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Intuition and Involvement in Social Work

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I AM a teacher of social work in Oxford and I have a tent amongst the dwellings of sociologists. It might be fair to say that I am on the housing list for a permanent dwelling, but the question is—will I, representing social work, get enough points to qualify? Sociology in Great Britain has striven for the last 20-30 years to establish itself as a scientific subject. I have in the course of my contact with this scientific world—which was entirely unfamiliar to me as my academic background is in the humanities—developed a profound respect for those who seek after truth in this way, and I have no doubt of the contribution that such researches can make to social work in terms of increased understanding of human behaviour; but I know that this cannot be my kind of contribution to social work for I have neither the training nor the cast of mind to make it possible. So what can I—and many others like myself in social work—offer for the enrichment of this service to people which we care about? Can social work bridge a gap between the artistic and scientific approaches to human behaviour? C. P. Snow, in his recent postscript to "The Two Cultures", speaks of the rise of a "third culture" comprised of various disciplines concerned with how human beings live, and suggests that such subjects may serve as lines of communication between the arts and the sciences. Perhaps this is not clearly understood at present by the specialists themselves within these disciplines, who tend to plump for one side or the other.

Of the many facets of these difficult questions, the uses of intuition are of particular interest to social workers; how in fact, can we uphold this capacity in the face of the precise analytic approach which social scientists rightly seek to emphasize?

All true scientists acknowledge the place of intuition in their discoveries. Magnus Pyke writes of three stages in scientific thinking. First, "the collection of facts", next "the construction of a hypothesis", lastly "the process of searching for further facts to test the fit of the hypothesis". Only the first and third of these operations, claims Pyke, is scientific. The second, the construction of a hypothesis, is a matter of intuition—the sudden flash that fits the pieces together and suggests an explanation of the problem. This helps us to place a proper value on intuition when we encounter it in social work, realizing that it is an integral part of other disciplined activities. But it does not help to answer three questions: what is intuition, is the intuition of the scientist the same as that of the social worker, and how does a social worker prove his intuition?

My own view is that the concept of the unconscious mind as worked out by the psychoanalysts is the most helpful way of looking at intuition. For once you have accepted the idea that only a part of mental processes are conscious anyway, it is easy to see that the so-called flash of intuition may in fact represent an unconscious process of thought, which like the greater part of the iceberg, remains submerged while the tip shows above the surface. This is supported by the fact that the intuition to which I have been referring tends to occur in those areas of mental activity in which the thinker is particularly interested; thus the scientist "intuits" about science, the poet about poetry, and so on. The flash often comes after hard conscious thinking—apparently unproductive—has gone on, or after a night's sleep.

The merit of such a view of intuition is that it implies the creative, constructive activities of the unconscious mind, which is seen as feeding the conscious rational processes. We can abandon once and for all the image of the unconscious as a kind of dustbin in which we hide away the less wholesome parts of ourselves. It also takes away from a magical, even somewhat frightening view of the process as somehow "arising from nowhere". Lancelot Whyte in his

book "The Unconscious before Freud" contributes to our thinking about this: " . . . There is no reason to regard unconscious processes as intrinsically irrational merely because we do not yet understand the organization and operation of the mind . . . The operations of the unconscious imagination and judgement . . . provide the basis for rational thought. It is reason which must grow more comprehensive so that it can understand, assist and fuse with . . . the ordinary processes of the unconscious . . ." (p. 7).

THE intuition of the scientist which I have been describing takes the form of a sudden "idea" to explain certain phenomena. It has to be clothed in words, intellectually expressed, before it can be tested. "Perhaps the reason for so-and-so might be such-and-such." Just the same thing sometimes happens with a social worker. But there may be other occasions when the social worker skips that stage altogether, when the hunch is immediately translated into action without the intervening conscious intellectual process. Let us suppose a caseworker sees in the same day Mrs. A and Mrs. B. Both offer the caseworker gifts of vegetables from the garden. The caseworker may accept Mrs. A's offer and refuse Mrs. B's (graciously one hopes), without being conscious of her reasons at all; analysed, they might be as follows: that Mrs. A needs to show the worker that she can grow good things and give good things to the worker as well as tell her bad bits—worries, troubles, etc.: that Mrs. B is trying to get the worker into a position of personal friendship which undermines the professional rôle.

The scientist must, by definition, test his hunches. He frames a hypothesis and then he sets up experiments by which he can test them. The research worker in the social sciences and even more the practising social worker, has an incredibly difficult task to find ways of testing hypotheses when they are concerned with human behaviour in complex situations, and most particularly with the testing of the social caseworker's activities. The individual social worker cannot do this even if he knew how as he is quite properly committed to action, not to that kind of research. Sometimes he can pause to consider his intuition and translate feeling into words before he acts, and obviously this is a useful and desirable thing to do when possible. Often, however, the action or the decision is taken before any such clarification has happened. *Then it is the result of the action which tests the intuition.*

Thus, over the offers of Mrs. A and Mrs. B of gifts, it will be the attitude of Mrs. A and Mrs. B to the caseworker in subsequent interviews which will help the worker see if he was right to refuse one and accept the other. Too often in casework at the present time, the pressures on individuals and lack of casework supervision make it difficult to check the result of the intuition. This is a great pity because in the sphere of human relationships particularly, we all know intuition is prone to error. The fallibility of intuition is due to the many subjective factors which crowd in to cloud the perception of others. Thus in the case of Mrs. A and Mrs. B the worker could have been quite wrong; especially if he did not understand his own complicated reactions to receiving gifts—perhaps his own need always to be the giver, not the receiver. These kinds of lessons can often only be learnt retrospectively, but each lesson learnt adds to the rich store of a good social worker's understanding of human relationships, and the experience of one situation affects and improves the handling of the next.

THUS we come to see that while those equipped and trained to do it must continue to test our intuition by orthodox scientific methods, the caseworker's tool must be insight —introspection—call it what you will. This is why it is an indispensable part of social work training to seek to sharpen the inner eye, as it were. Insight is a part of a social worker's private testing apparatus.

This view of the use of intuition carries with it an important assumption that although good caseworkers may do good work simply on the basis of their intuition, the best caseworkers will follow it up with analysis, will use conscious

thought to examine their intuition further. This is desirable not simply to "catch out" the deceiving fancy: but to liberate it. We cannot *create* intuition in ourselves or others, but we can free it and make it more reliable. The social worker who seems to be endowed with this natural gift of understanding deep things about human relationships does not have this gift "out of the blue". He has already learnt unconsciously a great deal about relationships. He has been, as it were, unusually "sharpened up" in this area from childhood onwards as the artist has noticed shapes and colour combinations with sudden flashes of perception about what he observes. But like the artist and the scientist the social worker by all kinds of study develops and improves the faculty.

This task of testing intuition is not, of course, "testing" as scientists understand it; it is the kind of testing which artists and poets are concerned with in the inner search for the validity of a feeling and the means of expressing it. What then are the parallels between the interests and the attitudes of the artist and those of the social caseworker?

In "Literature and Science", Aldous Huxley defined the differences between the literary and scientific approach as follows:

> " . . . The scientist examines a number of particular cases, notes all similarities and uniformities and from these abstracts a generalization, in the light of which (after it has been tested against the observed facts) all other analogous cases may be understood and dealt with. His primary concern is not with the concreteness of some unique event, but the abstracted generalizations, in terms of which all events of a given class 'make sense'. The literary artist's approach to experience—even to experience of the more public kind—is very different . . . His method is to concentrate upon some individual case, to look into it so intently that finally he is enabled to look clean through it . . ."

If those distinctions are acceptable it is easy enough to see where the social caseworker fits: the caseworker must utilize the knowledge offered by the social scientist or psychologist. Behind his handling of a given situation must be knowledge based on proven facts. But this cannot be, nor should it ever be, the only kind of knowledge we need. We need also the kind of understanding that Coleridge wrote about;

> "If the feelings, the imagination and even the fancy . . . are to be withheld from the service of truth, to what purpose were they given?"

And again:

> "It is in the nature of all disquisitions on matters of taste that the reasoner must appeal for his very premises to facts of feeling and of inner sense which all men do not possess."

If you substitute, with apologies to Coleridge, "social casework" for the word "taste" in that paragraph you will have a statement of equal importance to social work. In describing a poem, you may begin with a statement such as—"I like it, it makes me feel so-and-so". You must go on to try and analyse what it is that makes for this feeling. But it is accepted that you cannot begin to understand till you have, as it were, involved yourself with the work of art. The social worker must accept and use a similar feeling reaction to the person he has to help: by the scientific knowledge which is increasingly available to him and by the refinement of his own perceptions he must seek to understand the reaction more clearly. But the feeling response to an individual is in each case unique and the deepest levels of understanding are born of involvement.

Lawrence Hyde in "The Learned Knife" writes:

> "You cannot merely by being very very scrupulous and painstaking, find out what other people have discovered by passion, sacrifice, faith and suffering. The man you are studying only comes into existence for you in so far as he is perceived with a sympathy born of similar experience."

THERE is a tiresome muddle at present in some talk about social work—talk about "not getting involved". Without involvement, there is no understanding and without understanding there is no helping. But like most muddles, it has a germ of truth in it. For the

professional caseworker has a curious part to play, a kind of involvement within detachment and detachment within involvement. This is the paradox.

The professional relationship places limits on what is demanded of you emotionally and enables you to free yourself from some of your own conflicts and anxieties, and thus in one sense involve yourself more deeply and fruitfully with the person who needs your help. This is what I mean by involvement within detachment. On the other hand, the social worker must be a bit like the poet who is passionately involved in conveying a truth about the world as he sees it, and yet must retain a kind of detachment within this to study the detail of his verse and to perfect it. So it is in however humble a way, with the social worker, in an interview with a client for example. There is no reality in the relationship if you cannot feel with another human being; but in order to help him more, you must study the detail of what he says to you, watch for the hints of feeling which he may give you in oblique ways. This requires a kind of detachment. But within the *involvement* you may find the truth about an aspect of the person which you will never find as a detached observer. Every day we hear that this is an age of science and social workers may, I think, be all too easily forced into one of two false positions. Firstly, we may develop an exaggerated respect for that which can be measured scientifically or statistically and lose confidence in those judgements which are made from the "interior standpoint" based on this complicated series of intuitive processes I have been discussing. We must beware of what J. S. Hapgood has called the "psychological hold of mathematical ideals" . . . On the other hand, we may turn our backs on what such scientific study has to offer us. Social workers in the days of the Charity Organization Society did just this when they turned their backs on the implications of Booth's London Survey. We are paying the price today.

Thus, behind the pressing need for more social workers lie other questions: what kind of social workers, and how trained? We are in a crucial phase now. Most of the young people whom I train are academically well qualified and have a highly developed critical intellect. We want more of such people if social work is to stand up as a profession, and we want to foster the growth of discriminating critical minds. But the nature of this profession of social casework demands the development of these other faculties I have been describing. The teachers have to facilitate this side of the social worker's understanding along with other kinds of learning.

It is never easy to stand with a foot in two worlds; yet in social work we must, and in doing so we make a contribution, however small, towards a better understanding of the way in which these two approaches to human relationships, the artistic and the scientific, can complement and enrich each other.

Let Keats have the last word:

> "But the minds of mortals are so different and bent on such diverse journeys, that it may at first appear impossible for any common taste or fellowship to exist between two or three under these suppositions. It is, however, quite the contrary. Minds would leave each other in contrary direction, traverse each other in numberless points, and at last greet each other at the journey's end."

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