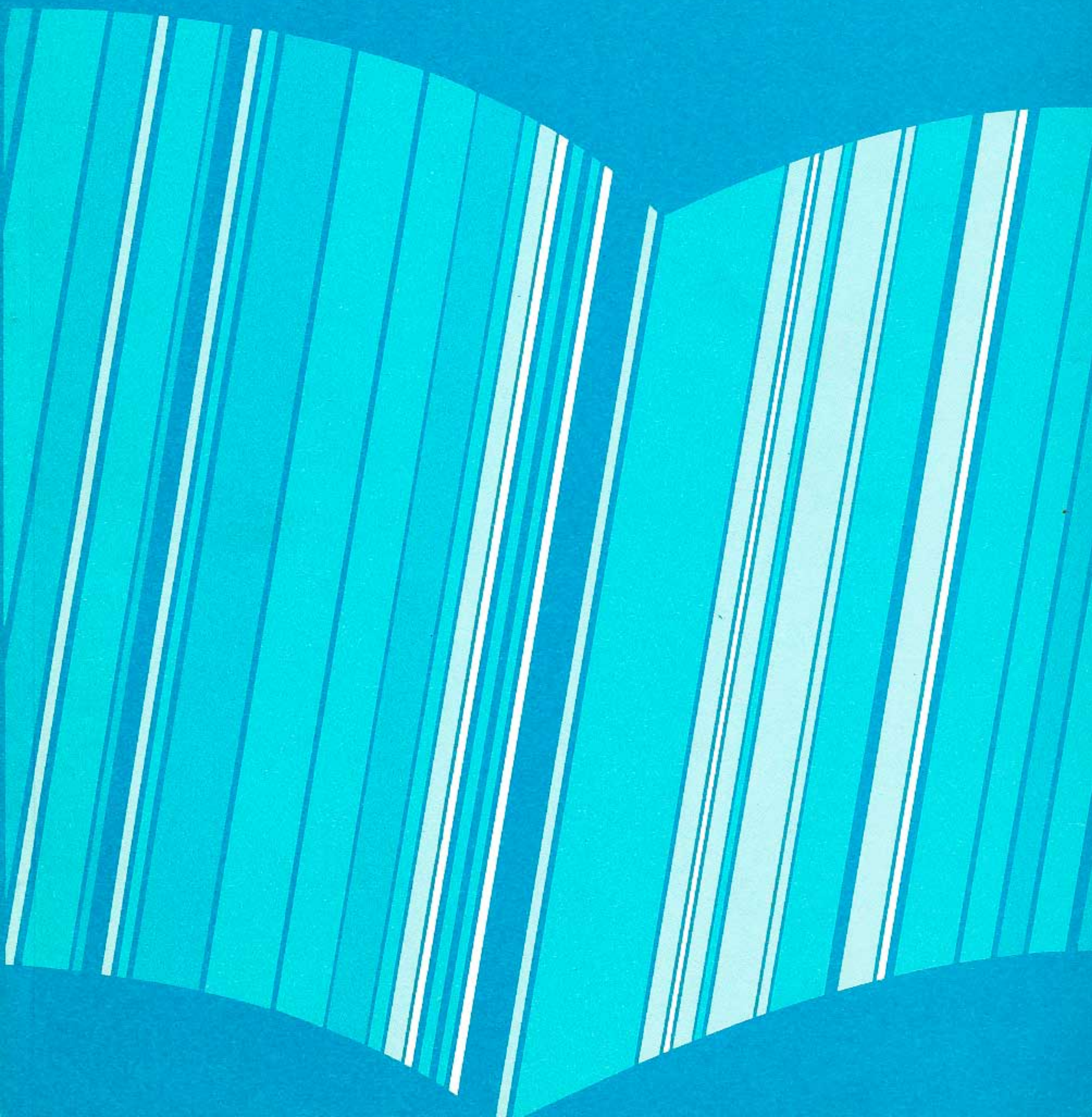


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Some Dilemmas in Social Work Education

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For the past eighteen months, I have been relieved of teaching responsibility to direct a research project, sponsored by the Department of Health & Social Security, concerned with the task of the field level social worker in local authority Social Service departments and the implications for social work education. The mere fact that such a project was launched gives some indication of the anxiety and uncertainty amongst those responsible for formulating and implementing policy in the staffing of, and training for, the Social Services.

Before the educational problems can be understood, the practice scene must be set. Important as other areas of social work may be qualitatively, the fact is that local authority Social Service departments employ vastly more social workers than any other agency, the more so since recently hospital social workers became employees of the local authority, although they, in most instances, remain hospital-based. Thus, developments and problems within the local authority Social Service departments are bound to be of crucial interest to the responsible central government department, the D.H.S.S. In 1970, all Social Services in England and Wales underwent major reorganization, commonly described as 'Seebohm',¹ by which the personal Social Services within local authorities were unified. (Comparable reorganization in Scotland took place a little earlier and, in Northern Ireland, a little later). Many of these departments were affected further by local government reorganization, in some cases drastic, which took place shortly afterwards.

To major organizational upheavals, with consequent effect on staff morale and mobility, must be added a marked increase in demand for Social Service, coinciding with the Seebohm reorganization. The reasons for this are not clear cut. The reorganization did not of itself increase service provision, though it was intended to make the delivery of service more effective. But it does appear that, whether as a result of publicity attending reorganization, or whether simply by coincidence, there was a general increase in the level of expectation in the community which the new Social Service departments were ill-equipped to meet.

A further coincidence was that two major pieces of legislation were enacted at about the same time. The first, The Children & Young Persons Act, 1969, gave local authorities, *inter alia*, wide-ranging new powers to develop 'intermediate treatment' for juvenile delinquents. This could be of two kinds; first, young offenders could be required by Court order to attend various community facilities, in addition to conventional methods of supervision, formerly the responsibility of Probation Officers, then transferred to social workers within Social Service departments. Secondly, there was provision in the Act for residential treatment for short periods. The Second Act, The Chronic Sick &

Disabled Persons Act, 1970, placed a duty upon local authorities to ascertain the numbers of disabled persons in their area and to provide such aids and appliances as might be necessary. This was a wholly desirable development, reflecting the increased interest in the disabled and their rights. But there is no doubt that local authorities were inadequately equipped in terms of material and manpower to implement either of these Acts effectively. Indeed, recently social workers have been refusing aids which they are in law bound to provide! Ministerial promises have since been made that there will be no more legislation without resources, a promise honoured to some extent by 'phased' implementation in the most recent legislation, the Children Act 1975.

Even that is only a part of the story of the past six years. Of the many other strands in this complicated history of social work development in the local authority, two deserve especial mention.

First, personal Social Service departments have been increasingly seen as a residual service, to which people turn when other basic Social Services fail them. The two most striking examples are in the field of housing and direct financial aid. Post-war housing policy has failed dismally; the reasons are outside the scope of this paper. The result in some parts of the country was that social workers were obliged to offer a rescue service; finding last-minute accommodation in bed and breakfast hotels is the most dramatic example of the failure of the system to cope with the homeless. Reallocation of responsibility between Social Service and housing departments is under way but it is too soon to say whether this will relieve social workers of an emergency responsibility which most would argue should be theirs only in exceptional situations.

More important, however, and of crucial importance to the future development of social work in Social Service departments, is the provision of direct financial help. I have explored elsewhere² the complex relationship between Social Security and personal Social Services, the former being, since 1946, located in central government, and most of the latter, of course, in local government. The financial safety net of the Social Security system is the Supplementary Benefits Scheme which, in addition to providing basic income maintenance for those not qualified for other benefits, may provide 'exceptional needs payments', as a lump sum, for necessary items. In 1963, powers were given to the (then) Children's Departments of local authorities to provide cash benefits in exceptional circumstances to families, where such action might "diminish the need for children to be received into care".* The Supplementary Benefits Commission is precluded from paying benefit, save in emergencies, to families where there is a full-time earner, whereas Social Service departments are free to make payments to low wage earners. In fact, the division of responsibility is far from clear and one of our current research studies is to examine payments made under both Acts and the relationship between them.

What is clear, however, is that the demands now made upon Social Service departments for direct financial help have increased dramatically as our general economic situation has deteriorated. What was originally intended as a minor provision has assumed great significance, as more and more people cannot meet heating debts and other escalating costs. Thus social workers in Social Service departments are encountering people who seek their services *solely* for financial relief.

We have seen, therefore, in the past five years an increasing proportion of time spent by social workers on practical tasks, especially in relation to financial assistance, involving protracted negotiations with outside bodies such as the public utilities and the Supplementary Benefits Commission. All social workers in the local authority (or anywhere else come to that) should expect to give some time to such matters. Social work always has

*Section I, Children & Young Persons Act, 1963. It is of interest that the equivalent Scottish clause does not restrict payments to families with children.

and always will be concerned in part with the alleviation of material need. What trained social workers resent is the proportion of time spent on helping those whose only problem is that the basic resources of the welfare state, as envisaged by Beveridge, are inadequate. They may also resent the complexity and cunning of the negotiations required to 'win' for their clients. (Alas, it may also provide a latter day equivalent to the comfortable feeling of dispensing soup to the poor.)

The social work educator knows the situation and he knows that the social work theory embodied in the literature bears little relation to this aspect of the task. His students also know, since nearly all of them will have had experience of social work before training, as well as field work during the course. Thus the teacher must strike an uneasy compromise: on the one hand, he must acknowledge the problem and offer some 'tactics' for daily work, as for example, in the field of welfare rights. On the other hand, it is, in my view, urgent to point out the grave dangers of recent developments. Ironically, despite the National Assistance Act of 1946 which, it was claimed, finally broke with the notion of 'the parish and the poor law', 'money' is back in local authority social work in a big way. The implications for social work practice within that setting are serious. We could have a situation in which the largest employing agency of social workers, responsible for the welfare of children, the mentally and physically handicapped and the elderly, attracts the less able and/or radical social workers, who quickly weary of repetitive and practical tasks which allow little scope for initiative and creativity and who dislike the extended use of financial assistance, seeing it as a tool of social control.

The second matter affecting social work practice at present is the wave of public anxiety about non-accidental injury to children. This became evident during the enquiry, of which I was a member, into the care and supervision of Maria Colwell.³ Since then, there have been five other published enquiries,⁴ initiated by central or local government. Whether there is an actual increase in the incidence of child abuse and/or professional ineffectiveness in preventing such tragedies are highly complex matters, outside the scope of this paper. What is certain is that the general public is much more aware of the problem and the media give it wider coverage. The consequence of this has been a sharp increase in professional anxiety (not only amongst social workers). The anxiety is not only on behalf of the child. There is also fear amongst social workers, and others similarly involved, of censure and widespread publicity. Vitally important as is the protection of such children, it is arguable that the present hectic climate may be resulting in excessive concentration upon one group of families, to the detriment of many others in need of service, such as the mentally ill or handicapped. Furthermore, we walk a tightrope between the protection of children and unwarrantable intrusion into family life.

This poses a double problem for the educator; first, he must consider how to respond to the current anxiety; whether, for example, he should increase the time in the curriculum given to child abuse. Secondly, the issue highlights a much neglected area in the teaching and in the literature, that of interprofessional communication. All the enquiries referred to have stressed deficiencies in this matter. In one of the studies in our present research we shall attend case conferences on non-accidental injury and afterwards interview participants. In this way we hope to build up a picture of the factors affecting such communications, which include, *inter alia*, important differences in the way professionals define and treat the problem and their understanding of their own and each other's roles in relation to the task.

Such understanding as we may gain applies equally, of course, to any situation in which "the helping professions" and other officials (such as police and Supplementary Benefits) are involved. It is well known that a great deal of a social worker's time is spent not with his client but with other people *about* his client. Unfortunately, there has been little

attempt to analyse the skills (and therefore to teach them) in relation to such activities. (Other professions, please note and if the cap fits . . .).

Putting all this together, therefore, it will be apparent that social workers in Social Service departments have, within the last six years, been subject to pressure from a wide variety of sources. Structural change, new legislation, rapid deterioration in the economic situation and rising expectation of Social Service provision have all played their part.

Set against this background, it will be apparent how simplistic have been the attacks upon the notion of 'generic' social work. Whatever may be the weaknesses in a system in which social workers carry a 'mixed caseload' of different client groups and problems, it is ludicrous to put the blame for the manifest inadequacies of the present social work provision upon that alone. This seems to be a very fashionable focus for criticism from those on the periphery, such as magistrates and doctors and, occasionally, teachers. Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between the principle of a basic generic *training* for all social workers and generic *social work* per se. There is nothing in the former which precludes or even discourages specialization in practice. (Doctors have used the model quite happily.) What forms specialization may take, upon what principles it should develop, and what the implications are for further and advanced education are, however, highly complex matters and as yet unclear.

For the educator, the fluidity and diversity of the present situation pose great problems. Informal specialization in relation to client groups is quite widespread in local authority practice. Where a student has a particular interest, it seems educationally and professionally appropriate to help him develop it during his training. But whether he can practise it or not depends on the policy of the department in which he works and the overall balance of the local team in which he finds himself, which must meet local need as a whole.

Broadly, specialization within the curriculum will tend to focus upon client groups (such as adolescence), upon particular problems, such as alcoholism, or upon ways of working, such as family therapy. The choices are very wide. Some educational specialization has simply replicated the 'pre-Seebohm' departmental divisions, that is, broadly, work with children and families, with the elderly and with the handicapped. This is a matter of regret since there is no inherent logic in such distinctions which are administrative and not professional in origin. There are many other ways of 'cutting the cake'. For instance, generic training could offer a specialization in the selection and support of substitute care; (for example, foster-homes or lodgings for children and adults in need). This crosses traditional boundaries. A central question here, as elsewhere, is 'who leads whom'? If the educator leads the field, will our former students have the chance to develop new ways of working which we encourage? The evidence so far is that where such efforts have been made, the results have been disappointing. Nor should this be dismissed solely as obstinate resistance to innovation. Necessity may be the mother of invention in some situations but when the pressures are at their most acute, the tendency is to cling to known procedures and tried ways of working, simply because they require less energy than experiment. This is not to say that trends towards formal specialization have not arisen within the field, notably in relation to 'task division', that is to say, ways of making work loads more manageable. This is perfectly sensible. 'Intake teams', that is, groups of social workers dealing solely with short-term work, offer an example of a practical specialization which was, however, linked to some research findings and theoretical formulations, concerning the greater effectiveness of time-limited 'contracts' with certain types of people and problems.⁵ The efficacy of these arrangements is not yet proven. What is interesting is that 'intake' is one of the few clear cut developments in specialism and arose in the first instance as a response to pressure, as a way of coping,

rather than as a response to specific client need or professional innovation.

The issues outlined above pose problems for the social work educator of curriculum balance and change. But matters are made worse by two other major difficulties, one related to present need and the other to profound uncertainty as to the very nature and purpose of social work.

When I trained as a social worker in 1953, there were at most a dozen professional courses in the country. Now in 1976 there are more than 140 leading to the national award, 'the certificate of qualification in social work'. Yet still less than half of field social workers are so qualified because the increase in demand has so far outstripped the training places available. (There has been no shortage of good applicants.) This massive increase in numbers of posts to be filled tells its own story of a rising profession. The implications of this state of affairs are worrying for those of us who offer the basic qualifying education. In some areas, newly qualified workers will be asked to take on the most complex cases (including those of children at risk) because it is believed that they have more skill than the unqualified. This may be the case but it is a heavy and in some instances, intolerable burden. The educator must ask himself what he can and should do to help his students prepare themselves for that endurance test. Secondly, rapid promotion for such recruits is inevitable. Many will be in senior posts in two years or less. Leaving aside the long-term problems to the service of having the relatively inexperienced at field level, their seniors themselves 'light' on field experience, the educator, faced with the reality, has to consider what should be offered, for instance in management skills, to the student who will move up the hierarchy with bewildering rapidity and without, as yet, benefit of post qualifying courses. (Plans are afoot but a good way from realization.)

It is perfectly possible to argue that neither of these issues should affect the content of basic professional education and, indeed, that to attempt to temper the reality is to mask the underlying need for different organization of work and further training. But that is easier said than done, faced with the knowledge of the situation in which students will soon find themselves.

I referred earlier to uncertainty as to the nature and purpose of social work. Such a fundamental issue can only be treated superficially here. Here are some of the questions which every social work educator must consider with his students.

- (i) To what extent does social work intervention paper-over the cracks of a social system in need of much more radical structural reform?
- (ii) Can a social worker ever justify the short-term suffering of his clients in the interests of long-term good of the greater number?
- (iii) Will social work with individuals and families always be needed to pick up the casualties in a complex, changing society?
- (iv) To what extent are social workers legitimate agents of social control? Whom should they 'control', in what ways and for what reasons?
- (v) What are the roles which the social worker should adopt and for what purposes? (Examples would be of activist, advocate, mediator, therapist, adviser, to name but a few.)

Clearly, these questions are raised, and fed, by both political ideologies and social scientific research and theory.

Social work does not thrive when political conditions are very far to the left or very far to the right. A recent collection of papers, entitled 'Radical Social Work'⁶ gives some idea of the ambivalence and ambiguity amongst those who identify with social work as

an activity yet subscribe to a (loosely) Marxist ideology. The reader is left with a far clearer idea of what radical social work is *not* than what it *is*. Refreshing as is the change from an earlier unquestioning paternalism towards social workers' clients, this position leaves the practising social worker with many unsolved dilemmas about those aspects of his task, which involve controlling (or as the radicals would have it 'repressive') elements within our social structure. (Removal of children from home and compulsory admission to mental hospitals are two examples.)

Social science research and theories have played their part in reinforcing doubt and uncertainty. Various empirical studies of social casework⁷ have shown how hard it is to establish with certainty the efficacy of such intervention. So, incidentally, have comparable studies of community work. But social workers are more affected by the former, partly because work with individuals and families, loosely described as casework, still forms the bulk of daily work; partly because for some the attack against casework is ideological and any weapon, including research findings, comes in handy. The social work educator has been accused of presenting social casework as a kind of theology and there is justice in this criticism. It should be acknowledged, however, that most empirical research in this area is recent yet difficult to use as a basis for generalization. Some is imported from the USA and was undertaken within a totally different social context and the studies apply only to specific problems or groups of people in difficulty. Social casework, for example with the elderly or the delinquent or with the affluent or the poor, carries with it different implications for method and focus, as yet little explored.

To complicate matters further, the very term social casework means different things to different men. Its sternest critics have tended to describe a process virtually indistinguishable from psychotherapy and have criticized it as irrelevant to the needs and problems of many of those who seek help from social workers. That now seems strangely outdated when, under the head of 'social casework', many engage in activities with, and on behalf of clients, which are a far cry from psychotherapy. One question for further research in this area, therefore, should be "what is the effectiveness of direct intervention to resolve specific problems of individuals and clients, given an extended repertoire of techniques"?

When all is said and done, however, it may be that the teaching of 'a kind of theology' can be justified if by that is meant 'a kind of faith'. (Theologians, please forgive us!) For in the last analysis, it matters not if the research studies show that only 15 per cent of the population served were helped by this or that technique. It should only spur the social worker to greater efforts to find more effective ways of helping. He cannot turn his back upon those with whom he does not know how to succeed. We have awful warnings in the chronic wards of mental hospitals of the effects of emphasis on curing rather than caring.

Since the 1960s, sociology has been, amongst the social sciences, the most powerful influence upon social work education. Our debt to it is considerable and the range of its contribution in such areas as the understanding of cultural and class differences and socialization processes is immense. In the context of this discussion of uncertainty within social work, however, the sociological critique of bureaucracy, now part and parcel of every social worker's education, has not been altogether helpful. As a part of our current research, my colleagues and I have interviewed a random sample of those who teach on social work courses across the country. It comes over strongly from these interviews that a substantial proportion of those who teach emphasize the dysfunctional aspects of bureaucracy, easy enough to spot in the current struggles to establish viable organizations of considerable size. But the fact remains that the majority of the students will go to work in such organizations which are a part of our contemporary social structure and are here to stay. To learn to manage oneself in such structures and to manipulate them to the

maximum benefit of the client, is the educational problem to which, it would seem, teachers have scarcely begun to address themselves.

It would be interesting to know how far other professions are grappling with similar confusions and doubts. I do not wish to suggest that the dilemmas here outlined (of which, incidentally, I have made only a modest selection) cannot be constructively resolved. Indeed it may be that we in social work education have something of value to offer to others as we are forced to stand between the reality of rapid practice change and of the 'social science explosion' and somehow to provide a professional kit-bag with useful tools which can be turned to a variety of purposes. It is hoped that, at the very least, this paper will have cast some light on the complexities (and the fascination) of our task.

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