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Larry Dan Watson ^a & Rebecca L. Hegar ^a

^a School of Social Work , University of Texas at Arlington , Arlington , Texas , USA

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The Tri-Sector Environment of Social Work Administration: Applying Theoretical Orientations

Larry Dan Watson and Rebecca L. Hegar

School of Social Work, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, USA

This article presents a framework integrating theoretical concepts and reform movements that shape the contemporary environment of social work administration. The framework incorporates several major environmental forces including issues of authority, market exchange and community cooperation, and new public management influences promoting market-based management, privatization, and downsized government.

Keywords: framework, governance, NPM, sectors, theoretical

INTRODUCTION

Social work administrators practice in every sector of society. Whether working in a nonprofit agency, a governmental program, a for-profit enterprise, or a hybrid organization, social work administrators function in highly developed, networked environments where the lines of the governmental, business, and nonprofit sectors cross. The effective administrator must possess skills in mediating, reconciling, and influencing the expectations of multiple external constituencies and have the skills not only to direct an agency, but also to manage the complex environmental context in which the organization exists (Patti, 2000; Schmid, 2004).

A framework developed by the first author has been used previously to examine the unique role of the nonprofit sector within the context of a theory of governance (Watson, 2006). This article expands and refines that framework to demonstrate the model's utility to aid social work administrators in understanding the theoretical concepts and reform movements that shape the environment of contemporary social work administration. Social work administrators are well positioned to provide leadership in each of the three sectors in which their agencies and programs deliver social services.

NONPROFIT, GOVERNMENT, AND BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS

The relationships between the nonprofit, government, and business sectors are complicated, multi-dimensional, and fluid. Unfortunately, popular stereotypes of the sectors can disguise the complex

nature of their inter-relationships (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2002). The public often views governments as monolithic, bloated bureaucracies in need of an injection of the types of business practices and market solutions preferred by the for-profit sector. Although many see practices such as downsizing as the most effective ways to allocate resources and provide cost-effective solutions, the business sector simultaneously may be viewed as uncaring, or as more concerned with enriching private interests than with promoting societal good. According to Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff (2002), the public image of nonprofits involves being value-driven, softer, kind hearted, and being able to mobilize voluntary efforts. A more balanced assessment reveals the many connections and linkages among the sectors and examines both their differences and interrelationships.

Scholars have demonstrated growing research interest in the ties and relationships linking government, the private sector, and the nonprofit sector, including the emergence of hybrid organizations. This article examines several forces that have reshaped social work administration and presents a framework to illustrate and explain the dynamic forces impacting administrators in each of the three sectors. The framework not only illuminates the structural realities of contemporary administrative practice in social work, but also highlights opportunities to strengthen democratic administration by recognizing characteristics unique to social work, including the profession's historical emphasis on relationship building, use of authority, and professional values.

THEORIES OF GOVERNMENT/NONPROFIT RELATIONS

Much of the theoretical literature on government/nonprofit relations concerns political ideology, the proper role of government, preferences for free-market approaches, and values of fairness, equity, and equality. Smith and Gronbjerg (2006) examine theories of inter-sectoral relationships falling into three broad categories: demand and supply perspectives, civil society and social movements, and regime and neo-institutional perspectives. Each theoretical perspective is examined below.

Demand and supply perspectives, based on rational choice theory, view government/nonprofit relationships as being structured around market forces governing distribution of economic goods and services. From this perspective, nonprofits develop market niches in response to demands that cannot be met by private firms or by government. In a transaction approach, government and nonprofits engage in exchanges through formal contracts to produce needed goods and services.

While demand and supply models are primarily concerned with issues of market exchange, civil-society/social-capital perspectives view the nonprofit sector as embodying values crucial to democratic society (Smith & Gronbjerg, 2006). This civil-society perspective envisions associations, informal voluntary activities, and civic participation as separate from the state and the market (Walzer, 1992).

The regime and neo-institutional perspectives examine structures and roles of state actors that explain cross-national differences in levels of social spending, size of the nonprofit sector, and effectiveness of services provided by nonprofit organizations. Within the broader perspectives on the role of nonprofits in civil society, Salomon and Anheier (1998) emphasize social origins, contending that the nonprofit sector of any country must be understood as an integral part of the historical development of political institutions shaped by social class.

The neo-institutional model focuses on how the institutional environment shapes the nonprofit sector. For example, Skocpol (1999) asserts that voluntary associations thrive in tandem with active government and that government support is critical to the growth of that sector. The institutional perspective holds that the proliferation of nonprofit organizations is the result of political, legal, and institutional environments (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000).

Ryan, Furneaux, and Lewis (2006) identify three typologies relevant to their research on partnerships among government, business, and nonprofit sectors. The first, Coston's (1998) model, builds on the work of Salamon (1987) in conceptualizing the relationship between government

and nonprofit agencies as a continuum, with one extreme being repression and rivalry, the middle of the continuum indicating completion and contracting, and the other extreme being third-party government, cooperation, and complementarity (Ryan, Furneux, & Lewis, 2006).

Young (1998) uses exchange as the basis for exploring the relationships between government and nonprofits. He observes that these relations in the United States are not one-dimensional, but complex, and that they must be viewed on multiple levels. In his view, economic theories support three views of government/nonprofit relationships: supplementary, complementary, and adversarial. In the supplementary model, nonprofits are seen as fulfilling demand for public goods left unsatisfied by government, while in the complementary view nonprofits are partners to government, helping to deliver public goods largely financed by government.

From Young's adversarial view, nonprofits prod government into making changes in public policy and into maintaining accountability to the public. Reciprocally, government attempts to influence the behavior of nonprofit organizations by regulating their services and responding to their advocacy initiatives (Young, 1998, p. 33). Much of the literature of government/nonprofit relationships takes its perspective from either the governmental or nonprofit standpoint. Young (1998) is one of few who looks at both sides of the equation and acknowledges that relationships are reciprocally based on decisions made by both governmental and nonprofit administrators (Najam, 2000).

THE FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework (Watson, Rycraft, & Hernandez, 2006) originally developed to demonstrate the role of the nonprofit sector in theory development integrates several of the major forces that have shaped social work management over the past 30 years and that continue to impact both seasoned and new social work administrators. Contingency theory identifies the task of the administrator as creating the right "fit" between circumstances in the environment and the internal structure of the organization as a strategy to promote effectiveness and efficiency. It uses an open systems perspective as opposed to the closed system view of the bureaucratic or rational approach. In contingency theory, the structure of an organization is variable and contingent on the characteristics of the organization's environment, including environmental heterogeneity and stability, technological certainty, organizational size, and power (Mintzberg, 1979). An important dimension of managing within a network environment is an understanding of both the internal and external politics at work in such environments (Agranoff & McGuire, 1999).

This framework gives the social work administrator a conceptual model for the many forces that shape the environment in which a social services agency must function. From this perspective, the administrator can evaluate structural and political forces as they seek the "best fit" for their organization while maintaining a commitment to democratic ideals.

Traditionally, the public, private, and nonprofit sectors have been viewed as distinct entities with clearly defined functions. The private or business sector is driven primarily by market forces surrounding the exchange of goods and services. The public or governmental sector is built on the foundation of authority, as only government can tax or exercise police powers of enforcement. The nonprofit sector can be viewed as a mechanism for cooperation through which government and business intersect and foster the cooperation of local communities to achieve public purposes (Swanstrom, 1997). Within the framework, the three sectors are depicted as independent but intersecting circles (Watson, 2007).

Sector Tasks

Savas (1987) identified strengths of each of the three sectors, and Osborne and Gaebler (1993) built on Savas' work to propose a separate set of tasks or operations for which each sector is suited.



FIGURE 1 Tasks in the three sectors.

They propose that policy management and regulation are tasks best suited to the public sector. Additionally, they view enforcement of equity, prevention of discrimination, prevention of exploitation, and promotion of social cohesion as tasks best suited for the public sector. In the private sector, the operations identified are economic tasks, investment tasks, profit generation, and promotion of self-sufficiency. Finally, Osborne and Gaebler (1993) propose that the nonprofit sector is best suited to perform social tasks, those requiring volunteer labor, and operations that generate little profit. The promotion of community, individual responsibility, and commitment to the welfare of others are all seen as tasks appropriate for the nonprofit sector (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). The tasks or operations presented do not represent an exhaustive list, and arguments can be made concerning their respective assignment to each sector, but the value of this approach is that it begins the work of determining the appropriateness of allocating each task to one of the three sectors (Watson, 2007). None of the tasks can be viewed as exclusive to one sector or another. The use of contracting to deliver public services has resulted in greater “blending” of tasks across sectoral lines. The primary placement of the tasks in the three sectors is illustrated in Figure 1.

New Public Management

As the role of government has changed over the past 30 years, a cluster of reform initiatives known collectively as new public management (NPM) has been a force driving many of the changes. As a part of these reform initiatives, numerous traditional government functions have shifted to the private and nonprofit sectors (Kettl, 2000). Frederickson and Smith (2003) identify common elements in the various forms of this movement as, “1) adoption of market-based management and resource allocation techniques, 2) increased reliance on private sector organizations to deliver public services, and 3) a deliberate and sustained effort to downsize the decentralized government’s role as the central policy actor in society” (p. 208).

The advent of market-based management brings the values and techniques of the private sector into the public and nonprofit sectors by introducing competition into the marketplace for social

services. The NPM goal of downsizing and decentralizing the government's role has been accomplished by shifting many functions to either the private or the nonprofit sectors. This trend has been highly controversial, both in the United States and in Europe, where observers in countries such as Sweden characterize NPM as an undesirable turning away from universal, public-sector responsibility for social welfare (e.g., Blomberg & Petersson, 2010; Höjer & Forkby, 2011).

Governance Theory

Many administrative theories are based on concepts of cooperation, networking, and governance (Frederickson, 1999). In some instances the term *governance* is used interchangeably with public management (Garvey 1992; Kettl, 2000; Peters & Pierre, 1998; Salamon, 1989). Frederickson and Smith propose governance theory as one "that accounts for lateral relations, inter-institutional relations, the decline of sovereignty, the diminishing importance of jurisdictional borders, and a general institutional fragmentation" (2003, p. 222). They propose a theory of administrative conjunction, defined as "the array and character of horizontal formal and informal association between actors representing units in a networked public (including the nonprofit sector) and the administrative behavior of those actors" (Frederickson & Smith, 2003, p. 223). Administrative conjunction conceptualizes professionals, including social work administrators, as performing diplomatic functions across jurisdictional lines to accomplish public purposes where an administrator's claim to authority comes not from a hierarchical position, but rather from knowledge and ability to work within a network. The connections between administrators develop around specific policy domains and, by establishing relationships in networks, administrators are linked across jurisdictional and sector lines (Frederickson & Smith, 2003). The administrator's task becomes the management of network relationships. A key concept in network theory is that participants retain their individual characteristics while moving from competitive to cooperative relationships (Salamon, 2002).

Frahm and Martin (2009) conceptualize changes affecting the three sectors as moving from a "government" paradigm to a "governance" paradigm. In their view, this new paradigm has emerged from the policy debates of the 1980s and 1990s that revolved around preference for either the government paradigm or the market paradigm (Frederickson & Smith, 2003; Kettl, 2000; Osborn & Gaebler, 1993). From the dichotomous government vs. market debate, the new "governance" paradigm has emerged (Agranoff, 2003; Salamon, 2002; Frederickson & Smith, 2003). Governance suggests the possibility of transcending old dichotomies to build on the relationship between government and the governed. From the governance perspective, solutions to social problems will be found at the intersection of all disciplines and all sectors—governmental, nonprofit, for-profit, faith-based, and others (Johansson, 2004)—a perspective consistent with the emergence of hybrid organizations, as discussed in a later section.

In the framework presented in this article, social work administrators from the nonprofit, private, and public sectors are centered at the intersection of the three sectors, represented by a small circle at the midpoint of the graphic model. This placement illustrates the position from which administrators work across sector lines and play an important role in governance. From this position, social work administrators not only advance the mission of their agencies, but they also become participants in governance and in the promotion of democratic administration (see Figure 2).

HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

In some human service fields such as foster care of children, nonprofits, for-profits, and government, institutions all provide similar services. Handy (1997) contends that each sector attracts a share of the market because consumers (or funders) are willing to trade perceived quality in one sector for anticipated efficiency and lower costs in another. Handy (1997) goes on to suggest this tradeoff as

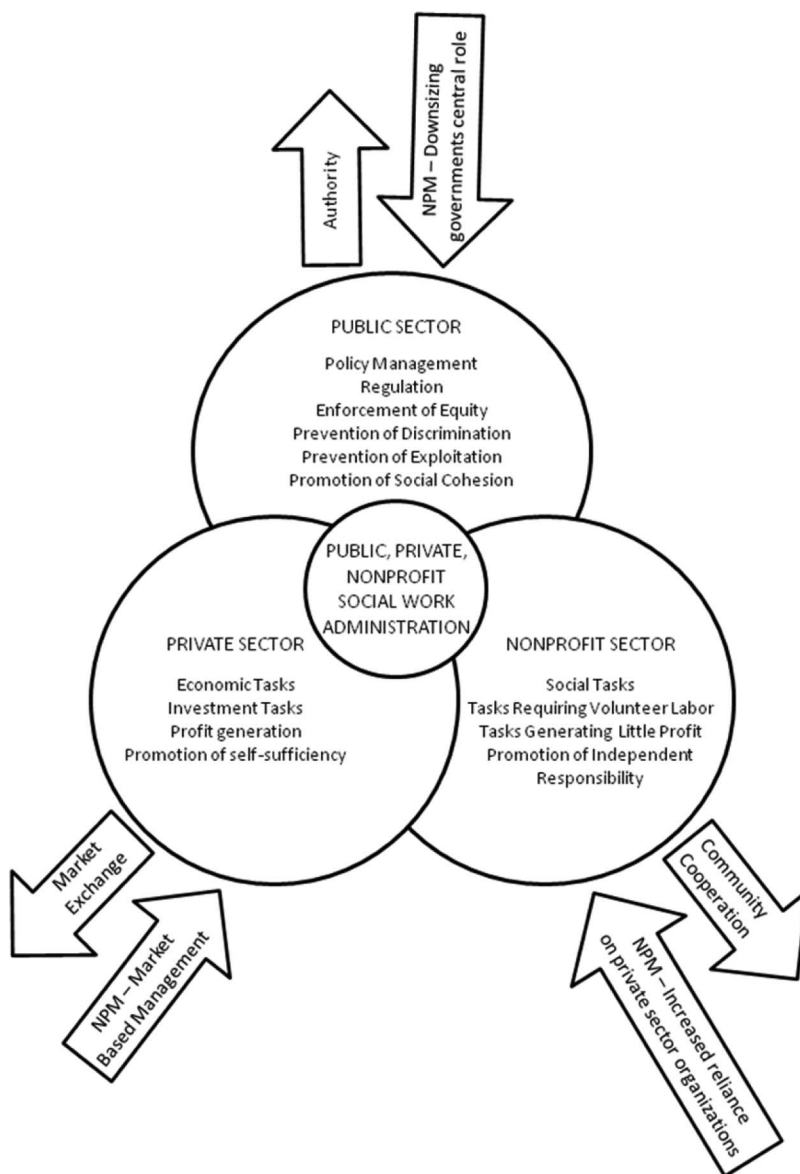


FIGURE 2 The tri-sector model.

the reason that organizations from each of the three sectors can co-exist in the same industry, a reality that has led many agencies to seek alternative organizational structures.

Traditionally, private organizations in the United States are divided into for-profit and nonprofit groups. In seeking new organizational forms, administrators operating between the two categories have used creative partnerships, subsidiaries, or joint ventures to accomplish their goals (Gottesman, 2007). The desire to function between the for-profit and nonprofit sectors also has led to new organizational forms: hybrid organizations. These organizations are not classified as subsidiaries or partnerships but instead represent new organizational types that function at the intersection of the traditional nonprofit and for-profit sectors (Gottesman 2007).

Hasenfeld and Gidron (2005) list several fields of service that have developed hybrid organizations. These include some racial, ethnic, and gender-based organizations (Minkoff, 1995), religious charitable organizations (Allahyari, 2000), women's nonprofit organizations (Bordt, 1998), peace and conflict resolution organizations (Gidron et al., 2002), and social influence organizations (Knoke & Wood, 1981).

Social work administrators may discover that the traditional for-profit/nonprofit dichotomy has less relevance in today's environment than it did in the past. The overlapping circles in the model represent the blurring of boundaries between the sectors and the emergence of hybrid organizational forms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Frahm and Martin (2009) suggest that social work administrators may be uniquely positioned to play a key role in society's shift to a governance paradigm. The framework presented here demonstrates the central role that social workers can play in developing new administrative models of practice. Relying on foundations of social work practice, recognizing the forces at work in the current environment, and utilizing the best management skills are the challenge for today's social work administrators.

Hoefer (2009) identified 37 skills, attitudes, and elements of knowledge needed for human service administration and used several groups of professionals to place these into four categories: people skills, attitudes and experiences, substantive knowledge, and management skills. His pool of raters included human services administrators and later social work educators, government program managers, and educators in public administration. For respondents at all levels, "people skills" were the most important and "management" skills were the least important (Hoefer, 2009). While it is important for social work administrators to have the management skills necessary to compete and be technically competent, these competencies are not a substitute for the interpersonal skills and core values of the social work profession.

Denhardt (2004) combines democratic administrative concepts with NPM techniques and calls for an alternative to new public management in the form of "new public services." Denhardt and Denhardt (2000, 2007) advise public administrators not to define their role or gauge their actions solely on the business values and market-based approaches of new public management, but rather to base practice on democratic governance principles such as citizenship, community, and participation in decision making.

Social work administrators must also find the balance between market-driven new public management concepts and foundational social work principles such as social justice. Efficiency and effectiveness are not enough. They must be coupled with principles of participation, trust, fairness, honesty, and reciprocity. The model presented here highlights several tasks that demand the attention of social work administrators: building relationships, understanding the forces influencing each sector, adopting management ideas that work, and focusing on issues of social justice. Sections below elaborate on each of these.

Building Relationships

The model framework places social work administrators at the intersection of the three sectors to emphasize the importance of their role in building relationships across the sectors. Social work administration is about forming relationships with funding sources, regulatory agencies, the general public, boards and commissions, referral sources, staff, clients, and all other stakeholder groups related to the organization. *Relationship* is a term of great historical significance in social work (Johnson & Yanka, 2010). While it is often used with reference to the social worker/client dyad, it is

of equal importance in administrative practice. Perlman (1979) describes relationship as “a catalyst, an enabling dynamism in the support, nurture, and freeing of people’s energies and motivation toward problem solving and the use of help” (p. 2). This definition describes well the administrative task illustrated in this model.

The importance of administrative relationships is documented in a study of 37 companies from 11 parts of the world in which Kanter (1994) found that relationships between companies grow or fail, much like relationships between people. She reports that when an organizational relationship was built on creating new value together, rather than on a mere exchange arrangement, both partners considered their alliance a success. True partners valued the skills that each brought to the relationship. Social work administrators understand intuitively the importance of relationships. It is key to their professional identity.

Understanding the Forces Influencing Each Sector

The framework presented here provides social work administrators with a graphic representation of the forces being exerted on human service organizations. The outward forces are those that make each sector unique. For example, the public sector is based on the authority of the state. Some social work functions require authority for the prevention of discrimination and exploitation, such as protection of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. Authority also is required for the enforcement of regulations that protect vulnerable populations and set standards of care for the provision of services.

Like relationship, authority is a construct with longstanding salience in social work. Deschweintz and others elaborated for the profession what it means to use in disciplined and conscious ways the authority inherent in many public sector roles to help recipients of services (Deschweintz & Deschweintz, 1946; Yelaja, 1965). The professional obligation and tool of authority is not limited to direct services; it applies equally well to interorganizational relationships in which one party carries statutory responsibilities. Social work administrators who are well grounded in the meaning and use of authority are particularly well prepared to work at the intersection of the three sectors, where one of the forces at work is the authority vested in the public sector.

Market exchange is the defining force of the private or business sector. Whether in private practice or in a for-profit company, social work administrators can balance the need to generate profit with the obligations of equity and fairness. The key element in the nonprofit sector is the force of community cooperation. It is in the nonprofit setting that social work administrators engage the community, encourage cooperation between the sectors, and build community strengths. Like boards of directors of nonprofit agencies, social work administrators are trustees holding “in trust” the organizations that in reality belong to the larger community.

Adopt Management Ideas That Work

Earlier research by the Watson (2012) reports that social service administrators have to a large extent embraced many core elements of the various organizational reform movements discussed above. Most of the agency administrators (70.3%) agreed that the private (business) sector is more efficient and effective than government, and that the nonprofit sector should adopt market-based management and resource allocation techniques. They further agreed with statements that the government should rely more on the business and nonprofit sectors to deliver public services, and that government should be downsized and decentralized. There was high agreement with the idea that business practices should be employed to reduce costs.

Social work administrators practice in an environment of accountability and evidence-based practice, and should evaluate and implement management practices that further the mission of the organization. If NPM concepts are found to be effective, they can be incorporated into administrative

practice. However, as noted above, social workers in some European countries are quite skeptical about the benefits for the public sector of NPM and related trends (e.g., Blomberg & Petersson, 2010; Höjer & Forkby, 2011; Saxonberg, & Sirovátka, 2009). Other scholars caution that service providers, both public and private, can become competitive entrepreneurs at the expense of the values of fairness, social justice, participation, collective responsibility, and community (Vigoda, 2002; Hasenfeld, 2009).

Many scholars take issue with the tenets of new public management approaches, but even the harshest critics concede that there are parts of the model that hold promise. Even though NPM seldom reduces costs, it has produced numerous innovative ways to accomplish public or collective purposes. Frederickson and Smith (2003) examine the theoretical underpinnings of NPM and conclude that NPM is very influential in administrative literature and can be understood as an acceptable doctrine of management. Wamsley and Wolf (1996) posit that NPM has done much good, and few would wish to detract from its accomplishments. Others contend that, while NPM principles can result in selective and short-run increases in efficiency, NPM is silent on issues of fairness, equity, or justice (Frederickson and Smith, 2003). It is in this arena that social work administrators can make a great contribution to the use of NPM practices, which with their leadership need not exclude attention to issues of social justice.

Some have criticized social work's move toward evidence-based practice as little more than a hidden managerialist agenda (e.g., Pease, 2007). Most social work administrators would agree that there is the need to strive constantly for improved efficiency and effectiveness. However, social work administrators need not abandon their core values in favor of a managerial approach based solely on an instrumental, de-politicized, and competence-based approach (Houston, 2001).

Focus on Issues of Social Justice and Inclusion

Regardless of the sectoral setting or the management approach, social work administrators are well situated to focus their practice on issues of social justice and democratic participation. As with the unique social work perspectives on use of relationship and authority discussed above, social justice is a value for which social work administrators are prepared by their profession. The NASW Code of Ethics includes social justice among the "core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history," that form "the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Social work authors Dolgoff, Lowenberg, and Harrington (2005) offer an ethical principles screen to guide professional decision making in which the value of "fair and equal treatment" is superseded only by basic human survival needs. Administrators with social work backgrounds bring these and other core professional values to their work within and between the three sectors.

Contracting arrangements, hybrid organizations, and other alliances across sectors offer new opportunities to strengthen professional values and democratic principles by developing service networks based on participation, trust, fairness, honesty, and reciprocity. Relationships are key to deepening and strengthening democratic participation and administration based on such social justice concepts (Wamsley & Wolfe, 1996). For the social work administrator, entering into contract arrangements also means accepting specific performance requirements that may have no emphasis on issues of social justice, such as equitable access to services. It is therefore critical that social work administrators advocate for social justice in contract negotiations, in policy advocacy, and in their administrative practice.

While much of NPM focuses on the roles of service providers, the civil society perspective emphasizes citizen participation and community building (Anheier, 2011). Social work administrators can balance the aspects of their practice that emphasize provision of services with those that work to strengthen the fabric of our society by promoting policy and practice based on "fair and equal treatment."

CONCLUSIONS

The theoretic framework presented here is based on the contemporary environments in which social work administrators practice. Theory represented in the model addresses only the environmental aspects of organizations and does not attempt to incorporate aspects of theory concerned with internal dynamics. The framework examines management theory as well as the reform movements that have impacted social work administrative practice. It is important for social work administrators to recognize the forces that have pushed the three sectors in which they practice closer together, as well as the historical and economic forces that keep them separate and distinct.

As social work administrators engage in practice at the intersection of the three sectors, including new hybrid organizational forms, they are in a position to apply and advance concepts that are the bedrock of the profession: relationships based on understanding, trust, and respect; disciplined use of professional authority; and the values of equity and justice. Through application of these concepts in work across the three sectors, social work administrators can demonstrate that market-oriented values such as efficiency and effectiveness are not enough for democratic administration. The challenge for social work administrators is to embrace the elements of theory and practice that promote efficiency and effectiveness while holding fast to concepts and ideals fundamental to social work practice. Social work administrators are uniquely positioned to develop critical relationships across sectoral lines in order to accomplish the purposes of their organizations in the context of democratic society.

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