Casework in Borstal

ALAN ROBERTON

THE NUMBERS coming into borstal have risen, the rate of reconviction for those leaving borstal has risen and we are all aware that the difficulties of the people we receive seem to increase in complexity. If we add to this the kind of doubts which prediction scoring and recent Home Office research, for example, have cast upon our traditional methods of doing our job we have a situation which is, at the same time, stimulating and challenging, dispiriting, bewildering and dangerous. It might be wise to look first at some of the dangers lest in trying to meet the challenge we only further increase our bewilderment.

None of us tolerates the uncertainty aroused by this kind of situation easily. Surprised by its complexities, disconcerted by the increasingly irrational and paradoxical behaviour of our charges, we may be tempted to return to the authoritarian methods of the past rather than face the further uncertainty of new, untried, methods.

A more sophisticated danger, perhaps, is that we adopt new methods — developments outside the service making this unavoidable — but adopt them in such a way that they can be shown not to work and thus justify a return to the old.

It is possible that bewilderment may add a note of desperation to our search for ways of meeting the challenge. In our desperation we may seek new methods from other settings, embrace them before we adapt them to, or evaluate them in our own setting, invest them with magical qualities and build a number of unreal expectations on them. Case-work and group-work are two methods which clearly offer themselves. Should we build such unreal expectations on them we may finish by bringing discredit to ourselves. Worse still, we may disappoint and estrange colleagues who had hoped to get something of real value from such methods, a real value which they undoubtedly offer. If we use these skills to meet our own rather desperate needs, as waving banners to convince ourselves we are in the van of progress, then disappointment is likely to be bitter. If we are wise enough to adapt and use them to meet the needs of our clientele we are likely to avoid this disappointment.

That cautionary note expressed, let me say quickly and firmly that a knowledge of case-work concepts and skills, and the same applies presumably to group-work, would seem to add fresh dimensions to our job, a greater width of approach and a greater depth of contact and understanding. I would not see us as fully meeting our responsibilities were we not to try to adapt and use these skills, but I would repeat that it might be wise to be circumspect in their adoption and adaptation.

A satisfactory definition of case-work is not easy to find. Part of the difficulty is that it is a living, dynamic process with the interaction of feeling between two people, the worker and client, at its core. To express it in words is to render static that which is ever-moving, ever different, and to give emphasis to the intellectual rather than to the feeling content. Nevertheless, if we are to have a starting point, some attempt at definition must be made.

"Social case-work is a process used by certain human welfare agencies to help individuals to cope more effectively with their problems in social functioning."* Some elaboration is needed. Social case-work is concerned with the emotional life of the client as it effects his adaptation to society and the satisfactory adjustment of his personal relationships. Many of the problems with which the case-worker is asked to deal may be purely practical ones; but whether the problems presented are practical or emotional the client is unable to meet them unaided; the case-worker is there to assist him meet them or remove them.

The interview is the centre of all case-work though the worker may go outside the interview to meet and talk, for instance, with other people involved in order to get a clearer understanding of the problem. In the interview the worker gains information about the client and his problems in the course of which a meaningful relationship is established between them. On the basis of this relationship and the 'understanding' of his problems which the client feels the case-worker to have, they work together through the difficulties, the client being helped gradually towards a new appreciation and solution of his problems.

Most case-workers work from a psycho-analytic background, that is their view of human growth, development and behaviour is derived from psycho-analytic theory. This is not to say that the worker is doing analysis, or some imitation of analysis. He is strictly concerned with the present situation but will seek to understand, in terms of earlier relationships and development, the feelings, attitudes and reactions which seem inappropriate to the present.

Essential to case-work is respect for the individual human being. Following from this is the recognition of the need to start from where the client is accepting him as the kind of person he is, seeing and feeling his situation as nearly as possible as he does. It is no part of the case-worker's job to take over his client's responsibilities and decisions and to do things to and for him, but to help him mobilise his own resources so that he may deal more effectively with problems himself and in his own way. Help given is not normally by advice or reassurance but by using the relationship between worker and client to clear away the frustrations, the contradictions, the blockages so that the client is better able to focus on the problem.

Two quotations may help: "What is even more important, the case-worker has enough concern for the real interests of the people involved not to encroach upon their ultimate independence, but to offer advice in such a way that they will know that they can accept it or

reject it freely, being sure in any event of his continued interest. Only from this standpoint can one human being ever attempt to help another without the danger of impairing equilibrium and injuring personality"†. " . . . because case-workers first meet the individual when he is not independent but in need of help, and is, in consequence, particularly liable to be unduly influenced, they have to make a point of working with him with a view to establishing his ultimate independence, rather than of trying to impose their own ideas upon him for the sake of a quick solution of his difficulty which might still leave him without initiative when on his own. In the same way, and because of his temporary state of dependency, case-workers have to be scrupulous as to the way they acquire knowledge of the individual — which often otherwise would be private to himself—and as to the use they make of it."† These attitudes clearly imply that the worker will not make value judgements, will not see his client as good or bad, right or wrong. He will be non-condemning in his approach, will not be concerned to apportion blame but will seek to understand why his client's feelings and behaviour are what they are. From this understanding he tries not to bring about a change of personality, which would be an impertinence, but to enable his client to modify attitudes and reactions, making them more appropriate to present realities and demands.

It would be folly to suggest that this high level of approach is consistently maintained by all case-workers but it is an ideal at which most case-workers aim, which many achieve some of the time and some most of the time. It works and it is inspiring to see it work.

No case-worker would start work without having made as careful a diagnosis as was possible in the circumstances of the case or without, in the light of that diagnosis, having defined the range of possibility of help and set limits to the goal.

Normally the case-worker would carry only one role, that is a helping or enabling one. There are exceptions to this, notably the Probation Service where the worker has also to represent the authority of the court, to carry an authority role as well as a helping one. To avoid distortions in the picture at this stage let me quote again: "In addition to his personal responsibilities to his client, the case-worker is also a representative of society. He is this because he is a social worker; because part of his way of helping the client is that, while meeting him at his own level and accepting him as such, he also helps him to meet the demands which society makes on him, for one of his functions is to represent to him, by and large, the standards of society. . . . They are thus prevented from becoming too much absorbed in individual problems of particular clients, unrelated to social problems generally."†

Even from a description as incomplete as this it will be obvious that there are difficulties in transplanting case-work from the kind of setting in which it has evolved to our own. Most agencies, for example, deal with clients who come to them seeking help. This does not make the case-worker's job easy nor does it necessarily

guarantee a high degree of co-operation, but it does mean that the starting point is a recognition of need on the part of the client. By contrast most of our clientele are either not conscious of any need for help, or feel the need, but are too confused by the processes of conviction and committal to see us as straight-forward helping figures. Our first job, then, is to see where there appears to be such a need, then to see if it seems possible for the person concerned to recognise its existence.

Experience seems to indicate two really major difficulties. The first, perhaps the most serious, lies in the number of functions which we exercise in relation to the persons in our charge. We are, at the same time, providers of material needs, custodians in authority over them, investigating and judicial officers where misdemeanour should occur, welfare agents and, in borstal, with its grade system and indeterminate sentence, arbiters of their fate so far as return to the outer world is concerned. Committal can be seen as an expression of society's disapproval so that we too may be seen as society's representative, professional disapprovers. To a normally adjusted person who feels shame and guilt about his misdeeds this may not be too bad though I cannot see it as being positively helpful. To a less well-adjusted person who is anxious to see all that happens to him as the responsibility of agents outside himself the opportunity to see us as disapproving, persecuting people gives him the means to escape from his own inner, frightening sense of guilt and therefore from any need to do anything about it. In this kind of way many of our roles can be used by boys and prisoners as a way of denying, hiding from themselves their own inner feelings, fears and anxieties. If a boy is concerned, for some reason, not to see us as benevolent then it is easy for him to emphasise our judicial function, for example, in order to do this. Many boys, I am convinced, get themselves on report to keep us as punishing authorities in this way. Case-workers normally would not have to deal with this kind of confusion. The only way I think we can deal with it is to understand fully that it is an extremely confusing situation for boy and prisoner, to see as clearly as we can in what ways it is being used both by our charges and ourselves and to bring out clearly, when this seems beneficial, how it is being used. If we can be imaginative and humble enough to do this, and I don't think it is particularly easy for any of us in our type of service, then therapeutic opportunities may be presented in an almost dramatic way.

Community or institutional living presents the other difficulty. Case-work is ordinarily based on an exclusive relationship between worker and client in an exclusively private situation. This is impossible in an institution. An interview certainly may be private but it is not exclusive. Everyone knows that it has taken place and there may be many repercussions and side-effects from this. In outside case-work practise clients would normally be unknown to each other and have no contact. Probation is again an obvious exception though it is still true that clients are not known to each other through the medium of the agency working with them. All our clients spend twenty-four hours a day in each other's company and anyone

receiving case-work attention knows the others who are receiving similar attention. This can create very considerable difficulties from the boy who will seek constant attention without really knowing why to the boy who, though conscious of a need, will reject any help of this kind because it may label him in his own and in others' minds. A number of diverse rivalry situations are likely to arise but these are probably too complex to be dealt with in a paper of this length. I can see no easy solution to all this other than the exercise of considerable ingenuity. A reduction in the numbers per house would ease some aspects of this though it would not remove all the difficulties.

The other side of the exclusiveness problem is that the outside client sees, and judges, his worker almost entirely in the one situation. In prison and borstal it is a whole-day, whole-week contact with our lives impinging on each other's at many points. It might be difficult, for instance, to convince a boy that one's case-work interest and concern is genuine when he knows that he has no razor blade to shave with, no table tennis ball to play with, that his trousers are tatty and his food indifferent. Much of our success in the adaptation of case-work skills will lie in our ability to mould an active, demonstrative concern with more formal case-work practice. With a population which tends to act out its difficulties it may be that we have, to some extent, to act out our concern in all our contacts. Many of our charges tend to split the world into very clear blacks and whites or 'for' and 'againsts'. If they find themselves treated in one sphere with the dignity, respect and courtesy which is the right of every human individual and in another with less than this then they may, in their perplexity, find it simpler to consign us all to the 'againsts'.

Perhaps the clearest gain from case-work experience is the level of understanding and insight, in the ability to see what lies behind a boy's immediate and obvious behaviour. This increased understanding, of oneself as well as of others, leads naturally to a greater width of tolerance. There are fewer situations which are upsetting in the sense that one reacts overstrongly to them, fewer types of behaviour which cause one to react and behave in an irrational manner. Thus it may be seen that the boy who is repeatedly hostile, contemptuous and critical in his relationships with staff is not simply against the staff but is trying to make us behave in an unsympathetic and rejecting way because this will repeat his experience with figures in authority in the past. If he can make us confirm his earlier experience in this way he can go on feeling that all authority is and always will be against him. He will see no need to change his basic attitudes to authority though he may modify them temporarily in order to get his discharge. If we can deal with his hostility without having to be hostile in return, if we can absorb his criticism without ourselves being upset by it or having sharply to defend ourselves then some modification of the boy's attitudes becomes possible. The boy who makes fair start and then what seems an unnecessary and irritating mess of everything to which he puts his hand is not necessarily just lazy, inept and awkward but may be ridden by a sense of his

own worthlessness, a feeling so powerful that he cannot allow himself to succeed. If we do get irritated, become impatient and condemn him for his failures then it is likely that we shall only confirm his feeling of worthlessness. If we can remain patient, deal quietly with such situations as arise and avoid condemnation then we may enable him to succeed at something, to gain some insight into what is happening and so to begin to move away from the sense of inevitable failure. If case-work training makes anything clear it is that an intellectual recognition on the part of the boy that attitudes and patterns of behaviour are inappropriate and self-damaging is rarely enough to make any fundamental changes possible. Such attitudes as I have illustrated are emotionally based and real change is only possible when the intellectual desire for change is given depth by fresh emotional experience in relationships with other people.

In borstal we often tend to emphasise the good aspects of a boy's personality and to play down the bad on the grounds that this will encourage the good to become dominant. This may work sometimes but an increasing number of boys have predominantly bad feelings about themselves however much they may cover them up. If we can recognise and acknowledge these bad feelings without being condemnatory or rejecting, the boy is likely to sense a positive sympathy, to be able, for once, to let someone outside himself see in what poor opinion he holds himself. If we deny the bad and try to emphasise the good, the boy will be vaguely aware that we are not sensitive to what matters to him, to the feelings that really worry him. He may then have doubts about our ability to help and will tend to keep communication between us at a superficial, practical level.

The readiness to see the boy as he is, to respect him as the person he is, has the other effect of putting realistic limits on one's goal, keeping it reasonably in tune with the individual's capacity, with his eventual environment and with one's own capacity to help him. If we allow ourselves to expect more from a boy than he can give, and this is fatally easy to do when one's sympathies are involved as they must be if we are to do anything, then disappointment is inevitable and we may then tend to relieve our own sense of failure by blaming the boy.

The kind of knowledge that case-work training gives helps us to see the two terrible temptations in work with delinquents. On the one hand to stand solid with society so that the emphasis is on disapproval of behaviour and punishment for that behaviour. On the other hand standing solid with the boy, excusing his conduct, laying all the blame at other doors and refusing to see him as he really is. Neither attitude is helpful. At the same time we represent the standards of society and are deeply concerned with the boy's welfare. We cannot discharge either function effectively if we ignore the other. The boy normally has a shrewd appreciation of the framework within which we work. To aim at the maximum flexibility and adaptation to individual needs within that framework is clearly desirable but to be casual or inconsistent about it or to take undue liberties with the framework would be unhelpful. Such inconsistency

can only confuse the boy, may cause him to have some doubts about our general integrity and we may forfeit his respect.

The use of 'permissive' techniques is less easy and straight forward in our setting than it may be in others and there are perhaps some fears and misunderstandings about it. If, in an interview or group situation, a boy feels free to say whatever he likes, to express criticism and hostility if he feels that way, he is only likely to get any positive gain from this if the worker concerned can absorb his expression of feeling and can himself contain it. The boy is afraid of these violent feelings in himself and feels they are dangerous and damaging. If he is allowed or encouraged to express such feelings he may be helped if he finds that the person to whom they are expressed is not damaged, is less afraid of them than he is himself. If he senses that the worker finds it difficult to handle or contain these violent feelings the boy's anxiety about them is likely to be increased. Unless one is fairly sure of oneself it is perhaps wise to limit one's 'permissiveness.' There is some fear, too, that 'permissiveness' in groups or interviews will lead to equally free and violent expression in the ordinary run of the institution. Experience seems to show that it does not work this way but that day to day relationships are handled in a more mature way.

The other issue arising in these last few paragraphs is that of emotional involvement. How does one steer the course between over-identification and none at all? Most of the trouble with the boy's feelings is that they are, to him, uncontrollable or difficult to control. The worker must be involved if he is to understand the boy's feelings but he cannot be helpful unless his own feelings, unlike the boy's, are within control. "One must aim at the maximum sympathy combined with the maximum detachment, however unattainable this may be; and I would like to make it clear that 'detachment' is here used to indicate an attitude to oneself and not to one's clients."[†]

Experience so far seems to show that there is not much place for formal case-work on a regular interview basis. This is possible with odd boys, usually people who are, for one reason or another, rather isolated in the institutional community. Even then it is probably important that, besides dealing with their individual problems, one works through the ways in which the boy is using this special situation. Generally we have to think much more in terms of what might be described as case-work on the hop, of making use of the odd and informal contacts we have as well as of the more formal ones. We have to try to be wise enough to know when and how to use these opportunities and to be aware enough to see when the apparent purpose for communication is simply a means of indirectly asking for help about more serious problems. We have to understand enough of the institutional culture to know that communication will often be devious and indirect, partly because the direct approach to authority is doubtfully permissible and partly because the boy is uncertain of our role. In this situation we have to try to be perceptive enough to make the kind of comment or speculative

question which will reassure the boy sufficiently for him to overcome these doubts. Often we have to try to see the boy's difficulties and put them into words which make sense to him because he cannot see the difficulties clearly himself until they are expressed. Often we seem to work solely through relationship with little or no direct verbal discussion of problems. In these and other ways we may vary from normal case-work practise—we may be more active, we may have to 'make the pace' more often, we may use a wider variety of approach and of ways of showing our concern. It may vary enough to say that we are not doing case-work but working with a case-work orientation. Whatever is said, I think it is inescapable that case-work training and experience, the case-work orientation if you like, offers us an invaluable tool, and an increasingly necessary one as improving services junior to our own deal with the more straightforward delinquents at an earlier stage.

Questions about working in this kind of way without training, about the possibilities of training on the job, the extent of training necessary and how far these techniques may be appropriate, are left unanswered. Whatever the answers, a move towards a similarity of approach would be desirable, and experience here shows that this is quite widely possible.

---

* Helen Harris Perlman. *Social Case-work.* University of Chicago Press.

† Una Cormack & Kay MacDougall in *Social Casework in Great Britain.* Ed. Cherry Morris. Faber & Faber.

‡ Margaret Tilley. *Casework with the Anti-social Client.* A.P.S.W., 1, Park Crescent, London, W.1.

Address manuscripts to:

THE EDITOR,
PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL,
STAFF COLLEGE,
LOVE LANE,
WAKEFIELD.

Biannual publication: January and July