



The Ecology of Social Administration

This book introduces the study and practice of social administration, which we believe deserves to be recognized as one of the distinctive major subdisciplines of the social work profession, along with social casework and groupwork (the so-called direct practices), social work research, and community practice. The three chapters in this introductory unit lay the groundwork for an understanding of the important role of administration for social work practice in social agencies. Social administration as presented here is not simply management, as conventionally conceived. It also encompasses leadership, critical decision making, and institution building in communities and social agencies.

Throughout this book, we discuss this broad conception of social administration and set it squarely within the context of the profession of social work and the social services. The broad approach taken in this book is in marked contrast to most introductory social work methods texts. These typically locate the core of social work practice in the “direct” practice methods and treat social administration as an “indirect” or supportive method, of interest primarily for its role in enabling the practice of real social work or direct practice.¹ Our conception is that social administration is social work equally as much as the other forms or modes of practice.

In making this distinction, we wish to call attention to a genuine division within the practice of social work that is currently not well reflected in the professional literature. We believe it is a more accurate reflection of the realities of contemporary agency-based practice to cast social administration and social administrators in a unique historic and contemporary role of leadership and institution building both in the profession and in social services, including advocacy and legislative policy change. Administrative leaders are involved in most of the major decisions affecting the role, scope, and direction of both the social work profession and the social services. Moreover, social administrators are also the primary agents who have taken upon themselves responsibility for building strong, stable, and effective social service programs. Social work students need to understand that delivery of services to clients is not an act done in isolation. Management, leadership, decision-making, and institution-building tasks of social administration are integral components of modern social service delivery. Without them, professional direct services simply would not happen.

In chapters 2, 3, and 4, we explore specific aspects of the social environment of social service practice as they are experienced in social administration practice. Community, organization, and social agency are just three of the many important social environments that affect social administration. They are, however, among the most important. In chapter 2, we examine selected comments from the vast literature on communities to explore the critically important place of community in contemporary social services and the role of social work administration in the community. As we approach the topic, community is important because it is the primary locus of stakeholders who care about and influence the social agency. In an age of social policy devolution, community has again become the primary locus within which the personal troubles of clients are defined as social problems and attract the attention of service agencies.

In chapter 3, we focus on the concept of the social agency and examine the range of public, commercial, and nonprofit social agencies. We also explore questions of incorporation, tax exemption, and other related issues. In doing so, we seek to restore to a place of prominence in social work practice the earlier perspectives on the centrality of the social agency as the central institution for organizing the delivery of social services in the community.

In chapter 4, we build upon this agency perspective and focus selectively on a number of perspectives from the equally vast literature on organizations to explore the administrative niche within organizational ecosystems. Perspectives presented throughout the rest of the book are based in the basic frameworks laid out in this section.