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Notes of two discussions
on social work training

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NOTES ON TWO DISCUSSIONS OF SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

In the course of two fairly short meetings in Lewes and in Strasbourg, it has only been possible to explore our subject fairly superficially. The papers about the courses at Swansea, Sussex, Strasbourg and Hamburg describe these particular curricula in detail. This paper seeks to analyse some of the issues that have arisen during our discussions of these curricula and of social work training in general. This account will necessarily reflect my own assessment of the significance and saliency of issues; but it may serve to give a focus to our further discussion of the general questions involved and will no doubt provoke colleagues to add to or to qualify what I have said.

Ambiguity about social work training

The relevance of these discussions and of our concern to define the principles of social work education was indicated by our general sense that social work education was changing rapidly and that it was often related only tenuously to the requirements of social work practice. In discussing our experience, we had to bear in mind the very considerable differences among our countries, both in the field of social work itself and in the organisation and traditions of higher education. Our countries have different legal and cultural backgrounds, different views of social work and different concepts of the universities' role in this field. Britain contrasts particularly sharply with France, and Germany. British universities, though largely financed by central government, remain legally independent corporations. As they operate a numerus clausus for admissions and have an average of 5,000 students each, British academics are able to retain a tradition of much closer intellectual and social contact with their students than is usually possible in continental institutions. Social work has perhaps been more fully developed and publicly recognised in Britain than in France and Germany, while postgraduate courses in social work have been incorporated more fully and over a much longer period into the universities' curricula. The status of social work in Britain has improved substantially during the last 20 years by the establishment of the National Institute of Social Work Training in 1961; the organisation of large-scale social service departments following the Seebohm Report in 1970; the setting up of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work; and of the British Association of Social Workers in 1970.

Notwithstanding this rapid institutionalisation of social work in Britain, it was still possible for Simmonds to say that "we don't really know what a social worker is". This uncertainty was related to the shift of opinion that had taken place in Britain, and also in Germany, in the past 10 to 15 years. At the turn of the century, social work had been concerned with ameliorating the poverty which was so prevalent, especially in contemporary cities. Between the wars, however, and especially after the Second World War, as psychoanalysis became increasingly

influential, the focus of social work shifted from inter-personal relationships to individual case-work. More recently, as social workers have become increasingly sceptical of the Welfare State, they have started to challenge the social structures and the patterns of distribution of economic and political power in which they see the source of the problems with which they have to deal. Community workers in particular, who have tended to adopt a conflict model of society, have called in question many of the assumptions on which traditional social work has been based.

In France, social work has developed within a highly legalistic framework. Andrieux confirmed that there was no longer any certainty about what social work was. The social worker's role had been "far too precisely defined by the law", so that social work was often reduced to the rather mechanical application of the rules laid down by a given agency. Nor was the social worker's training very relevant to practice. These factors had led them to adopt an approach that was so rigid that they found it difficult to deal with non-standardised situations with which they were so frequently confronted. French social workers, accordingly, felt ill-at-ease and ineffective in their jobs.

Much the same was also true of Germany. Schneider considered that the training of social workers in Germany was weak because it lacked common standards and an adequate theoretical basis. Social workers were taught "a lot of disconnected facts" and in the Fachhochschulen teachers tended to have very idiosyncratic ideas about what an appropriate curriculum for social workers might be. There was no general consensus about curricula and social workers were somewhat dissatisfied with their training. In Schneider's opinion, it was necessary to establish "guiding principles" upon which an acceptable curriculum could be based. It was for the universities to develop an adequate "theory of social problems" which would constitute the foundation of a revised and improved pattern of social work training.

It became clear, therefore, that in all our countries, the training of social workers, for one reason or another, was either regarded as unsatisfactory or was still being developed so as to meet changing conditions. It was this that made our discussions both relevant and interesting. But, in all our varied experience and despite our differing national contexts, there was one common theme around which a great deal of our discussion revolved. That was the general conviction that there was a sizeable gap between academic training and the requirements of social work practice. The relationship between learning and practice in the field was therefore called in question.

Could the universities' role in social work education be justified?

At several points, the question was posed as to whether the universities had, or should have any role at all in social work training. Schneider considered that their distinctive contribution to social work education derived from the fact that, as educational institutions, they were far better qualified than the ordinary social worker to establish the appropriate criteria for a social work curriculum. This view appeared to ignore the contribution that might be made here by the social workers' professional associations. Certainly, our French colleagues were less sure of the universities' ability to do this. Andrieux, speaking of the French context, in which social work training has never been undertaken by the universities, made the point forcibly that the French university could claim no competence whatever in social work, however it might be defined. The group at Strasbourg who were concerned with it comprised lawyers, philosophers and sociologists who were mainly working in the Departement de Formation Continue. Their role, therefore, was less one of direct instruction than of working alongside practising social workers in order to help them to discover what social work might become. The aim of this collaboration was to break through the rigidity of French social work practice that had been engendered by their excessive legalism. The university sought to help in this process by affording groups of social workers the techniques and scientific and intellectual support that they needed in order to find solutions to their own problems for themselves.

A similar justification of the universities' involvement in this field was advanced by Moseley, which appeared to be generally accepted. The universities, in his view, were a kind of data-bank. They were repositories of the information that was needed to understand what caused the problems with which social workers dealt and of the techniques for evaluating the efficacy of the methods by which social workers had tried to solve them. The university could make available a wider expertise than most other educational agencies. No doubt impressed by the Sussex practice, he considered it desirable that social work courses should not be taught exclusively by social workers. To teach social work in a separate school of social work would, he suggested, tend to limit the staff available for teaching. It was essential that social work students should be exposed to as wide a view of the field and its problems as possible, and this would be more likely to happen if their training were integrated into the work of the university as a whole. On the other hand, with the rigid structure of some continental universities perhaps in mind, it was also suggested that universities and academics' career-patterns were so organised that, far from fostering, they actually impeded inter-disciplinary collaboration. It was a point which had a good deal of validity.

What kind of theory was needed?

Assuming that the university did have a valid role in this field, what might it be? Our discussion polarised around two particular issues: skills and theory. To consider theory first. Certainly, it was generally agreed that social work required a sound theoretical basis. Guihard, for instance, considered it essential to have "indicators to devise a strategy for social work intervention". There was, however, a sharp divergence of view about the nature of theory per se. Moseley took the view that a plurality of possibly conflicting theories should be taught and that one could "pick out those bits of theory which made sense for practice". Schneider, on the other hand, reflected the influence of a German philosophical tradition in his opinion that it was ill-advised, and indeed distorting, "just to pick bits of theory out of their context". As he saw it, the fact that was most relevant to the social worker's understanding of his task was that social problems tended to be concentrated in particular sectors of society. This concentration could best be explained in political terms. Social work education therefore needed to be set within the context of a macro-political analysis. A postgraduate social work curriculum should include material on social function of social work. It was essential for social workers to know where these social problems were concentrated, whom they affected, who ran the social services and in whose interests they were organised. Students also had to be trained to deal with practical questions. But in learning how to establish a youth-club, for example, he considered it much more important to understand about the operation of socio-economic structures than about personal psychodynamics. Schneider appeared to base his ideal curriculum upon one, rather than a plurality of theories.

From a sociological point of view, it was a question of the kind of model of society that should be adopted. Schneider's view was that there was invariably a "structural contradiction" within the social services, as in society at large, as to whether their function was to stabilise or to change the social system. In Britain, as Kedward argued, social conflict was increasing because, during the 1960's, more people had been educated and thus become more politically aware, so that they were less ready to acquiesce in traditional ways of reconciling differences. Britain's present economic difficulties had led to what were regarded as inequitable social policies, including cuts in the budgets of social service departments, and this had induced some social workers to come out on strike and thus to come into conflict with "the system".

Moseley, however, doubted whether a conflict model fitted the British scene or accurately reflected the real emphasis in social work in Britain. He thought that most social workers continued to be concerned with social engineering, with trying to help the poor and the handicapped. Despite their rhetoric,

most community workers were also only rarely involved in genuine conflict. The main focus of social work was upon dealing with society's casualties, so that in practice conflict was much less significant than system-maintenance. Kedward agreed that most social work teachers in Britain would consider system-maintenance the point of social work. On the other hand, if able young graduates came into the profession, then it was likely that they would define the relevant problems differently from their teachers. They wanted to reappraise conventional ideas about deviance, for example, and to ask critically who set the norms by which other people were defined as being "deviant". They were much more likely to adopt conflict models, with a clear sociological emphasis.

Moseley clearly objected to what, in his view, constituted an over-emphasis upon sociological analysis. He argued that, working in such an ill-defined and demanding field, social workers probably needed some kind of ideological commitment to sustain their concern and motivation. At one time, this had been furnished by a commitment to Freudian psychology. More recently, however, social workers have tended to become increasingly and, in his opinion, dangerously committed to a similarly lop-sided sociology. If social work had suffered from its earlier excessive dependence upon a particular kind of psychology, it now stood in a similar danger from a no less debilitating and naive dependence upon sociology. He objected to the over-emphasis on one kind of theory at the expense of another on account of the kind of work which social workers had to do. Since people's problems varied a great deal, the social worker needed to be able to use a corresponding variety of methods in dealing with them. Thus, it was very important that students should be required to consider a similar range of theoretical explanations both of human behaviour and of the aetiology of social problems. They needed to understand psychological as well as sociological explanations and, within psychology, to be au fait with both behaviour therapy and psychodynamics. Social work courses accordingly sustained and needed to sustain what was bound to be an uneasy balance between these two approaches.

The adoption of a single-theory position also stood in danger of encouraging dogmatism. This danger would be particularly serious if the universities were ever to presume to be able to provide a unique and final theory of social work. Simmonds pointed out that, though the analysis of socio-economic structures rightly had a central place in the social work curriculum, sociological theories tended to change very frequently; so that it was even more important to design a curriculum that would still help today's students to understand the world they would be living in in 20 years' time.

Social work skills

The importance of encouraging flexibility was emphasised once again when we began to discuss social work skills. Moseley was particularly anxious that a social work curriculum should be based upon a clear definition of the kind of skills that were needed in practice. While agreeing that people acted spontaneously when actually doing their job, he considered that, for training purposes, it was essential to specify the particular functions and skills required. This was also imperative if rational decisions were to be made about strategic questions in social work education, such as what prior education students should have had, what should be taught, whether the orientation should be specialist or generic and what kind of staff should be employed. Failure to do this would encourage people to regard training as tantamount to an apprenticeship and this would merely serve to strengthen, rather than to challenge what he described as "the conventional shibboleths of social work".

Moseley's view appeared to rest upon a kind of positivist conviction that a curriculum was only good to the extent that it was founded upon scientifically validated results. If research demonstrated that social work was much less effective than its practitioners thought, what implications would that finding have for a social work curriculum? Surely it called in question the validity of the knowledge base in social work. In his view, this knowledge tended to be speculative rather than scientific and he deprecated what he described as "the literary approach", which he considered dangerous.

The seminar seemed, to the Chairman at least, to be rather sceptical of this line of approach and reluctant to take it up. Certainly, it appeared to consider that there were other issues of more immediate relevance to discuss. Indeed, one of our Swiss colleagues argued that "science was a highly developed form of misunderstanding", while Simmonds was concerned with the dangers of what he described as "quasi-technology" and peoples' tendency to distort what they saw in order to conform to their scientific view of the world. A commitment to scientific method was evidently no defence against bigotry and dogmatism. Furthermore, that there was often a great gap between scientific knowledge and the reality of the daily world. More significant appeared to be the problem of how theory and learning should be related to practice.

The importance of sound judgement

There was much cause for concern and dissatisfaction here. Guihard, speaking of French experience, thought that the social worker had, above all, to be able not just to use but to understand the facts which came to his attention in practice. He thought it paradoxical that, while the universities were concerned with theory and were also able to provide lots of factual information for social workers, the relationship between theory and information and what actually had to be done in the field was very ambiguous.

And even if the university provided sound theory and relevant information, in his experience cases were so different one from another that the social worker would still have to learn how to adapt his learning to the particular case so as to ascertain how he might act most effectively in a very particular set of specific circumstances. In this, at least, he was at one with Moseley's pragmatism in recognising the variety of cases that had to be dealt with. There was certainly general agreement that, in this field if no other, learning was useless unless it could be directly related to practice.

Broady was especially sceptical whether it would be useful to try to define the criteria of a relevant curriculum by listing the social workers' skills in great detail. Some particular skills were already defined and appropriate methods of training in interviewing, report-writing and so on had already been devised. What more was needed? For the social worker was called upon to exercise not just single skills but complex clusters of skills together. The link between knowledge and practice, he suggested, required what might best be described by the term "judgement". To be able to make a sound judgement it was necessary not only to know but also to understand: to be able to explain and place information in a framework of interpretation without which it could not be used. In the practice of social work, or of any applied art, the most crucial "skill" in his view was the ability to judge with discrimination the relevance of knowledge and understanding for the particular circumstances which a given case presented.

To illustrate the point. At five o'clock in the afternoon, a parent sees one of his small children hit the other who comes running up to him crying for consolation. How shall he react to the aggressive child? Several alternative interpretations might flash through his mind. The elder child might simply have been jealous of the mother's greater affection for the younger. Alternatively, he might have been made irritable by the fact that he had not eaten much for lunch and was now getting hungry. Or he might have been constipated or sickening for an illness. Or simply tired and frustrated at not being able to find a favourite toy. The problem for the parent, as for the social worker, was to decide upon which of a number of possible and plausible interpretations most accurately fitted the facts. For obviously, as the interpretation varied, so would the action that followed it. Thus, the social worker required not only theories and skills but training in that very complex intellectual skill if it can be called of judging quickly and accurately how to interpret such situations.

Open-mindedness

This activity presupposed that alternative interpretations were possible. It was thus consistent with the view that social work students should be introduced to a plurality of theoretical positions if dogmatic rigidity were to be avoided. Indeed, Simmonds suggested that the most important attribute in a social worker, which (rather than simple skills, important as they were) would help define a curriculum, was open-mindedness. In the course of their formal education, it was essential for students to cultivate an openness of mind and an ability for critical and systematic thinking; and he cited in support the philosopher Whitehead, who said that while students would probably forget most of the detail which they learned at university, if they retained intellectual attitudes of that kind, then that would constitute their real education.

This aspect of educational theory was considered in the discussion of the relevance of the first degree for social work education. Broady had indicated how a degree in social administration, such as that at Swansea, had sometimes been regarded as a preliminary training for social work. But it was agreed, in discussing that course and the corresponding one at Sussex, that such courses, though oriented towards questions relevant to "welfare-intervention", should not be so narrowly conceived. For they would best serve social work by developing in their students a general intellectual competence which would not at that stage of their education be specifically related to the requirements of professional social work.

It thus became evident that the criteria and principles for social work education were very similar to the criteria for education in general. The intellectual weaknesses of many British graduates going, for example, into administrative appointments were that they had often not learned how to communicate simply and effectively and that they found it difficult to come to clear and reasoned decisions. Such qualities - skills? - were needed no less among social workers, who, as became evident in the discussion, often found it difficult to come to decisions quickly. A curriculum which encouraged those qualities in our undergraduates would be of value not only in their academic but also in their subsequent professional education.

Examples of teaching social workers

The crucial problem, therefore, was how best to encourage our students to learn for themselves. In discussing how social work students should be taught, some similarity could be discerned between the approaches of Sussex and Strasbourg. For the object of the French project, as Andrieux and his colleagues explained it, was decidedly not to transmit a lot of formal knowledge which would never really be related to practice. Indeed, that chasm between theory and practice, which had been inherited from what

they described as "nineteenth century particularism", was precisely what they were hoping to overcome. What they were trying to do was to find a way of encouraging social workers to discover knowledge that would be relevant to their own practice, through group activity and investigation. Assuming that he had a competence in one of the social sciences, the social worker could be helped to find out how to utilise that understanding in practice. The Strasbourg project had arisen out of discussions which the university faculty had had with the social workers' associations, under the Act of 16 July on Permanent Training. Their purpose was to try to liberate French workers from an excessively rigid definition of their role and to turn them into "a new kind of generalist who would be able to act as interpreters of social needs" in the areas in which they worked. The specialists from the university were able to help them to analyse the situation so as to discover possibilities of action within it. Their focus was not upon the individual social worker, isolated in a social vacuum, but upon their work in real social situations, and they were especially concerned to avoid the fragmentation of knowledge in different disciplines which had no real relevance for practice.

The students involved in the Strasbourg project were, of course, already working in the field. They suffered from a "crisis of professional identity"; and since they lacked a clear and distinct identity, Andrieux considered it impossible to train them generically. The object of the exercise was to reform or correct the effects of their earlier training and they were encouraged to undertake the course by the fact that it led to a university diploma.

The Sussex course was also concerned to bridge the gap between theory and practice. As Simmonds explained it, they aimed to consider theoretical models "under the challenge of the field situation" so as to encourage the student himself to make sense of his own observations and to help him to act sensibly in relation to the problems he had to deal with. Ideally, he wanted to see the students "write their own textbook".

In this practice, the tutor sought to elicit from his students observations from their practical experience and then to help them formulate for themselves an explanation so that they could more effectively understand what they had discovered. For example, a student might give an account of a problem family. If he could not interpret adequately what he had seen, he would be at a loss to know exactly how the family might be helped. The tutor, accordingly, might suggest that he should start sociologically by identifying the socio-psychological linkages in the family structure. He could then consider how far learning theory might help him to act appropriately. Again, if the students wanted to know more about child development it was for them to negotiate an appropriate course of instruction with the two tutors who were experts in this

particular field. In Simmonds' view, it was very important that theory should be explained as it applied to action so that the student could make "a convincing personal understanding of a given case". He needed to be able to interpret and test against practice the theory he was interested in.

The social work student and professional experience

Two further points were made about British experience of students' adjustment to social work agencies. First of all, there was sometimes a divergence between the relatively free way in which the student was encouraged to work while at the university and the modus operandi of a social work agency. This frequently caused some tension in the relationship between the social worker, as employee, and the local authority as his employer. It was essential that they should sustain a continuing dialogue in the agency to which they had been assigned.

A second problem arose as a result of the excessively rapid promotion which many young social workers had won as they rose to fill the vacuum that had been created in the management structure of the new social service departments since 1970. It took time for their learning to mature in practice and, during their first year's employment, newly trained social workers were often very confused about how they could relate their skills and training to the agency's requirements. They had often moved in senior managerial positions before they had had a sufficient range of experience to be able to integrate their education effectively with the demands of practice. They had therefore too little and too limited an experience of social work practice and so tended to be too narrow in outlook. This meant that their training was unlikely to have been effectively tested and modified against the realities of practical experience. Still more dangerous, it was probable that, in middle management, they would be somewhat insecure because they had not had the time to elaborate a hierarchy of tested principles upon which to base their judgements. Furthermore, if their field experience was limited, then there was a danger that, once in managerial positions, they would regard management rather than social work as their reference group (as one piece of research suggested had already happened) and thus come to see the main problem of social service as that of allocating resources rather than of finding better ways of helping people in need.

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CURRICULUM REFORM IN INDIVIDUAL
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