conversations with Wayne around goals and interests and what might be useful in overcoming obstacles which Wayne encountered. In spite of past experiences, Wayne revealed a strong commitment to complete his final years of high school and was hopeful of doing work experience or voluntary work. After several contacts with the SCSA , Wayne did connect to an alternative education provider where he could complete schooland to a local Youth Organisation for other support. Wayne also investigated one of the programs he had previously thought he was not eligible for and negotiated support from another agency so that he could participate in that program.

It is important to engage with clients around issues *they* value. These often include work and training interests but not exclusively. Including broader interests can help develop other networks and connections which sometimes (ironically) lead to work or training. SaiL is not oriented towards employment outcomes and indications in Figure 2 should not be read in a 'linear' sense (Poulter, 2006:332), but as outcomes which have developed with the client. They show that connections to paid employment or education occurred for a significant set of SaiL clients 'along the way'. Jones (2001:547) has argued that the UK focus on social exclusion was unbalanced by a 'fixation with waged work'. The idea of work as 'one fundamental value' (Sawyer, 2000) has tended to be influential in Australia as well. However, the Social Inclusion focus in Australia, whilst giving central importance to paid employment, provides scope for other activities which ought to be encouraged (Social Inclusion Unit, 2009). Many connections fostered through SaiL have been personal or family connections, (as figure 1 shows), which have broad supportive value. Focussing on what *works* for the client has been the primary aim.

Centrelink's access to vulnerable people underpinned the basis for improvements in service within SaiL. It is also the case that some vulnerable people struggle to access Centrelink. Some very marginalised people live with the wrong or insufficient payment and sometimes without assistance. This has been the impetus behind the Community Support Unit in Newcastle. The CSU aims to work more in the client's world. Working within the milieu of the client is not only practical, in terms of accessing people who might not readily approach Centrelink, but it also helps break down stereotypes and norms for workers which leave "out large chunks of human reality" (Baumann 1998:84). It is, in the words of one worker, a 'reality check'.

Established as an out-servicing payment team around homelessness, this service has more recently included a greater involvement by social workers to assist people within their own milieu. As in Logan, customer service and social work staff work together, with the social work role more focussed on supporting the client to meet their needs within a broader helping network. This networking role can involve internal guidance within Centrelink where there are complexities around the client's connection to payments, or interim support in the community until a client connects more adequately elsewhere. Usually it involves a mix of these two factors. The following case example demonstrates this overlap.

Sally, who received a disability pension, was initially seen by CSU workers at a local shelter. They became aware that her payments were reducing due to a debt of several thousand dollars. The CSU customer service advisor was concerned about the correctness of this debt based on Sally's circumstances. He was also concerned at the impact it might have on her well-being. Given complexities around pursuing these issues with Sally, including past domestic violence, she was connected to the CSU social worker who arranged to meet with Sally at the shelter.

The social work involvement was undertaken as much as possible on Sally's terms, with Sally inviting along a worker from the shelter. The trust established in this meeting facilitated the social worker maintaining contact with Sally over several weeks, even though Sally disengaged from the shelter.

Throughout these contacts the social worker developed some understanding of Sally's life-world. This was crucial in establishing a debt waiver and it also helped identify a number of areas Sally wanted to address besides the debt. She wanted to develop further living skills as in her previous relationship she was not allowed to cook or manage money and had felt isolated.

Over several weeks the social worker was able to link Sally with a service providing social activities and to a life skills program. Sally's somewhat loose connection with a psychologist was recognised by Sally as something to be maintained more regularly. This connection also became useful as supporting evidence for a

debt waiver. The social worker stepped back from involvement with Sally several weeks later after checking that Sally was happy with and sustaining her alternative connections.

In Sally's case, the CSU assisted her with and beyond income support processes through adopting a relational approach which helped her develop some aspects of her own helping network, oriented around her own goals. As with SaiL, there were elements of micro and macro practice. The social work contact around the debt helped Sally to explore her unique experience in a way which drew in other network players, explored other needs and in turn helped resolve the more specific payment problem. In this way the process of more mutual engagement had clear mutual benefits, as Sally's needs and Centrelink needs around payment accuracy aligned.

Implications for practice

The approaches discussed in this paper have demonstrated alternative organisational possibilities within the limits of local environments with strong management support.

High levels of ongoing staff development, training and coaching are crucial for the pursuit of such complex interactions. The use of social workers already within the organisation has supported this process and enhanced the likelihood of transferring learnings to other parts of Centrelink.

Workers have functioned without any special rules or delegations, using provisions available within mainstream policy and legislation. When something has simply not been possible for a client due to legislation or policy, there is no special discretion for workers to apply. Workers have no brokerage money or special funds, but are able to spend time with clients sharing

information more clearly and sensitively. This leads to less misunderstandings on both sides as well as allowing for unanticipated solutions to emerge. Within the CSU this time commitment has been factored into local service funding arrangements, whereas SaiL has drawn on project funding to extend service within a highly disadvantaged area.

Allowing workers more time with clients is a key organisational challenge. Relational approaches require personal interactions and are not simplistically 'efficient' in the push-button sense. On the other hand, a lack of insight into client perspectives creates unrecognised organisational costs. The story of clients becoming enmeshed in repetitive transactional processes and of their relationships with institutions becoming increasingly confrontational or ending in an abrupt disconnection is a story of costly inefficiency. Clients' 'cycling through', disengaging from services or not connecting at all creates negative outcomes including service recovery costs and impacts on worker well-being which tend not to be measured. Additionally, the ripples of positive contributions which seemingly 'challenging' clients can foster for themselves and their community are worthy of more attention.

Experiences from SaiL and the CSU undermine the traditional view of helping as a one sided affair in which the costs are borne by the institution and the benefits reaped by the client. They suggest that developing a shared, relationally oriented framework with clients may be a mutually beneficial process which improves staff skills and knowledge and increases organisational capacity. The appeal of such increased capacity to organisational leaders and managers provides cause for optimism around developing relational approaches in the face of other managerial and punitive trends described earlier in this paper.

Conclusion

> A concern for justice in a community should be, in critical part, a concern that its institutions enable and encourage us always to see, and in seeing to be responsive to the full humanity in each of our fellow human beings.
>
> Raymond Gaita (1999:84)

De-humanising and alienating tendencies within welfare provision are a source of tension for social workers. This tension is sometimes understood in terms of social work needing to defend its professional capacity for discretion. The authors have considered instead how social workers can influence service approaches to value the needs, connections and lived context of vulnerable people. In this space, the role of social work may be twofold: to mitigate the exclusionary tendencies which vulnerable people encounter in their lives, but also to influence their own institutional practices to account for the full humanity of people. The challenge in this is how social workers relate to, guide and support non social work staff, managers and service leaders so that the institutional service experience is more closely grounded in the client's world.

This paper has demonstrated how social workers have helped develop relational qualities in service provision with reference to two localised Centrelink environments. Within these environments a richer, more flexible process has emerged which has allowed marginalised clients to overcome mistrust, develop unanticipated strengths and connections and to represent their own needs as distinct from apparent risks.

Social work can participate more fully within future service delivery discourse through further research into relational approaches. This could consider impacts on the development of non social work staff skill, knowledge and attitudes, as well as a longitudinal

understanding of impacts on clients and community of different service approaches.
Understanding the complexity of social reality may help towards creating better, more
inclusionary practices.

> We realize, too, that social perspective and sanity of judgment come only from contact with social
> experience ...

<div align="right">Jane Addams (1902:7)</div>

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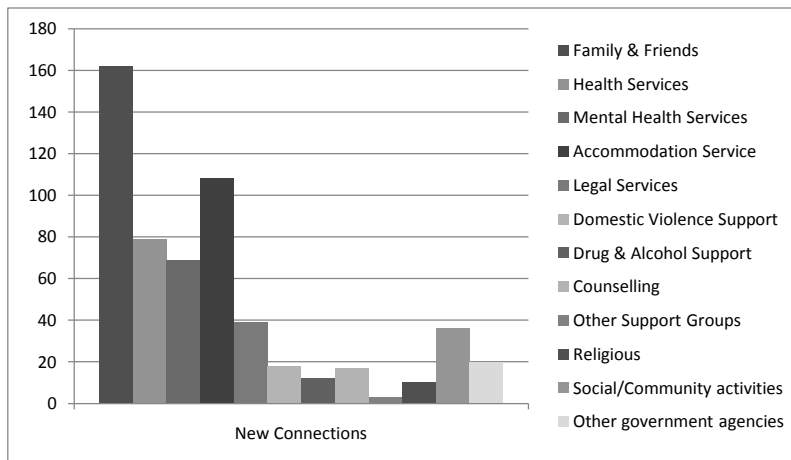**Figures 1 & 2**

Figure 1: New connections sustained by SaiL clients

Figure 2: Work, Education & Training outcomes by SaiL clients

Source: Sail Database, October 2010, Centrelink, Woodridge.