Formal and Informal Sources of Care

Britain, like most other industrial societies, has a pluralistic system of welfare provision. Indeed the term ‘welfare pluralism’ means nothing more than a diversity of sources of welfare provision and service delivery (Gladstone, 1979; Rea Price et al., 1987; N. Johnson, 1987). It is generally recognised that services are organised and delivered by a variety of sources, usually identified (by Wolfenden, 1978, for example) as the statutory, voluntary, commercial and informal sectors.

The existence of pluralism in personal social care has led to the suggestion that such provision can be discussed in terms of a ‘mixed economy of welfare’ (Webb and Wistow, 1982). However, as we pointed out in Chapter 2, there are considerable reasons for caution in the use of such a framework for the analysis of social welfare. To take a narrowly economic view of the commodities and services provided by each sector is to neglect the key issue of the subjective meaning of care. But this dimension has to be taken into account because it means that normal economic assumptions about substitutability of products from different sectors cannot be made. In a strictly economic exchange the benefits exchanged are extrinsic (that is, detachable in principle from the source which supplies them). By contrast, in social exchange it is often the case that benefits are intrinsic because their significance depends on the person who supplies them (P. M. Blau, 1968). This point has particular relevance in any attempt at discussing a consumer’s view of welfare services. Although there may be no obvious difference in the extrinsic benefits supplied in a particular caring exchange – commodities such as meals, shopping, cooking, cleaning and so on...
– it is likely that those who receive services will have preferences among the suppliers of such commodities which will depend on the intrinsic benefits – such as emotional warmth, affection and interest – which are expected from potential suppliers. Thus a visit from a daughter may have a different value to an elderly person compared with a visit from a volunteer friendly visitor, even though the two events may seem, externally, to be identical in form. Even where intrinsic benefits are less obvious, preferences may be influenced by the source of supply. For example, a sum of money from a charitable organisation may be less acceptable than the state’s Christmas bonus for pensioners, because even an apparently identical sum of money has a different meaning to the recipient according to perceived rights to receive.

**Differences between the formal and informal sectors**

Family care is undoubtedly part of the informal sector of care and there are important respects in which this sector differs from the other three sectors which, for ease of analysis, collectively will be termed the formal sector. At the beginning of Chapter 6 were outlined some of the arguments about the special nature, the alleged qualitative superiority, of informal care, which was said to be rooted in its origins in pre-existing social and/or biological relationships between helper and helped. Of course, the subsequent evidence demonstrated that the superiority of family care should not be accepted without question. In fact, it was clear that some of the most damaging and emotionally destructive relationships may exist within families, with negative consequences for all concerned. None the less, the claim that informal care is *prima facie* preferable to recipients must be taken seriously.

Of course, the fact that informal care is personally directed may be seen as a disadvantage from the point of view of its overall distribution. Indeed, as we argued in Chapter 2, the world of informal care does not secure equal provision for all cases (in particular defined categories of need) and neither can it adequately meet the needs of all those who do receive its services. However, if it is argued that it is impossible for the formal sector to be an adequate substitute for informal care (because the latter is experienced as qualitatively different) then such a view has the implica-