

Case Conference

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Specialisation Within a Unified Social Work Service

OLIVE STEVENSON

THIS IS AN attempt to clarify one of the issues involved in the consideration of a unified structure in local government personal social services. Reference has been made to the conflict between factors which lead to a demand for greater co-ordination and those which point to a need for continued specialisation. The first question is, therefore, is there really such a conflict? At first glance this may be how it looks. A study of trends in organisations generally, however, leads to two conclusions. Firstly, that specialisation is an inescapable aspect of progress in sophisticated organisations and, indeed, in all advanced societies. Secondly, the very fact of specialisation increases the need for co-ordination by the organisation. Wilbert Moore writes:¹

"Certain processes of change may be found to have a reliable and enduring direction. Most notable . . . is the presumably universal tendency to specialisation or structure differentiation".

He adds:

"Specialisation is not of course an absolutely sovereign and irreversible dynamic process as its dangers to systematic cohesion may occasionally lead to renewed emphasis on unity. . . . But the probability of continuing specialisation in enduring social systems is high".

Thus it is reasonable to conclude that social work will prove no exception and that specialisations of some kind will be found even if unified personal social services arise within local authorities. Furthermore, evidence from other organisations stresses that this specialisation demands more of management, in order to ensure that communications run smoothly and that the various sections of the organisation combine

spread himself over too diverse a field of knowledge and practice. This has been called a together effectively. In particular, it has been pointed out that "specialisation increases the relative importance of *lateral* relationships as distinct from hierarchical". This implies that social workers in senior positions will have to become increasingly expert in what we are now coming to call management; for, as has often been pointed out, structural unification is no guarantee of organisational effectiveness.

The next general point is that there are said to be two kinds of specialisation described as "by task" and "by people".² The first, "by task" is usually illustrated by references to industrial organisations and factory workshops, where the job is broken down into its component parts and this in fact made simpler for the operators. The second "by people" applies in particular to the professions where it requires special expertise and a high level of training in a special field of activity. At first glance, it might seem that only the second kind of specialisation is relevant to social work. On further consideration, however, it is clear that both kinds can be applied to social work; in fact it is the distinction between these two kinds of specialisation which is so often blurred in our discussions and leads to confusion.

What then is the equivalent for our purposes of the factory workshop type of specialisations? This would be the limitation of task at field work level, on the assumption that a "ground floor" social worker cannot be expected to perform a range of duties across the board with equal skill and that efficiency will suffer if he is required to

* Based on paper given to an A.C.C.O. Conference in November, 1967. *The author queried whether it should be published now that the Seebohm Report was out but it seemed to the Editor that this made it more interesting, considering when the paper was given.*

“sub-division of performance roles”. This I shall refer to as “organisational specialisation” and contrast it with “professional specialisation” which would arise at senior levels, as a product of acknowledged skill and expertise.

In the history of the organisational development of the social work services in this country we can detect three phases; first the undifferentiated care afforded by the workhouse to the destitute, whether young or old, mad or sub-normal; secondly, the growth of services to cater for specific categories of human need; and now, thirdly, a trend to unification of these services arising from the belief that human need and in particular family problems cannot be administratively dichotomised. We can all point to absurdities which have arisen because of such administrative divisions but we can acknowledge at the same time that the impetus, which concentration on certain social problems gave to the relevant social work services, has not been without benefit. (The setting up of Children’s Departments in 1948 is a good example of this.) Given a unified structure the problem which now arises is the extent to which specialisation at field level is desirable and necessary.

It is very difficult to detach ourselves from our existing specialisations and look at this objectively. Inevitably, when we know a good deal about one part of social work, there is a tendency to think that a “general purpose” social worker could only be superficial by comparison. If we look to the medical model—the general practitioner—the problem is distanced a little and becomes clearer. Is the g.p. becoming a Jack of all trades and master of none in this age of rapidly expanding knowledge or has he a vital integrating role in medicine which society needs? Is the comparison between a general social worker and a g.p. a valid one, in terms of the amount of knowledge and skill to be acquired, and the attitudes and motivations to different types of patient or client?

Are we prepared to say that a general social worker needs to know more than a g.p.? Or that the underlying motivations enable him to work successfully with one group of clients rather than another—with the delinquent youth rather than

the aged, for example, whereas the underlying motivation of the g.p. to heal the sick takes him across such boundaries? I do not pretend to know the answer to such questions. By raising them, I point to the possibility of comparisons with other professions which could be fruitfully studied at much greater depth. Equally fruitful would be comparative studies with other countries and their social work services. When I was in the U.S.A. I visited two voluntary agencies which ran, apparently successfully, on completely different lines. In one, a family agency in Washington, I learnt that there was no *formal* specialisation at field level in relation to family problems—social workers had a varied caseload ranging from problems of illegitimacy to senility. However, in discussion, a certain degree of *informal* specialisation became apparent; by virtue of certain workers’ inclinations and gifts, they tended to draw a larger proportion of one or another type of problem. This necessitates case allocation by seniors who identify and allow for these inclinations. In another agency, however, field level specialisation was much more formally defined, with workers dealing full time with problems of illegitimacy, for instance.

If it is decided that neither of these extremes are desirable—complete dependence on informal specialisation or a rigid division by type of problem or person—but that nevertheless some kind of subdivision of task at field level is necessary, there then arises the difficulty of agreeing on subdivisions with the organisation. Two such subdivisions which are conceivable are; firstly, services to families (interpreting the word widely to include married couples without children, fatherless families, etc.) in the community; secondly, services to individuals to adults and children in long term residential care (including hostels and foster homes) with or without family ties. There are cogent objections to such a division; the “boundary” problems which arise when people move to and from the community and the institution; the danger of separating “the community” from “the institution” organisationally at a time when efforts are being made to bridge the gap.† The difficulty is, however, to find any more viable alternative. It is clear that

† I am indebted to the discussion at the A.C.C.O. Conference for these points.

the arguments which have led to a wish for administrative unity in respect of the services to families in their own homes are overwhelming. These are too familiar to be restated. One factor, however, is worth restating—the growing body of theory about family interaction from many different sources, all of which tends to emphasise the subtle interdependence of family members in ways not fully recognised in the past.³ This has great relevance to the issue of specialisation, whether by problem (delinquency, mental illness), or by family member (child, grandmother) because it suggests that almost any kind of specialisation at general social worker level may reinforce identifications with problems or individuals which are unhelpful if the family is to be viewed as a dynamic system—anything that happens to one member having repercussions on the whole.

The analogy of the family with the human body is sometimes made to point up the argument. Just as physical injury or disease in one part of the body has far-reaching repercussions on the whole system, so the same may be said of the family members in terms of social and emotional factors. The analogy breaks down, however, in that human beings can and do exist separately from their family in a way that parts of the body do not. Adequate personal social work services must, therefore, also take account of the individual apart from his family. It may, therefore, be that this would be a possible basis for formal field level specialisation: general social workers working with families, and general social workers specialising in alternative community provisions for those who cannot be within their families. This latter group would be particularly knowledgeable and skilled in the various forms of residential and foster home provision. I suspect that the problems of placement of mentally ill adults in hostels, children in foster homes or the aged in homes, for instance, would throw up many of the same problems of role relationships, for the social workers with residential staff or foster parents; many of the same problems in adjustment for clients in new situations and so on. Within such formal differentiations, there might still be room for informal specialisation according to inclination

and motivation. This is simply a suggestion in the hope it will provoke better alternatives. However, if we set up any model in which formal field level specialisation is reduced to a minimum, this carries with it the absolute necessity of specialisation at senior level so that the general social worker has access to skilled consultation when it is needed, in the same way as a g.p. Thus we come to the second kind of specialisation—professional specialisation in which unique skill and expertise is acknowledged. The history of the professions shows that such specialisms are constantly evolving and changing as new knowledge and skill become available. One thing, in the midst of much uncertainty, is quite clear. Social work must have this kind of specialist. What is described as the “information explosion” in the social sciences, the rapid increase of knowledge about social problems and social work provisions, makes it essential that certain people further the skill of the profession by concentrating their attentions on a certain aspect. Faced with the necessity of knowing about everything, the social worker retreats confounded: given the possibility of exploring with increasing thoroughness a facet of social work (adoption, mental illness, delinquency, perhaps) this can act as a stimulus and excitement. This does not contradict the earlier argument for general social workers and limiting specialisation at field level. It is an argument for initial breadth of field experience followed by, either, the possibility of depth which specialisation offers *or* movement into “management”—a different kind of breadth, “organisational” breadth. Either would offer an advanced career structure.

It is not fruitful at this stage to suggest any precise forms which such advanced specialisation may take. It is helpful to put this in a general perspective. In an article by Bucher and Strauss “Professional Association and Colleague Relations”,⁴ the authors point out that sociologists, in writing about the professions, have tended to emphasise the “shared identity, values, definitions of role and interests of members of a profession”. “In short” the sociology of the professions has largely been focused upon the mechanics of cohesiveness and upon detailing the

social structure of the professions". They suggest that in so doing, the conflict of interests within professions have tended to be overlooked. "The assumption of relative homogeneity within the profession is not entirely useful; there are many identities, many values, many interests". These "tend to become patterned and shared; coalitions develop and flourish . . .". The authors call these grouping "segments" and suggest that specialisms may be called major segments. One statement we can take to heart in our own deliberations at the present time—under the heading "the sense of mission" the authors write:

"It is characteristic of the growth of specialities that early in their development they carve out for themselves and proclaim unique missions. They issue a statement of the contribution that the speciality, and it alone, can make in a total scheme of values and, frequently, with it an argument to show why it is peculiarly fitted for the task. The statement of mission tends to take a rhetorical form, probably, therefore, it arises in the context of a battle for recognition and institutional status".

It seems that conflict between different segments or specialisms claiming particular knowledge and skills promotes growth; in social work these will arise as new social problems arise or are detected and appraised in different ways. (An example would be in relation to immigrants.)

Bucher and Strauss continue:—

"Segments are not fixed, perpetually defined parts of the body professional . . . they take form and develop, they are modified and they disappear. . . . Each generation engages in spelling out, again, what it is about and where it is going. . . . Out of this fluidity, new groupings may emerge".

The different types of professional specialism which could arise would be concerned with areas of knowledge. These areas of knowledge might be related to specific social problems (such as physical handicap or delinquency); to the phases of human existence (childhood or old age); to social provision (residential care) or to method (casework or groupwork).

There could be much argument about all these; perhaps least familiar to British social workers is the controversy over "method" specialisation, so heated in the States. It is clear that however the controversy is resolved at field level—can we

have multi *method* social workers?—there will be room for specialists in the three methods we at present identify—casework, group work and community organisation. Certainly one can be assured that the unified social work organisation we envisage, combined with the likelihood of larger local government units generally, makes a career structure for a variety of senior specialists a real possibility.

So far I have been outlining a hypothetical model; it is one in which a general social worker, undertaking a broad range of tasks but with certain formal sub-divisions of task within the organisation, and with the probability of informal specialisation according to inclination; this could only be contemplated given the existence of senior specialists available for consultation. One hopes that the medical parallel would not be exact; that the general social worker, unlike the average g.p., would be free to move up the hierarchy towards specialisation or management and that specialisation would usually arise after a period of general social work.

I am bound to admit, however, that the ideas I have been putting forward may be quite unrealistic; for whatever structural alterations take place, the fact is that large numbers of people who will enter such a structure at field level will come with pretty strongly defined identifications with a certain field of practice. The question is—how far existing social workers themselves can make the role adjustment, apart from acquisition of further knowledge and skill, which will be required to function as "general social workers".

Change gets harder as we get older. It is likely that many young social workers could make such an adaptation; many of the *older* social workers would be equipped for specialist senior roles which would partly solve that problem. There would still be, however, large numbers of social workers for whom the strain of the adaptation would be considerable.

The saddest aspect of all this relates to developments in social work education in the past ten or twelve years. In 1955, the first "generic" course at the London School of Economics burst upon the world and since that time there has been an increasing acceptance of generic principles;

firstly, that there is a common base of knowledge, attitudes and skills which all social workers need; secondly, that these can be illustrated in different fields of practice—hence the customary practice of arranging fieldwork placements in different settings. This is a pretty firmly held belief now amongst social work teachers. Yet in many ways the pull against such generic trends has been very strong. Firstly, the fragmentation of responsibility for social work education at Government level has led to very rapid expansion of courses outside the universities with clear associations to certain fields of practice. Even courses within universities are not free from this kind of conflict. Secondly, the fragmentation of the social work services in local government has meant that the identifications of students with fields of practice, which is implied from the outset by grants and labels, is strongly reinforced in their first posts. It is my opinion that the importance of unconscious motivation in determining choice of field or practice has been misunderstood. People's unconscious motivation has to go somewhere—if, suddenly, all Child Care or Probation Officers were abolished, applicants for such posts would not be lost to social work. They would find an alternative outlet for their unconscious needs. More important in terms of social work at the present time is the role image of the "Child Care Officer" or "Probation Officer" fostered in training and reinforced in practice.

While recognising the inevitability, given the present situation, of the emergency Child Care Training scheme, which has just been launched, this affords a particularly vivid example of the dilemma we face. This rapid expansion, so greatly needed, so desirable, has taken place before structural unification at central or local level and before—just before—a National Association of Social Workers—comes into existence. This will make a task of reorientation a massive one and it may mean that the kind of general social work I have envisaged is simply not a practical possibility in the foreseeable future. I hope this is unduly pessimistic.

A further difficulty in relation to the "general social work idea" is concerned, not only with emotional identification with the fields of

practice, but also with the demands on intellectual capacity which a truly generic approach requires. The capacity to transfer knowledge from one field to another, to see general applications, is generally conceded to be related to intellectual capacity. How far can we assume that, at basic level, all social workers can be trained to grasp the general applicability of certain concepts rather than their specific application to certain situations? An example might be in connection with residential care—and raises a question about the recommendations of the Williams' Committee for generic training.⁵ This is a subject, however, on which we have no evidence and is purely speculative. It would be gratifying if this point could be disproved.

The implications of these ideas for social work education are threefold.

Firstly, we should attempt to establish a truly "generic" social work education at basic level. Despite agreement in general terms that this is desirable, we are a long way from the reality. The implications of this must be recognised by practitioners. It means abandoning concentration on detail and attempting to paint on a wider canvas. Much that is now uneasily included in basic training under the heading of "settings"—child care law, detailed medical knowledge and so on—would be jettisoned.

This leads to the second implication—the extensive development of in-service training as an ongoing indispensable part of professional education. This would equip new social workers with the necessary detailed knowledge; and it would encourage mobility between whatever formal organisational specialisations do arise.

Thirdly, universities and technical colleges should develop advanced trainings, of various lengths, in different specialisations and in management.

Despite any efforts towards a unified policy and approach towards change—our British traditions will ensure that in fact there will be much diversity (or confusion, according to your point of view). There is, however, much to commend diversity on issues such as these, which can only be resolved by experience. Nevertheless, may I in conclusion press home two points.

Let us use whatever changes are proposed for

some bold and adventurous reorganisation—not just a gathering together of existing fields of practice under one organisational umbrella.

Let us build into any reorganisation an ongoing system of enquiry so that we examine some of the questions which arise from consideration of this topic: questions such as the extent and type of division of task necessary at field level; the use of informal specialisation; the differing capacities of social workers to transfer knowledge and skill from one field to another, and so on.

If ten local authorities involved ten universities or technical colleges in planned appraisal of their reorganisation from the outset—not afterwards when the necessary data has not been recorded—we would have a fascinating study of the interaction between organisational processes and personal and professional identifications. This could be a real advance in the theory and practice of social work. It would be a tragedy if we missed the chance.

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4. Ed. Vollmir. *Professionalisation*.
5. *Caring for People*, pub. Allen & Unwin, for National Council of Social Service.