

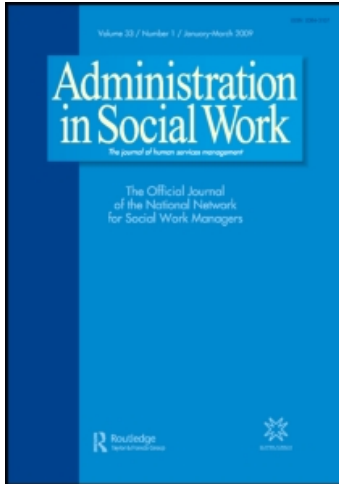
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Mary Parker Follett

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Mary Parker Follett: Epilogue to or Return of a Social Work Management Pioneer?

Katherine Selber, MSW
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INTRODUCTION

Challenges to our bureaucratized public and private institutions have spawned current attempts to revitalize organizational and management approaches (Bolman & Deal, 1987). Modern managerial approaches such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) have gained momentum in both the private and public sectors for the past two decades. These approaches have been described as revolutionary in that they depart from both scientific management and the human relations models (Martin, 1993; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). But, the beginnings of this new wave are not so new. Indeed, they are rooted within social work in the teachings of Mary Parker Follett, a settlement house social worker and management theorist who gained international recognition in the 1920s. The ideas of Mary Parker Follett have been highlighted by a collection of her writings, *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management*, recently published by the Harvard Business School. Included in this publication are commentaries on the current relevance of her ideas by Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Peter F. Drucker, Warren Bennis, Paul R. Lawrence, and other contemporary management writers.

This article presents an overview of Follett's major concepts and contributions to management theory, their service as a historical bridge between eras, and their importance to the management of human services

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today. The article also highlights her life as a social worker and demonstrates how her ideas significantly contribute to social work management theory. Although other disciplines and professions, such as political science and business, have included Follett in their literature, social work has been less articulate about a central role for her work in the literature on management of human services. The article proposes that Follett be afforded a more visible role in our understanding and teaching of management theory through the utilization of her ideas in the administration of human services.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LIFE

The last decades of the twentieth century have established the pervasive awareness that change is perhaps the only constant in our society. From the globalization of the marketplace and the changing nature of the workforce to pressing social needs and issues, change encompasses our daily lives. In the private-for-profit sector, this rapid change is embodied in such trends as increased competition from abroad, increased diversity of human resources in the workplace, the changing nature of the way work is organized and goods produced, and the rising expectations of employees and employers (Coates, Jarrett, & Mahaffie, 1990).

The public sector also has been impacted. Federal budget deficits, which have increased drastically, have fueled a growing sense of concern for the effective administration of public sector services. Studies have emphasized the dissatisfaction of the public with government operated human services and the public's concern for the poor quality of human service delivery in general (Harrison & Stupak, 1993; Martin, 1993).

These changes and challenges are mirrored in our organizational lives as well. Organizations have become increasingly complex (Morgan, 1986). The advent of sophisticated technologies, such as high-speed desktop computers, instant communication networks like electronic mail, and accessibility of a wide range of information such as through the information superhighway, has paralleled and fostered this increasing complexity of organizational processes.

Such changes in the internal and external environments of organizations have challenged traditional approaches to organizational structure as well as to management (Peters & Waterman, 1982). In order to remain competitive in the private sector and to enhance commitment to human services in the public sector, new forms of management, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI), have evolved since the 1980s. These approaches have stressed the impor-

tance of customer-defined quality outcomes, employee participation and empowerment, the redesign of work with less hierarchical organizational structures, team-driven work processes, and the use of quantitative methods for measurement of results. Overall, such approaches have been characterized as people-oriented, with an emphasis on employee and customer inputs, but also results driven in terms of customer-defined quality (Brannen & Streeter, 1994; Martin, 1993; Miller & Cangemi, 1993; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993).

In further analysis of TQM, this modern management approach can be seen to possess elements of both the traditional scientific management model and the human relations model (Spencer, 1994). The ideas of Mary Parker Follett are frequently cited in the business literature as a bridge between these two schools of management theory (Wren, 1987). Follett's underlying philosophy included the necessity of understanding human nature in terms of individual and group motivation, and the importance of integrating various points of view in order to achieve excellence in organizations. Additionally, an understanding of the whole or the "total situation" is obtained through a blending of scientific methods and knowledge based on experience.

This combination of elements from the scientific management and the human relations models was bold for this time. In the recently released collection of her writings, Rosabeth Moss Kanter comments that although Follett wrote some sixty years prior to the computer age, managers "can still draw inspiration from this insightful giant" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. xiii). Not only did Follett run contrary to her time, she also can be considered at the forefront of the quality revolution. Indeed, Peter Drucker (1995) has called her the prophet of modern management theory, and Sir Peter Parker of London School of Economics refers to her as the mother of management (cited in Linden, 1995). Although scientific management and human relations theories tend to be deductive and prescriptive, Follett's approach was inductive and grounded in experience. In order to understand her significance as a bridge from the earlier scientific management era to the human relations approach, as well as how she foreshadowed today, an examination of the social and economic conditions of her life and times is required.

FOLLETT'S LIFE AND TIMES

Mary Parker Follett was born in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1868. She began college at Radcliffe, then known as "The Annexe" (to Harvard). She studied one year at Newnham College in Cambridge, England and

returned to graduate from Radcliffe in 1898, followed by post-graduate study in Paris. In 1896, while still a student, she published *The Speaker of the House of Representatives*, a study of the legislative process and effective speakers based on document analysis and in-depth interviews. This publication brought her to the attention of Boston's intellectual leaders at a time when Boston and other East Coast cities were filled with intellectual pioneers, many of them women, in such fields as philosophy, medicine, business, and social work (Austin, 1995; Graham, 1995).

Following her studies in Paris, Follett returned to Boston and became involved with the Roxbury Men's Club. For the next twenty-five years she worked at the Roxbury Neighborhood House. Her most notable activity as a settlement worker was the promotion of school facilities for after-school hours as neighborhood community centers. Her work in this area led the Boston School Committee in 1917 to make school community centers a regular part of the public school program. Follett soon became involved in the most urgent business personnel issue of the day, disputes between labor and management. She was appointed a member of the Massachusetts Minimum Wage Board, which was established to resolve disputes between employers and employees.

In 1918, Follett published *The New State: Group Organization, the Solution of Popular Government*, gaining international recognition. In 1925, at almost 60 years old, Follett was invited to speak at the annual conference of the Bureau of Personnel Administration in New York, the major national forum for discussion of management theories. This was followed by a series of lectures in both the United States and England during the last half of the 1920s and the early 1930s, which brought her recognition as one of the more important thinkers of her day on organizational management.

Frederick Taylor, the prevailing management theorist during Follett's years of writing and the primary figure in the scientific management era, was another part of the setting and experiences of this time. Taylor's approach emphasized increasing productivity through increasing efficiency. To achieve these goals, a top-down management style was promulgated with control and direction primarily assigned to management. Jobs consisted of well-defined, highly specified, and routinized tasks. The individual work ethic was espoused and was reflected in the focus on the individual, rather than group efforts within organizations. These management and organizational characteristics, typified by Taylor, provided the context for Follett's writing during this era of heavy industrialization (Wren, 1987).

Industrialization and urbanization, in turn, brought economic, political, and social forces that demanded new approaches to management. It was at this juncture that Mary Parker Follett articulated her principles of manage-

ment and became the integrative bridge between the scientific and human relations management eras (Graham, 1995; Wren, 1987). The Hawthorne experiments signaled the beginning of what is called the human relations approach. These experiments were originally intended to focus on the effect of physical work conditions on productivity, but, instead, they revealed the importance of supervisory style, interpersonal relationships, and communication skills in the workplace. The proponents of human relations believed that supervisors with good communication skills could address both human and organizational needs, and Follett's writing promoted these ideas.

FOLLETT'S UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY AND BASIC MANAGEMENT CONCEPTS

Follett was a pioneer in many areas. Perhaps this was due to the applicability of her tenets to a variety of fields. Her wide body of writings span political science, philosophy, the psychology of human behavior, business, and management in general. Her basic management concepts have been sporadically quoted and published since the forties with the publication of her first collected works (Metcalf & Urwick, 1942).

Follett's basic philosophy was guided by an understanding of human nature, developed from her educational background and from her experience as a social worker (Metcalf & Urwick, 1942). She saw the individual and interaction of the individual with others as the basic building blocks for organizations, whether in industry or government, and for understanding society as a whole. Follett stated:

I have been asked . . . why I am studying business management. . . . I have chosen this (path) for a number of reasons. . . . Industry is the most important field of human activity, and management is the fundamental element in industry. . . . It is now generally recognized that not bankers, not stockholders, but management is the pivot of business success. It is good management that draws credit, that draws workers, that draws customers. . . . For whatever problems we solve in business management may help towards the solution of world problems, since the principles of organization and administration which are discovered for business can be applied to government or international relations. Indeed, the solution of the world's problems must eventually be built up from the little bits of experience wherever people are consciously trying to solve problems of relation. (Cited in Metcalf & Urwick, 1942, pp. 17-19)

Follett's underlying philosophy included a group-oriented view of society in that interconnectedness and community are viewed as fostered through group relations as well as by individuals relating to each other. Follett stated that "the group self is the true self" and that "individuals are created by reciprocal interplay. . . . in relation not to society but to a concrete group" (cited in Metcalf & Urwick, 1942, p. 105). Democracy, in her view, was based on a social awareness and connectedness through the individual's participation in different groups—family, work, social institutions, and government. Follett considered both government and business as social institutions and, thus, she thought management functioned similarly across all types of organizations.

Four principal concepts best characterize Follett's approach to organization and management. Her views on conflict, leadership, participatory management, and coordination not only bridge management eras but also demonstrate her unquestionable relevancy for today.

Follett on Managing Conflict

Follett's views on constructive conflict are perhaps her best known. She framed conflict in terms of positive rather than negative difference and considered conflict to serve productive ends. She proposed that integration, not domination or compromise, was the best way to resolve conflict, since both domination and compromise left unfulfilled desires which could later lead to further conflict. Integration, on the other hand, entailed a thorough understanding of each position, taking into account needs and desires of both parties. A new option could then be sought which included salient points from each side. In this way, Follett believed that an optimal solution could evolve. According to Follett, conflict could reach true resolution rather than being "constrained by either/or situations" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 86).

The following example epitomizes the clarity of her writing style and her ability to use everyday examples, as well as illustrating the principle of integration:

In the Harvard Library one day, in one of the smaller rooms, someone wanted the window open. I wanted it shut. We opened the window in the next room where no one was sitting. This was not a compromise because there was no curtailing of desire; we both got what we really wanted. For I did not want a closed room; likewise the other occupant did not want that particular window open—he merely wanted more air in the room. (Cited in Metcalf & Urwick, 1942, p. 32)

Follett's ideas on conflict resolution stood in contrast to those of scientific management in which the "iron hand of management" was the method for resolving labor and management disputes. Follett's search for commonality of purpose to resolve conflict promoted a new spirit of cooperation. Although her views on conflict were suggestive of a human relations approach, they were also distinct from that model. The principal difference is that the human relations school emphasized distance between management and workers and the use of communication skills to avoid conflict. Follett, on the other hand, emphasized the commonalities between management and workers. She focused on the content of conflict, the wishes of both parties, and open discussion of these issues, especially between managers and workers. Rather than avoiding conflict, she advocated a direct yet nonconfrontational approach.

Follett on Leaders and Teams

Follett's views on leadership and teamwork provide further examples of her practicality and emphasis on practice rather than theory. She firmly espoused that leaders were not born, but were trained and could learn through experience and reflection. She described the role of the leader as an integrator during problem situations, as opposed to a specialized position apart from workers and solely responsible for decision making (Harrison & Stupak, 1993). She called for widely diffused leadership and multiple leaders, recognizing the importance of everyone's potential to lead in a given situation. In essence, the principal role for the leader was in organizing the experience of the group. Follett went on to say:

The leader makes the team. This is pre-eminently the leadership quality—the ability to organize all the forces there are in an enterprise and make them serve a common purpose. . . . The ablest administrators do not merely draw logical conclusions from the array of facts of the past which their experts bring to them; they have a vision for the future. (Cited in Graham, 1995, pp. 168-169)

She believed in some essential elements of good leadership. One element was the ability to grasp what she called the "total situation." She believed that leadership rested not on personality but on the leader's knowledge of the job and the ability to see the totality from "facts, present and potential, aims and purposes" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 168). She also proposed that "[l]eaders and followers are both following the invisible leader—the common purpose" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 173). It was this unifying purpose of "the total situation" that was crucial to leadership.

These views on leadership and teams could have been from the pages of Deming and Drucker, but instead were written more than fifty years ago. Current management approaches such as TQM are anchored in these same ideas of leadership as being visionary and team-building in nature. In direct contrast to the hierarchical models of scientific management, Follett focused on less division between leaders and followers. These ideas predicted the TQM models with their flatter organizational structures and high performance teams cutting across organizational functions. Follett's conceptualization of the leader as responsible for stimulating the creative energy within an organization is also similar to TQM's call for continuous improvement. A further similarity to TQM is the casting of multiple leaders as a part of effective teamwork. Follett wrote:

The leader guides the group and is at the same time . . . guided by the group, is always part of the group. No one can truly lead except from within. . . . The leader . . . must interpret our experience to us . . . must see all the different points of view which underlie our daily activities. He [She] must give form to things vague. . . . He [She] must be able to lead us to wise decisions, not to impose his [her] own wise decisions on us. (Cited in Hurst, 1992, p. 58)

This quote emphasizes the importance of the leader's role in integrating the decisions of many rather than unilateral decision making. Follett described the potential of all workers within the organization to lead, which is similar to TQM's focus on continuous learning and flexible work teams with evolving leaders.

Follett on Participatory Management and Empowerment

Follett's writings have been referred to as the embryonic beginnings of participatory management (Harrison & Stupak, 1993; Wolf, 1988). Her emphasis on the group setting for joint problem solving and the leader's role in integrating the "total situation" into a creative solution was clearly a forerunner to the idea of the empowered employee. Follett described her view of power within an organization:

Whereas power usually means power over . . . some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of 'power-with,' a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power. . . . ['Power-with' can best be developed by managing] so that you can influence a co-manager while he [she] is influencing you, so that a work[er] has an opportunity of influencing

you as you have of influencing him [her]. (Cited in Metcalf & Urwick, p. 101)

This idea of power with others, rather than over others, is the embodiment of empowerment. Follett viewed authority as embedded not in a particular position within a hierarchy but in the worker's knowledge, experience, and skill. This view is clear from her statement that "... authority is not something from the top that filters down to those below" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 151). Follett believed that workers closest to a task held the necessary elements for problem solving and thus held the real power—the power of the "total situation."

Follett on Coordination

Follett elaborated four principles of coordination in a precise yet comprehensive way, which included an emphasis on the reciprocal relation of actors and facts, the direct involvement of all responsible people involved, initiation of coordination from the earliest stages, and the continuous nature of coordination. These principles predicted the modern era of management sixty years later. Follett believed that an acknowledgment of reciprocal interdependency of all actors within an organization was necessary before coordination could occur. She also stated that coordination must occur directly, not only through the chain of command. Follett referred to this type of coordination as cross-functioning and espoused its use from the earliest stages of a project. Her fourth idea, coordination as a continuous process, is similar to the current TQM emphasis on continuous improvement.

Follett emphasized that the purpose of management was to attain a unified purpose rather than uniformity of thought. This positive view of differences as enriching the "total situation" set the stage for coordination and the idea that diversity fueled the creative energies for the organization. Follett wrote that "... "the core of the social process is not likeness but the harmonizing of differences through interpenetration" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 34).

Follett's Management Contributions

Mary Parker Follett's contributions are as relevant today as in the early 1900s. Initially presented in the era of scientific management, her ideas enjoyed limited recognition during the 1920s but were soon replaced by the human relations movement in management. Although different reasons have been suggested to account for Follett's views falling out of

favor, the main explanation involves the differences between her beliefs and the scientific management's approach that dominated at the time (Drucker, 1995). For instance, Follett's emphasis on small groups and on cooperation ran contrary to many of the fundamental principles of scientific management, such as a belief in bureaucracy as well as firmly held values of competition and domination in American society. In addition, Follett's ideas on management as a comprehensive function and not just as a set of tools, as well as her emphasis on management's need to focus on the whole organization, were also contrary to prevailing thought (Drucker, 1995). An additional explanation for her brief success might be her lack of academic affiliation. Since Follett was not employed in academia, she did not have access to a student following or the regular audience common to academic settings.

Undoubtedly, Follett would have been surprised to learn that her influence extended into the present time. Her writing with its easy-to-understand style and plenty of everyday examples, indicated that she had a humble nature. However, she is now considered a timeless theorist in the way her ideas both bridged different management eras and anticipated, almost seven decades later, modern management theory. Table 1 illustrates in brief form these linkages.

Follett's Ideas and Their Contribution to Social Work

Follett's management concepts should be included in social work curricula due to both their historical contribution in shaping social work's management approach and their critical relevance to current human services management. Although she wrote across diverse areas, the underlying theme was that business organizations and all other organizations should provide a service or a function with responsibilities to the larger society. She wrote:

A business [person] should think of his [her] work as one of the necessary functions of society, aware that other people are also performing necessary functions, and that all together these make a sound, healthy, useful community. 'Function' is the best word because it implies not only that you are responsible for serving your community, but that you are partly responsible for there being a community to serve. (Cited in Graham, 1995, p. 269)

She believed in the responsibility of each organization to contribute to society and to make decisions not only for short-term gains such as profit, but also on criteria that reflected the public good.

TABLE 1. Comparative Management Analysis

	Scientific Management	Follett	Total Quality Management
Concept			
organizational structure	hierarchical	functional	flatter
role of management	direct and control	integrative leadership	facilitator; coach
role of employee	comply with organization	worker input stressed in group setting	high performance teams
authority and control	embedded in role; top-down	based on unity of purpose and knowledge of situation	self-directed work teams
conflict resolution	management to resolve via dominance	integration of ideas	customer-oriented solutions
use of information	fact gathering about job performance; tool-box approach	scientific approach to decision making stressed	various quantitative methods used
organizational goal	efficiency and increased productivity	unity of purpose and community service	customer satisfaction

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Many of her writings also suggested other social work objectives and values, such as a strengths perspective and recognition of the worth of each person. For example, in *Creative Differences* she wrote of the need for seeing differences as a positive force, affirming the contributions that each person can make. She said, "It is possible to conceive of conflict as . . . a normal process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all" (cited in Graham, 1995, p. 20). She argued that conflict was no more than differences and that the best conflict resolution entailed seeing the advantages to differences and not just adjusting to conflict.

Follett's writings on the empowerment of others, specifically within the management framework, also advance the traditional social work objective of empowering clients to meet their own needs and to reach their potential. Her description on the nature of "power-with" versus "power over" is one of the best definitions of empowerment in the literature. With great simplicity, she describes "power-with" as including those affected by the decision-making process. She wrote, "We are recognizing today that it [consent] is only a first step; that not consent but participation is the right basis for all social relations" (cited in Metcalf & Urwick, 1942, p. 211).

Follett also had a social systems perspective in her emphasis on the "total situation" and her examination of all the parts and interrelations within an organization. As in a social work systems framework, Follett considered organizations within their particular context and was comprehensive in her view. For example, Follett said:

I do not think we have psychological and ethical and economic problems. We have human problem with psychological, ethical, and economic aspects. (Cited in Graham, 1995, p. 25)

She argued that business and organizations be examined from a "functional whole or integrative unity" and that interpersonal motives were inextricably bound within a particular situation. These ideas resonate with social work's person-in-environment perspective. In addition, her ideas on the integrative process in conflict resolution and management can be likened to social work's joint problem-solving process. In writing on the integrative process, she spoke of breaking up the whole into its component parts, bringing the differences into the open, looking at the total situation from the other person's perspective, and joint resolution, action, and participation. These ideas parallel the steps in the social work problem-solving model.

Follett's approach to management is of particular significance for the teaching of management in human services because it was grounded in the actual experience of functioning organizations rather than being derived

from general theory. This latter approach characterized both scientific management and human relations theories. Akin to Follett, many current writings on human services management are deductive and prescriptive, combining elements from both the scientific management and human relations paradigms. These current writings also focus less on the political economy context of organizational functioning, that is the "total situation" repeatedly emphasized in Follett's writings (Austin, 1995).

Table 2 provides additional information on Follett's original ideas and their foreshadowing of constructs now embodied in the contemporary social work literature.

Implications for Social Work

Social work researchers, practitioners, administrators, and academics have been plagued for several decades by questions about the profession's effectiveness (Brannen & Streeter, 1994; Fischer, 1973; Rubin, 1985). In addition, recent authors also discuss consumer concerns about the quality of services in the public sector (Martin, 1993). Varying responses to ques-

TABLE 2. Follett's Ideas and Social Work

Follett's Ideas	Social Work Framework
interdisciplinary—draws from philosophy, psychology, political science, business	interdisciplinary—draws from sociology, psychology, political science
systems perspective—the integrative whole and the total situation	systems perspective
values differences	emphasizes diversity
emphasizes goal of fairer society	emphasizes social justice
power with not over	empowerment
integrative conflict resolution	joint problem solving
purpose of organization is service to community	enhancement of social functioning
focuses on individual within groups	emphasizes systems levels; group processes
positive approach to organizational analysis	strengths perspective
understanding of "total situation"	person-environment fit

tions of accountability include addressing concerns through quality transformations in organizational structures and processes. Parallel to these transformations, market and budget forces have promoted reexamining traditional ways of delivering all services and products in both the public and the private sectors. In response to the serious concerns of clients, customers, and stakeholders, the profession's rebuttal of "raising the public good" is inadequate. Organizational life in our society, and indeed, in the whole world, has grown complex. Our challenge as social work administrators, researchers, and academics is to understand this complexity.

This is perhaps why Follett has such an appeal. Although she wrote at a time when complexity was addressed through standardization and control, she promoted flexibility and wholeness. She advocated humanistic yet factual approaches to problems. Her ideas were simple and based in experience rather than being derived from theory. In this respect, she had the early elements of a grounded, qualitative approach. She derived concepts from everyday experiences, drawing generalizations from simple illustrations. She relied on rich descriptions of the total situation for solutions, not just on quantitative data. She did not suggest simply a set of tools for leadership, but a visionary, integrated approach. As Peter Drucker (1995) reminds us, Follett described for us the what and why of leadership, not just the how.

Follett's last publication was well over six decades ago, yet her writing is contemporary. Her timelessness and timeliness are derived from her ability to embrace complexity. Social work can begin to meet the current challenges of the organizational delivery of services by elevating Follett's works to a more visible position within our profession, both within management texts and as social work educators in the classroom. Change in social work is slow, but crisis, in this case significant challenges to embrace newer paradigms, presents many opportunities. Mary Parker Follett's work is such an opportunity.

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