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Co-ordination Reviewed*

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SOME OF US have been feeling recently that this topic of co-ordination and co-operation in social work has become a little stale. Everyone agrees it is a good and necessary thing but the suggestions made to explain why it is only partially successful seem to have been for the most part superficial. The Ingleby Commission referred to "interdepartmental rivalries" and having bitten on such a gristly topic, choked and said no more. I would like to look more deeply at a few of the difficulties involved, acknowledging from the outset that many aspects of the subject will be untouched or insufficiently explored. For example, I do not propose to take up the Ingleby contention that many of the problems are due to failure to distinguish between the processes involved—the processes of "detection, investigation and treatment". My own view is that this is not a particularly helpful line of enquiry.

The Oxford Dictionary defines co-ordination as: "the harmonious combination of agents or functions towards the production of a result". The last phrase of this definition is interesting—"towards the production of a result". One can profitably ask the question—is there *one* desired result in a problem of co-ordination? But this I will return to later.

To clarify and focus our thinking, here is an example of a familiar type of co-ordinating committee:

It is a July day in Southdown in the Town Hall; in a small committee room decorated in beige and chocolate brown the co-ordinating committee sits. The following are present:

- The Children's Officer (*Chairman*).
- The Child Care Officer.
- The Medical Officer of Health.
- The Health Visitor.
- The Mental Welfare Officer.
- The Probation Officer.
- The National Assistance Board Officer.
- The Housing Manager.

The Long family is being discussed: they are living in very poor conditions in privately owned property; they have four children, two under five. Mother is mentally ill, usually rather depressed, but has periods in hospital in acute phases. Psychiatric reports suggest that the position is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Father is frequently unemployed and on probation for theft of coal from a nearby merchant's yard. There is no previous history of delinquency. The children are poorly fed and clothed and the general conditions are dirty. It is obvious to everyone that despite all this the family ties are strong. The meeting has been called by the Medical Officer of Health because of his concern and that of the Health Visitor, over the home conditions and the Housing Manager has been invited to see if there is any possibility of rehousing the Longs in Council property.

I have deliberately chosen a fairly commonplace example with no outstandingly unusual features. Now let us consider what often happens at such a meeting. Our definition of co-ordination concludes that it is "towards the production of a result". What is the desired result of the members of this committee for the Long family? Can it be described by a fine sounding phrase like—"the well-being of the family in Society"? A general statement of this kind glosses over all kinds of conflicts which I shall try to analyse below. In fact this co-ordinating committee consists of people with a diversity of aims and emphases, all of which at their best are laudable, none of which is totally opposed. Nevertheless there are real problems of balance.

The Housing Manager and the National Assistance Board Officer may see themselves to a greater extent than the others present as guardians of Society's resources; not concerned primarily with this family but preoccupied with their responsibility to Society as a whole—that the "taxpayers" shall not be exploited, that the

* Based on a talk given to the old students of Barnett House, Oxford, in July, 1962.

needs of others beside the Longs for houses shall be emphasised. Beneath this may be a deep and urgent desire that some system of external fairness shall be preserved and "justice shall be seen to be done". Of course no social worker can afford to ignore this issue but we are speaking of differing emphases, not absolute distinctions, and the focus of the social workers present will inevitably be on the Longs—on their need for decent housing to help improve their standards. The point is perhaps more subtly illustrated by the conflict which arises between the Probation Officer and the National Assistance Board Officer concerning Mr. Long's poor work record. This is seen by the National Assistance Board Officer as a wilful refusal to get and keep employment and it is felt to be quite wrong that such a man should be supported by the State. The Probation Officer, while wishing that Mr. Long would go to work, sees it as indicative of the total family problem; he believes that Mrs. Long's depression makes it extremely difficult for her husband to leave her alone with the children and that on balance it may be best that Mr. Long should remain at home most of the time.

It is sometimes extremely difficult to disentangle the various issues involved in such a discussion—which we can hear any day of the week between the social worker and those who do not see themselves primarily as social workers but who are nevertheless much involved with the social services. Obviously it is in part a matter of knowledge and understanding of human beings. But is this all? Can and should the National Assistance Board Officer, knowing more of the dynamics of the Long family, decide that Mr. Long need not work? Should the Housing Manager, understanding the effect that dreary housing conditions are having on this mother's depressed and apathetic state, rehouse the Longs over the heads of a 100 other families less urgently in need but longer on the list and causing no problem to the social workers? We may have to take care that we do not punish "the deserving".

One can of course discern the psychological factors which affect such discussions. The identifications and the personal problems of the participants are often clear. Beneath the argu-

ments that Mr. Long "ought" to work may lurk punishing attitudes, not uncommonly found in those whose own sense of duty is harsh, and based on fear rather than love. The Probation Officer's arguments may reflect a sympathy with the underdog, even a collusion with him against authority. Nevertheless to point this out is not to dispose of a real social problem of judgment and decision in weighing up the needs of the Long family with the needs of other families and the rights of society to defend itself against exploitation. This is no one answer to this problem; it is rather a matter of preserving "a healthy tension", with as much personal insight as possible.

This then is our first point of conflict in this Co-ordinating committee. It would be simple indeed if the problems ended there but this is only one of a series of cross currents. At a field work level, one can discern two types of difficulty—not completely separate, of course, but different enough to be considered apart. These are, firstly, differences in method; secondly differences of function and involvement.

Amongst those who can be considered as social caseworkers at this committee there will be marked differences of method and skill in the understanding and treatment of people. Furthermore, those who do not consider themselves social caseworkers may be puzzled and even threatened by the approach of the caseworker. There are problems here both of general education and also of professional training with which everyone is familiar and upon which I do not wish to dwell. In practice, one of the most common causes of friction turns on casework method; granted everyone wants the Longs to clean up their house and care for their children better—how best to achieve it? In this case, the Child Care Officer has been visiting regularly; she happens (though this would by no means always be the case) to be a qualified professional caseworker. With the bloom of a generic course still fresh upon her, she has firmly in mind two basic casework assumptions: "start where the client is" and "the value of advice-giving is limited". She upholds these in her work with Mrs. Long. She accepts Mrs. Long's depression as a fact and believes that she must start there; she does not

exhort her to cheer up or to clean up since she believes it would only make Mrs. Long feel less and less adequate as a wife and mother—already she is drowned in self reproaches and guilt characteristic of the depressive. All this is, however, upsetting to the Health Visitor. Her training as a nurse has made her sensitive to the harm done to the children by poor nutrition, dirty conditions and so on. She wants action and so does her Medical Officer of Health to improve this situation speedily. The Child Care Officer does not think this can be effective. There are conflicts of method in the actual help this mother receives from the Child Care Officer and Health Visitor who both visit. This shows at the meeting when the Medical Officer of Health acidly remarks that “deep casework” seems to mean visiting for years and talking about anything rather than the actual problem of a dirty house and dirty children.

I have chosen to compare the Child Care Officer and the Health Visitor; but it could of course have been different Services, depending on the area; it is inevitable that in this stage of rapid development in social work in this country we should find these difficulties in understanding the objectives and methods of others. The value of more recent developments in casework method is not yet proven; also, behind criticism there may be envy. Sometimes there is imperfect understanding by the untrained social worker of what may reasonably be hoped for from the trained caseworker. Idealisation and denigration are two sides of the same coin, both equally unreal. We see today something of the same attitudes to caseworkers as are found towards psychiatrists. Casework is either black or white magic, it can solve nothing or solve everything.

I have linked the words “function and involvement” since in day-to-day practice they are inseparable, as Clare Winnicott’s recent article in *Case Conference* on agency function has shown. In discussion, however, one can separate them; by “functions” I mean those duties laid upon a social worker by the agency and by “involvement” I mean the inner feelings of the worker towards particular clients and their needs.

Returning to the Long’s, let us look at these

problems. The Mental Welfare Officer has helped Mrs. Long in her various phases of acute depression prior to her admission to hospital. With the coming of the Mental Health Act, the psychiatrists in the hospital have laid increasing emphasis on the care of the mentally ill in the community. The Mental Welfare Officer believes that his “patient” is best at home for as often and as long as possible. He sees that there are real dangers of a kind of apathetic institutionalisation; but he also recognises that there are strains in all this for the family. The Probation Officer believes strongly that it is an intolerable burden for Mr. Long to have his wife at home in this condition and would prefer that Mrs. Long should have longer spells in hospital. He feels it might be best for the children to be received into care. The Child Care Officer is also deeply concerned about the effect of mental illness on these children, especially as the older ones have to shoulder responsibility beyond their years. But she knows as no one else at the meeting that being in care is no picnic—that warm foster mothers do not always materialise; that the ties of children to their home may be overwhelmingly strong, whether healthy or neurotic. Part of these difficulties arise from actual knowledge in the possession of the one that the others do not have. But there is much that goes deeper. As we all know, the structure of our social services has tended to give particular social workers a bit of the family to be concerned about especially. Obviously this can be modified by knowledge of other responsibilities, by increasing emphasis on the family as a whole—both of which are affected by education and training. Even so, there remains the personal and inward identification of the worker; sometimes, though not necessarily, reinforced by the agency’s function. This point comes out clearly at the co-ordinating committee. The Mental Welfare Officer, a large, kindly man, feels most protective towards Mrs. Long, so timid and pathetic, and this fits in happily with the focus of his work. The Health Visitor, an energetic woman who has overcome many obstacles in her own life, is intolerant of Mrs. Long’s hopelessness and both inwardly, and by reason of her professional concern with the under fives, is child-focused. It is, of course, quite

possible that the personal identification might differ from the agency identification and this must often occur. In this connection however one has to recognise the unconscious drives that cause us at times to select one branch of social work rather than another.

All this assumes that conflicts may arise between the needs of different people within the family. One may argue that ultimately the needs of individuals within the family are going to be the same and usually in the long term this will be so; the "rescuing" of children from the unsatisfactory parents is an example of short term action which has often proved in the long term to be disastrous. Nevertheless, we must not glibly pass over the fact that the family unit, locked together as it is, nevertheless contains separate people with separate needs and rights. This is particularly important where mental illness is concerned. This *may* have to be seen in terms of both partners "need" for the illness, but in Mrs. Long's case, her feeling for her children seems at times to reflect her need to be kept alive by them rather than her capacity to give in love. In her depression she feels dead inside and the children are a live bit of her to which she clings. In them, mother's sadness provokes considerable guilt and anxiety. One must seek first to identify and weigh up such factors before one can begin to make appropriate plans. If there has to be a choice between the needs, for instance, of mother and children, one can be helped to a decision by the fact the children may be helped to break out of a vicious circle which will otherwise be perpetuated to the next generation but this is always a painful decision and one in which frictions between social workers are likely to occur.

I have written of the involvement of the social worker with a particular member of the family and this does pose considerable problems for a co-ordinating committee. Yet there are still other kinds of involvement. The very problems for example, of "debt and dirt", or of "parental roles", which the Long family, and many others, present, are those which rouse deep feeling in the workers, intimately concerned as they are with social and psychological attitudes, built up within us over the years. It is inevitable that for dif-

ferent workers different problems will seem more pressing or more disturbing than others, and this will add to the tensions in co-ordination. The controversy between the National Assistance Board Officer and the Probation Officer about Mr. Long's unemployment is sharpened by the feeling of the National Assistance Board Officer that Mr. Long's almost feminine role in the home is inappropriate and even "unhealthy".

So far the problems of co-ordination have been considered at the field work level; the role of the higher grades of administration in the process remain to be discussed.

One often hears that co-operation is satisfactory at the field work level—it's the Chief Officers that make it difficult—"if they would leave us alone, we would get on all right". A simple and obvious fact must first be faced. Senior Officers should have obtained their posts by reason of special ability which should include a capacity to analyse, clarify and synthesise issues, which is clearly of vital importance in the guidance of a co-ordinating committee. There is unfortunately no doubt that this capacity is frequently lacking. The motive which we loosely describe as "empire-building" also enters into the difficulties and the desire for power is a common feature in the higher levels of organisation. It is sad that the basic question "Who can serve this client best" is often lost sight of in the midst of rivalries which at the present time are often focused on the question—"Who should do preventive work?" Problems such as the Health Visitor and Child Care Officer experienced in the Long case over casework method may be taken up and used by Chief Officers. On these issues, opinions may be rationally held and cogent arguments advanced on either side. But they are frequently complicated by other less wholesome motives. Simon's book: *Administrative Behaviour* studies many different factors involved in decision making in any organisation. He makes the point that identification with an organisation is necessary in order to cope with the problem of rational choice. "Identification is an important mechanism for constructing the environment of decision". This is because it limits the issues which the people concerned have to consider and cope with. Simon suggests, however, that the

high-level administrator must have wider horizons.

... "Observation indicates that, as the higher levels are approached in administrative organisations, the administrator's 'internal' task (his relations with the organisation subordinate to him) decreases in importance relative to his 'external' task (his relations with persons outside the organisation). An ever larger part of his work may be subsumed under the heads of 'public relations' and 'promotion'. The habits of mind characteristic of the administrative roles at the lower and higher levels of an organisation undoubtedly show differences corresponding to these differences in function.

"At the lower levels of the hierarchy, the frame of reference within which decision is to take place is largely given. The factors to be evaluated have already been enumerated, and all that remains is to determine their values under the given circumstances. At the higher levels of the hierarchy, the task is an artistic and an inventive one. New values must be sought out and weighed; the possibilities of new administrative structures evaluated. The very framework of reference within which decision is to take place must be constructed.

"It is at these higher levels that organisational identifications may have their most serious consequences. At the lower level, the identification is instrumental in bringing broad considerations to bear on individual situations. It ensures that decisions will be made responsibly and impersonally. At the higher levels, identifications serve to predetermine the decision, and to introduce among its assumptions unrecognised and unverified valuations. . . ."

Thus, in our sphere of interest, Simon would place fairly and squarely on the Chief Officers'

shoulders' the task of looking beyond the confines of his own organisation towards the wider values and objectives of the Social Services as a whole. Sectional loyalties, one may feel, are inevitable and even necessary at the field work level but at the higher levels one should have different expectations. One must recognise that at the present time, for a variety of reasons, not all Senior Officers are of the calibre, intellectually and professionally, to fulfil these functions in relation to co-ordination. It happens not infrequently that field workers are better qualified than their Senior Officers which means that the former lack the informed support which is their right in any organisation. Simon's comments point up the great need in social work at the present time to study at greater depth the administrative processes.

One may I think group the difficulties of co-ordination under four general heads: firstly, problems of social philosophy; secondly, of case-work skills; thirdly, of the workers' function and involvement; fourthly, of the administrator's rôle. Only by a circular and complicated route like this, can we find our way back again to the Long family, to the family in need, whom we so often fail through our clouded perception of the processes in which we are involved. In all that is discovered, two essentials will I believe emerge—the need for deeper personal insight, on the one hand, and on the other, the need for wider vision of the objectives of the social services as a whole.