

Mrs Palmer.

Comments on the Critique of the Social Work Course

Although we shall be meeting to discuss many of the points raised by the 2nd year social work students, I thought it might be helpful if I circulated some of my own thoughts and comments on the critique and indicated the issues which I, personally, would find most useful to discuss. Some of these I have already discussed with some social work students and tutors but it would certainly be useful to discuss them further in a group. However, these comments are my own and are not necessarily shared by the other social work teachers or other staff in the department. Nonetheless, I think I can say that we all agree that the critique is a most useful and well set out document. We appreciate the time and energy needed to gather together these comments, and while it may be cathartic to criticise, it needs a good deal of effort to formulate these criticisms in such a concise way! It is also an unselfish exercise because the benefits which may come about from changes in the course arising from this critique will accrue primarily to the second generation! It seems sensible to set out my comments in the same order as particular problems are discussed in the critique.

1. Basic Education in Social Sciences.

I think that all the tutors in Barnett House would agree that the 'splitting' of subjects between terms and sometimes between years, e.g. social institutions, has not been successful. Some changes have already been made in the design of the course and social administration, social psychology and social institutions will now be taught in the first year. The academic work during the 2nd year will primarily be focussed on social pathology and such seminars as those on social policy organized this year by Dr. Halsey and Mrs. Parker. In this way we hope that the work of the 2nd year will be 'problem focussed' and approaches to this can then be made from sociological, psychological administrative standpoints.

a) Social Psychology.

The emphasis of this paper has changed during the 2nd year and social work students concentrate primarily on theories and studies of human behaviour which include psychoanalytic and empirical approaches. The social work tutors have for some time recognised the difficulty of studying this subject without reference to 'normal' behaviour, particularly that of children. In the past, social work students have been involved in making 'child studies' i.e. visiting a 'normal' family with young children over a period of months. There are however drawbacks, to this plan. It is complex to arrange and time consuming for students i.e. it could involve one afternoon a week, and it also means that students only observe development over a period of 9 months at a maximum i.e. October to June for the first year. It is doubtful whether it would be possible for this to be fitted in, together with the playgroups and particularly during the Trinity Term when students are doing fieldwork. We have, however, discussed the following alterations:

1. A series of visits to day nurseries
2. Visits to pre school playgroups and more visits to nursery schools (3 to 5 year age group.)
3. A series of films illustrating normal child development to be shown in the first year and to run concurrently with some social psychology teaching in the term before Dr. Pritchard's seminars. We have already collected together a number of possible films and these will probably be shown to first year students (the next 'intake'!) in the Michaelmas or Hilary Term.

b) Social Institutions

It is of course more appropriate for Dr. Martin or Mr. Ridge to comment on this. However, I know they agree that the splitting of this paper was a mistake and the pattern has been changed this year. It was originally intended that the applied sociology paper might be the most

useful for social work students but the sociology tutors eventually decided that as a whole the social institutions paper was more satisfactory and would include the subjects concerned in the rubric for applied sociology. Opinions differ as to how useful it is for underlying approaches and concepts to be discussed before specific topics are studied. Some tutors think that such a theoretical approach without reference to particular topics would be both arid and rather meaningless.

c) Social Administration

I think both Dr. Halsey and Mrs. Parker have thought that the second year seminars on problems of social policy have been useful and I know this feeling has been shared by many students. I agree that it would be useful to have more seminars designed on similar lines although these would probably have to take place in the Trinity Term of the second year and opinions differ about how much 'organised' teaching there should be during this term. We would be interested to have your comments on the Social Work and Social Action seminars which have some implications for social administration, social work and sociology.

d) Social Pathology

I have already written some comments on the teaching of the criminological aspects of social pathology and I know that the students who discussed this with Dr. Walker have seen these. If anyone else would like a copy, would they please get in touch with me. I do not want to repeat all the points I made but I would like to emphasise that it would not be possible to 'define an overall approach to the topic in the initial stages' since social pathology must be studied from different standpoints, e.g. psychological, sociological, etc. One aim of this paper is that it should draw together knowledge of particular aspects of the social sciences in an attempt to study particular problems. We never expected a 'unified concept of social pathology to emerge'. I don't think it exists! However, it would probably have been helpful if we could have explained this necessary 'confusion' when students began to study the subject and this we will attempt to do in the future. We will also try to explain the rationale for inclusion of particular subjects and point out that there are many which could have been included as well, e.g. study of aspects of poverty. However, briefly when this paper was planned, it was primarily intended to meet the needs of intending social workers. Subjects were chosen therefore which would have special relevance to their future careers.

As I have already discussed in my comments on the criminological teaching, I too am doubtful whether social work students find it particularly helpful to share all the seminars relating to social pathology with graduate social scientists, lawyers, etc. While I would not wish social work to become too parochial I think that most social work students have found it difficult to contribute to discussion of a subject with which they feel unfamiliar with those who already seem 'expert' in it. It is clearly important for some subjects to be discussed with lawyers and other social scientists and I think that social work students, and perhaps social workers in general, underestimate the value of their practical experience of certain problems. However, I recognise the difficulty of sharing all seminars and I suggest that some of the social work classes during the Hilary Term could be devoted to study of particular treatment approaches to certain problems, e.g. addiction, alcoholism, mental disorder, etc. Mr. Ridge may also give a series of seminars during the last half of the second academic year in which approaches to social pathology are discussed.

I do not agree that tutorials 'to cover basic facts' would be a good plan since this type of teaching is not done economically in tutorials. It could also be extremely boring for both tutors and students. However, it has been suggested that each speaker in the series of seminars 'Forms of Deviance' in the Michaelmas Term, should issue a 'Basic Facts Paper', i.e. one foolscap sheet giving essential 'hard data' and basic reading.

I agree that book lists have often been long but I have welcomed the fact that they are sometimes repetitious. I thought it would be reassuring for students to know that one book could be read in conjunction with several topics! I think we must in future make it clearer what is essential reading, e.g. indicate important chapters of books, but I would be sorry if we pruned the lists too far since many of the subjects included in social pathology are intended to be useful to social workers for purposes other than the final examination! Hopefully, I think these book lists should be useful for future reference!

I must apologise for some of the confusion over teaching arrangements. Although plans were made months in advance, we could not anticipate all the problems until they actually arose! In addition it is extremely complicated to plan teaching where five or six tutors are involved. Since more tutors will be teaching the criminological topics next year, this difficulty will not disappear. I hope, however, that I have learnt something from last year's experience^{and} that some of the confusion will be avoided. Planning was complicated by suggesting that in some cases students should choose their tutors. For administrative reasons I do not think it will be possible to repeat this.

e) Dissertation

I think that the aims of the dissertation may not have been made sufficiently clear. While it was intended that students should have some experience in doing some individual and 'original' research¹ in their work in view of the imminent 'explosion' in social work research, it was never anticipated that "valid conclusions" would be reached. However, it is particularly important that intending social workers should have some experience of research in their work in view of the increasing amounts of information relevant to social work. I think I see most of the dissertations as "pilot" pilot projects. In spite of the short time available for the gathering of data and review of relevant literature some very interesting work has been done and I think some students tend to underestimate its value and the efforts that they have made.

I certainly agree that all the social work tutors need more experience in helping students design and set up projects and we hope we have learnt some valuable lessons during this last year. It is particularly important not to start with/too ambitious project. It is easier for projects to grow than to shrink! However, the nature of this type of independent work means it will always involve some uncertainties and disappointments however careful the preparation. We will certainly try and obtain "methodological" help for students who need this, although I would like to emphasise that the time available for work on the dissertation does not mean that 'perfect designs' or valid results are anticipated. In many cases it is both useful and interesting to have reached a point where problems may be more clearly defined and further questions asked.

The social work tutors agree that in future, because of the time available, no one person should supervise more than five or six dissertations. Even so, I doubt whether much more time could be spent on supervision and preparation although some students have certainly had more time than others. On average Mrs. Smethurst and I think we saw each student eight or nine times to discuss their dissertations and some students have consulted other tutors as well. Although rather exceptional, the planning of one student's dissertation involved the exchange of the planning of one student's dissertation involved the exchange of approximately 60 letters and telephone calls! In view of the pressures of work during the Trinity Term perhaps it would be a good plan for each student to meet his dissertation supervisor during the summer vacation to finalise, as far as is possible, plans for fieldwork.

I was interested in the suggestion that some 'group dissertations' might be attempted and would like to discuss this further with both students and staff. On the whole, I think four rather than six students would be a more viable number. However, most careful preparation would be needed since 'co-operation' in research is often extremely difficult and I have a horrid fear that the study of 'survey' having been completed,

there could be major difficulties in deciding who was to write up what and great care would be needed in order to prevent too much overlap. Nonetheless, I think this idea is worth exploring further.

II. Professional Education

I was impressed by the way in which the essential elements and problems in professional education had been grasped. Social work tutors are continually discussing many of the topics raised in the critique without having reached the 'right' or final answer. Indeed, it is extremely doubtful that these problems will be solved to everyone's satisfaction in view of the changing needs of the community and the changes in social work these demand. I think we have to accept some continuing tension and conflict and not necessarily see this as destructive.

I would question whether the social work tutors based their teaching on the assumption that the students know what casework was although it is certainly true that in previous years we have not found it worthwhile to teach the 'content' of casework before students are actually in their field placements. In courses which combine theory and practice there is nearly always a hiatus between the teaching of some theory and some practice. We hope that the disadvantages of this are outweighed by the advantages of combined theory and practice and it would be useful to discuss this further.

This year we have experimented by having in the Trinity Term both social work classes and some more formal seminars on aspects of social work theory, e.g. direct work with clients, the use of authority, etc. etc. I think these seminars have been helpful although I think that some first year students are doubtful about their value. They are certainly occasions when information is communicated and sometimes discussed but they are different to the more informal discussion and exchange of information which takes place during social work classes.

I am not quite clear what is meant by the comment that the social work tutors seem to assume that students know why they are doing casework and that it is justified. If this is a request for more teaching and study of empirical studies of the effectiveness of social work methods, then I agree entirely that this is important. However, given the complexity of so much social work and the present rather scanty literature on its effects, I think that for some time some assumptions, reasoned I hope, will have to be made. Although I do not think ethics can be 'taught' I certainly agree that there should be more opportunity for discussion of ethical issues in social work and the assumptions on which much social work is based. I would hope that this kind of discussion would go on informally throughout the course. The timing of more formal discussions is difficult. I think there is some evidence (e.g. from participation in the social work and social action seminars) that these more abstract topics are more readily discussed by second year students who feel they have a grasp of some of the issues involved. It is sometimes difficult to feel that relatively abstract issues can be discussed without some practical work experience, and also there are always those who are bored by 'abstract' discussion! It would be interesting to have students' comments on the timing of this "teaching".

a) Social Work Tutorials

I fully agree that it is important for some social work students to discuss their anxieties and stresses arising out of the process of social work education. However, I would not like to see this discussion as the prime focus for social work tutorials for several reasons:

- i) many students prefer to 'manage' their anxiety privately and succeed in doing this,
- ii) when students feel they need to discuss personal anxieties, they will not necessarily choose to do this with their social work tutor. Some prefer to discuss this with their supervisors.

- iii) Since the social work tutors do think that many things need to be taught and discussed, it is important that some social work tutorials should be reserved for 'teaching', although I recognise that some topics are more economically and usefully discussed in seminars. However, not every student feels able to participate fully in seminar discussion and may find tutorial teaching easier.

I would be interested to discuss this further with students but my own view is that if a student seems to be progressing well and coping with the various aspects of the course, social work tutorials should not be focussed primarily on discussion of his or her development and anxieties. I would rather see the social work tutorial as a more flexible 'tool' with efforts made to gear its content to students' needs both 'academic' and personal.

b) Social Work Classes

It is difficult to decide on the ideal size for group discussion. I do not think that 10 or 11 is necessarily too large and I have had experience of some smaller groups of 6-8 students where these were thought to be too small! Availability of tutors may be the deciding factor since it is not always possible in a group of about 21 students for three tutors to be continuously available to teach three groups.

I was interested in the idea that the playgroups were thought to be the ideal size and to provide support for individuals. I think all the social work teachers would agree that the playgroups provided very valuable experiences for both students and tutors. However, I do not think discussion in them was always easy and I think the support and cohesion achieved was derived partly from the 'task' of the group which could not necessarily be paralleled in groups formed primarily for discussion. If, as suggested, the groups changed in composition throughout the course I think it is unlikely that they would be very cohesive. What certainly seems important to note is the 'mourning' for the playgroups by some of the second year students and it would be interesting to discuss whether the student groups could usefully be continued in some way in the second year.

The flexibility and structure of social work classes is always a difficult problem and it is discussed endlessly by social work tutors! I certainly agree that there should be some freedom of choice for students although this does depend on students actually making choices and being willing to discuss their cases! It may be that groups should be less structured in the second year and I would be interested to discuss how students could be more involved in the planning of the seminars. I would also like to discuss how classes could be 'tightened up' for more attention to be given to methods of social work and also how worthwhile it is to 'teach' or discuss methods in which most students have little experience, e.g. group and community work.

The suggestion that there should be groups where students can raise individual matters is an interesting one (I do not think that T groups accurately describe what seems to be suggested). Some courses have these kinds of discussion groups and although it is recognised that in some cases students' anxiety is increased, the experience of participating in these groups is thought to be a helpful one. The possible introduction of these groups raises a number of interesting points possible introduction of these groups raises a number of interesting points e.g. should they be compulsory, who should lend them, should views exchanged during the groups be made known to the social work tutors if they were not directly involved in them, etc.? I think we should realise that it is very likely that while these kinds of discussion groups may seem useful in retrospect, while they are in progress they can give rise to anxiety and distress which some might rightly wish to avoid.

c) Outside Speakers

I agree with most of the points made. We certainly try to inform speakers of ground previously covered but this does not of course guarantee that a speaker will not give some repeat performances! It is also difficult, in a new series of seminars, to know exactly what ground each speaker will cover. I think it is therefore most important that whenever possible a social work tutor should come to seminars so that we can be fully aware of what is being discussed and wherever possible ensure continuity. I certainly agree that more stress could be placed on the intellectual and social development of individuals, but given the existing pressure of work I doubt if this could be included in any significant way without jettisoning some other part of the course. This might be the right decision and it would be useful to discuss with students what they think could be omitted.

d) Settings Classes

The social work tutors have already agreed that wherever possible the 'settings' seminars should run concurrently with the first part of the second placement.

I think the idea of summaries in the form of leaflets on the law relating to particular issues, e.g. housing is a good one. I would like to discuss with the probation students the extra 'settings' seminars they would like. I agree completely that the MSW students need the opportunity to discuss the emotional and social problems associated with illness with an MSW. I think the first year MSW's suffered both by being the first and being only two and we will certainly try to include seminars for the first year MSW's along the lines suggested.

It is perhaps worth mentioning that the teaching of 'settings' is a subject hotly and frequently debated by social work teachers and practitioners. There is considerable disagreement about how much should be taught 'in the field' and in the university, how far social work departments should offer continued in service training for recently qualified social workers and sometimes, in view of a possible 'Secbohm' future, whether there should be any specific settings teaching done in the university. Although, I am not completely sure about this I think at present I favour the courses containing some specific settings teaching but for this to be supplemented with 'generic' teaching, i.e. seminars in which students from all three streams discuss and compare work they all undertake, e.g. working in institutions, preparing reports, working with volunteers etc. The timing of the seminars is difficult. They might be best placed in the already crowded Hilary Term, or alternatively, in the last term although there is some evidence that students would prefer this term to be kept as free as possible.

e) Practical Placements

There is no doubt that the split week is hard to manage and the social work tutors have been very much aware during the last years of the strains placed on students, their tiredness, etc. It is particularly unfortunate that shortage of placements and the rural areas surrounding Oxford mean so much travelling.

We realised that some of the second year teaching programme could have been better placed in the first year and we have rearranged the ~~naves~~ ~~with~~ ~~this~~ ~~year~~ ~~pl~~ ~~to~~ ~~be~~ ~~in~~ ~~ve~~ ~~some~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~first~~ ~~year~~ ~~students~~ ~~now~~ ~~for~~ ~~the~~ ~~course~~ ~~this~~ ~~year~~. I believe some of the first year students now feel very overworked and we may have got the balance wrong again! I would like to discuss this further.

For many reasons this last year certainly seemed an extremely busy one for both students and tutors. In fact most planning of the various courses is done well in advance (i.e. months not weeks!) I would appreciate suggestions about how the work could be presented in a less confused way and also some clarification of that is meant by the 'logical progression' of subjects.

Given that a course combining theory and practice is seen as theoretically preferable it would be interesting to know if students did in fact have experience of their practical work adding dimensions to their academic work and vice versa. If they did not then the alternative would in my view be regrettable, i.e. theory learnt first in isolation from practice with inevitable frustration from students wanting to 'get on with the job', and once in the field finding little opportunity to study, question and discuss the basis of their work in relation to relevant theory. I would also be interested to know how the second year students have found this last term without any practical work and what improvements in organisation they would like to suggest.

f) Administration

I agree that seminars on organisation and administration would be better placed earlier in the course, although it just is not possible to have everything all at once! I am rather doubtful about the use of teaching office procedures since these vary so much from agency to agency. It is certainly most useful if each training agency can issue students with explanations of its particular procedures.

III. Professional Identity

I fully agree that social work education demanding as it does the development of self-awareness, can be and perhaps ought to be a painful process. A student who experienced no anxiety would probably be learning very little! I believe that a certain amount of stress is unavoidable although some students find a social work course much harder than others. I think that tutors should be ready to share these anxieties and in some cases to prompt open discussion of them although I also think that there are students who prefer to find other means of support and given that a student is progressing well, he should not feel bound to discuss his personal difficulties. Depending on the amount of support social work students need and would like I rather doubt whether social work tutors are the right people, or have the time to offer this on any intensive level.

Perhaps what concerns me most is that some students have felt unsupported and that in finding the course impersonal, have felt that the social work tutors have failed to make positive efforts to help them. Since the strains of a social work course mean that students should be supported as much as possible, I would like to discuss ways in which this might be more successfully achieved. There have of course been particular difficulties during the last two years, e.g. the new design of the course necessitated some experiments in teaching and planning which were not all successful. The social work tutors had to share their uncertainty about some matters with the students and there are special strains in being 'guinea pigs'! While I hope that any social work course would continue to experiment with different methods of teaching etc, it is easier to do this with the confidence which comes from some experience.

With the departure of Miss Stevenson some students had to change their tutor when this had not been anticipated at the beginning of the course. Naturally this change proved more difficult for some people than others. However, it is likely that in future years all students will have the experience of being tutored by different people. Apart from this being experience of being tutored by different people. Apart from this being unavoidable because of changes in staffing, (which are more common the larger a course becomes), there are also some positive advantages in having different tutors. What we would want to avoid are feelings of impersonality arising from these changes.

I am particularly sorry that the arrival of my baby and my absence from the department for the second half of the Hilary Term coincided with the last weeks of the second placement which are often the most trying. While not wishing to overemphasise the importance of the continued presence of any one tutor, I am well aware that my absence was unfortunate

for some students I tutor. I think that some felt that because of my imminent departure they either could not, or felt they ought not to discuss some personal problems. I think it is also possible that my absence may have prevented more open, and possibly heated discussion between social work students and tutors during the period when the strains of the course were most severe.

There are some other factors which are peculiar to this first two years which I think may have contributed to an atmosphere of impersonality felt by some students. During the first year the social work students had the undivided attention of their tutors and the number of students in the department was half what it is now. In the second year numbers doubled and new tutors were appointed. This, combined with longer periods away from the department during the second placement, meant that the second year students would inevitably feel that the course and the department had become more impersonal. The importance of this would obviously be affected by the degree of support students experienced in their placements. As I have already indicated, I am not sure that these difficulties would necessarily be decreased by the creation of special discussion groups but I would certainly like to explore this idea further. I would also welcome discussion of ways in which students could be involved in planning and decision making in the department.

I fully agree that there should be discussion between tutors and students of their social work and academic progress and I was under the impression that this was done! Certainly tutors and students seem to have discussed social work reports, future jobs etc. quite fully during this last term.

There is a constant need for the relationship between theory and practice to be explored and it is certainly helpful for tutors if regular discussion takes place between them and students so that particular difficulties can be highlighted, and if possible, overcome. It is, however, highly unlikely, given the nature of social science and the developments in social work that a sense of complete integration could be achieved. What must be explored, are the conflicts and tensions which need not necessarily be destructive. Whether it is possible for more subjects to be studied in depth and positive attempts made to prepare students for teaching and research given the existing pressures in the course I rather doubt. One of the frightening aspects of the critique is the request for more of nearly everything! However, we hope that some students will be interested in studying methods of social research and I would welcome the planning and 'taking' of seminars by students. Second year students might be involved in some discussion with first year students, e.g. about the running of playgroups or second year students might combine in planning seminars to discuss some 'generic' aspects of social work.

While I realise that the uncertainties and anxieties some students are feeling may be both frustrating and disappointing if they are too great, some of this is necessary if social workers are to develop professionally during their careers. In spite of possible feelings of immediate relief, I would be unhappy if students left the department feeling fully 'trained' and therefore without much incentive to explore social work practice further and at greater depth. Perhaps it could be said that one of the aims of the course is that questions should be asked which cannot at this stage be fully answered. The dissatisfactions of students may well indicate their high aspirations and ability and it is therefore all the more important that these should not be ignored by tutors. Therefore all the more important that these should not be ignored by tutors.

It would be particularly valuable for the department and the social work tutors if the present second year students could return to Oxford for two or three days in about eighteen months time when we could discuss in the light of our greater experience the deficiencies and merits of the course as a preparation for social work. I hope that it will be possible to plan a meeting of this kind and that many of the present students will be willing to share their experiences and ideas with us.