

Casework and the Prison Service

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NOEL TIMMS HAS recently published the first comprehensive English attempt at a textbook on Casework.¹ The only reference in it to the penal system is a passing remark at the opening of the final chapter to the effect that casework in this setting has not been touched.

There are probably two main reasons for this. One is that the Service employs a mere handful of professionally trained caseworkers, all of whom have been seconded for such training rather than recruited because of it. We are somewhat in the position of explorers in virtually unknown territory and have been generally too concerned with investigating ways of applying a casework approach and re-assessing our own roles to engage in public debate. Now that urgent consideration is being given to the ways of implementing the recommendations of the Advisory Council for the Treatment of Offenders' Report on the Organization of After-Care, it is perhaps appropriate to consider the question more widely.

The second reason for leaving

our Service out of such a book is that the prison system is not generally seen as a social work agency. How far this is feasible is discussed later; certainly the origins of casework practice in voluntary social work organizations, and its development (even within statutory agencies such as Child Care and Probation) around the idea of a person in social difficulty recognizing his need for help and coming for it himself, have not led naturally to the inclusion of an authoritarian, total institutional system in the field of most people's thinking on the subject.

What is casework all about? The term is being increasingly met with and as Timms points out, "Casework has rarely been defined to anyone's satisfaction. It remains elusive and even its sympathizers are forced to admit that attempts to describe it often reveal—to borrow a phrase of Oscar Wilde's—'all the utility of error and all the tediousness of an old friend!'" And later, "the present state of social work literature reveals mainly an ac-

cumulation of unassorted ideas. This seems particularly so for casework. In writing and in professional discussion casework can be 'case-work' or 'casework'; it can be 'scientific', preventive, therapeutic, deep or intensive. Yet beneath these variations it is possible to discover variations on a number of key themes."²

Timms does not do much to clarify the concept of casework. He quotes Bowers' widely used definition only to pull it to pieces as being "deeply entangled in the art/science controversy," containing some "heavily persuasive" terms and claiming too much. His own definition⁴ "work on cases guided by certain principles and the use of knowledge and human relation skills with the object of fulfilling the function of a particular agency," seems much vaguer and is heavily loaded to support his contention that the 'function of the agency' is one of the definitive aspects.

Is it unreasonable to suggest that any science needs art to apply it and that there is no real controversial point here at all? Casework, as an approach to the task of assisting people in trouble to cope with it, is rooted in scientific method. It follows this method in seeking to observe and record facts accurately, to formulate hypotheses on the bases of these facts to attempt to explain how the present state of affairs has arisen (or to predict how it will develop), and to test the hypo-

theses out and reject those which are unhelpful and use the remainder.

The art of using scientific method in an approach to human beings is no different from that in using it to solve problems of bridge building in civil engineering. Care must be taken to observe and record accurately; judgment, intuition, inspiration, sensitivity are all involved in interviewing technique, in choosing how to construct a hypothesis (or in casework terms 'diagnosis'), and in devising methods of evaluating results (i.e. 'treatment' in casework terms, because it is the person's subsequent behaviour which will indicate whether anything has been gained from the contact).

The facts in dealing with human beings, of course, include not only objective details of age, height, income, etc., but the feelings people have about these things; these mould their attitudes towards the objective details and affect their behaviour accordingly. Thus it is that caseworkers are trained to look for emotional rather than rational logic in the behaviour of those with whom they deal.

Casework is different from other forms of work with people in that it rests upon scientific method, extensive psychological⁵ and sociological knowledge, on a set of principles and on carefully supervised training in applying these elements.

Timms looks at the elements in

some detail in the first part of his two-part book where he has chapters on "Psychological and Social Knowledge", "The Principles of Casework" and "Skill in Human Relationship". Parts of this are difficult reading, particularly the first chapter quoted, not because of the style which is usually most lucid but because so much theoretical ground is covered in a short space as to leave even people acquainted with this field gasping for air. Used as a kind of outline road map, however, (and this applies to the whole book in some measure) it is very useful in indicating areas to explore. The references at the end of each chapter form a most comprehensive reading list. Incidentally the book is well indexed too, so it is easy to find one's way about in looking for specific topics, although I would not recommend it as first reading for students utterly unfamiliar with casework ideas.

Timms' first chapter of all, "The Caseworker and the Agency," is perhaps the most important in the book for our purposes. This is where he elaborates his idea that the scope of casework is defined by the function of the agency employing the caseworker. Whether one accepts that this affects the theory (i.e. the scientifically based approach), as Timms argues, or not, it undoubtedly is most important for practice. For instance, the question of 'authority' is discussed at length. Timms maintains the distinction

between people coming for help and people upon whom it is, in a sense, thrust when they openly fail in their social living by offending against the law or in other ways. His argument offers clear guidance to questions about the caseworker's right to take action when a person's conduct breaks the law or the agency's rules. But it seems to confuse the examination of the client's attitudes to the casework situation and the nature of 'treatment'. Do people coming voluntarily to a welfare service feel any less under pressure than people up in court? Do they face more easily the fact that it is their reaction to situations (or even their manufacturing of situations) that needs examining if a solution is to be found? The burden of a vast amount of social work literature is the futility of the idea that things must be done *to* or *for* a person rather than *by* him; it suggests that clients bring very much the same demands to agencies of all kinds. This is certainly true of prisons where the demand for a 'cure' is a well known means of defence. There would seem to be a strong case for arguing that there is a positive advantage in the question of authority being clear in the penal setting. The inmate does not have to pretend he wants to be inside, he knows that we know this and we are then in a position to face and work through his hostility straight away instead of delaying or avoiding it.⁶

An important issue arises, however, in connection with agency function. Timms, in discussing principles, says two things; that the agency must allow the minimum conditions for a casework approach to operate and that caseworkers demonstrate their values as regards their work the moment they choose to join a particular agency. This implies that the Prison Service must be very clear about its aims, and its staff very aware of their own motives. Casework can only be really useful if the reformative treatment of inmates is important, otherwise it is limited to helping people to adjust to their sentences and this is a meaningless exercise if the sentence itself is meaningless.

To say this is not to imply a sentimental, sloppy attitude to inmates. It is necessary to demonstrate to some determined, professional criminals that the forces of law and order are strong enough to contain them and to prevent their friends getting them out. If they are to change at all they too must see the futility of maintaining their old attitudes. But we recognize that the large majority of our clientele are considerably less determinedly anti-social than that, many even positively motivated right from the start. If the principles of respect for human dignity and individualisation of treatment mean anything therefore, treatment methods must include regimes which allow for the making of relationships, for

the trying out of new attitudes and behaviour, for the exercise of initiative; and which can tolerate the testing out involved and, more particularly, failure *en route* to increased capacity. Such regimes cannot insist on uniformity of behaviour and meticulously high standards in the material environment.

It is possible to argue that caseworkers could function in a penal system which was devoted (apart from them) simply to custody or positively to deterrence or punishment. In some degree this is the position of welfare officers in prisons and social workers in detention centres as against housemasters in borstals. The Advisory Council for the Treatment of Offenders' recommendations are to perpetuate this distinction. If other staff were able to remain relatively immune from feeling, it would be practicable to run such a system. But in practice this is far from true. The pressure for greater involvement in treatment grows as involvement increases.

Greater involvement requires improved training at all levels, and proof that the need has been at least partially recognized is evident in the proliferation of courses both centrally and in separate establishments during the last year or so. These are gradually including elements of the basic psychological and sociological knowledge required of caseworkers and it seems logical to expect that

the development will continue to the point where all basic grade officers who are capable of it (in this author's view, the large majority) reach a standard akin to that of welfare assistants in the Young-husband Report scheme.⁷

Improved treatment also implies redefinition of criteria for selection and allocation of inmates. The scope given by the Prison Rules, 1964 allows now for allocation by personality type rather than length or kind of sentence. Specialized regimes have thus become a practical possibility. Regional grouping obviously has a part to play in this too, making possible the supply of professional assistance to governors from a central pool, for ease of transfer for inmates needing different facilities at different times, and for closer contact with families, either direct or via the probation and after-care service.

Much of the discussion in the last few paragraphs has been concerned with the wider aspects of casework as a method of operation rather than as an approach to operating. What of the details of method? The classical casework method is the office interview with one person and there is sometimes a tendency to assume that this is the 'purest' form. Timms in the second part of his book (five chapters on work in the main casework agencies, that is almoning, probation, child care, family welfare and mental health) explodes this fallacy clearly. He uses a number

of illustrative extracts from case records, demonstrating work with small groups, in a busy hospital ward, and even in a car outside a railway station.

The penal establishment setting is clearly one of multiple relationships. The possibility of one close relationship being the core of the work is comparatively slight although it does happen. What does seem to be important is that everyone who is significantly concerned with any given individual is able to communicate with someone acting as a co-ordinating focus, and that this person is able to make a relationship with the inmate in which the diverse contacts of the establishment are integrated—that is, in which the person and his problems are seen as a whole. Traditionally in borstals this has been the housemaster. Increasingly it is becoming the group or landing officer, with senior staff as either professional advisers, community organizers, or communication channels.

Machinery is often already in existence waiting to be used in the way described. For example, house and wing boards, reception boards, staff study groups. What is lacking are sufficient numbers of trained senior staff, and, largely in consequence, appropriate staff training schemes within establishments. The Prison Service is not alone in those things; Timms says "Caseworkers should respond to the challenge of the complexity of the human and theoretical prob-

lems they encounter...they can explore much more fully the nature of the institutions in which casework is practised, so that in particular cases and also in general terms they come to appreciate the impact of the institution on their personnel and on those coming for help. Caseworkers should also endeavour to find new ways of working in view of the serious shortage of trained staff, which is likely to be a permanent feature of the social services. The place of a consultative service for untrained and inexperienced staff and of short-contact casework are two problems which merit serious attention."⁸

Treatment itself has been variously classified. Timms gives a number of examples in the section on treatment, chapter 4. Briefly it can be said to take place through the relationship the worker has with a person in difficulty in which they, as it were, stand side by side and look at the problem together. A fairly general view is that treatment within this relationship may consist of four things—(1) environmental modification (in which institutions have far greater immediate power than community agencies), (2) support to the client to enable him to solve his difficulties by himself, (3) clarification of the underlying emotional attitudes which are inhibiting the client solving his difficulties himself (which may involve looking at the flow of feeling between the worker and

the client when in the interview or other contact situation), or (4) insight giving, a process nearer to psychotherapy, when the roots of inhibiting emotions are looked at in an attempt to demonstrate their inappropriateness to the current situation of difficulty and to reduce thereby their power to inhibit solutions.

Such levels can easily be identified in work done within our establishments. Despite a frequently used argument (often a cover for defeatism) that the institutional setting is unreal and therefore "outside" methods are inappropriate, it is real enough in everyday terms to inmates and staff. The whole range of human emotion is encountered; maybe it is in exaggerated or distorted form but it is there and can be utilised in examining and modifying patterns of response. What is really required is not to attempt to make our establishments more like the outside world, an attempt foredoomed to failure, but a type of training directed to producing a common understanding. This could enable all ranks and specialisms to work together as a team, attempting to solve problems of organization and individual handling on the objective basis of the inmate's needs.

There is need for detailed research into aspects of theory and modes of application. Again we are not alone; Timms says, of the whole field, "We are still ignorant about the relationship

between knowledge and the effective practice of casework in each setting . . . we know very little about the results of social work, or about ways in which a casework service is regarded by actual and potential clients."⁹

It seems quite clear from a consideration of the foregoing that in the Prison Service we are all in a casework setting whether we like it or not; it seems only sensible to make the best of it.

¹ *Social Casework: Principles and Practice*: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964, 25s.0d.

² Page 3, line 4 to end of paragraph, and page 3, paragraph 2, line 4.

³ "An art in which the knowledge of the science of human relations and skill in relationship are used to mobilise capacities in the individual and resources in the community appropriate for better adjustment between the client and all or any part of his total environment." BOWERS, S.

"The Nature and Definition of Social Casework" from *Social Casework*, October, November, December, 1949.

⁴ page 7.

⁵ Psychological knowledge in this sphere is based on a study of human growth and development, aimed at teaching all that is known about influences on the formation of adult personality in normal and abnormal ways.

⁶ TIMMS, page 45. "People may feel that in coming to a social service they are in the power of others considered to be their superiors and the applicant's power can be exercised only in explicit or implicit refusal of the service."

See H. PRIMMS: *Authority and the Casework Relationship*: Social Work April 1962, Vol. 19, No. 2, for a useful examination of this topic which is not included among Timms' references.

⁷ See *Report of the Working Party on Social Workers in the Local Authority Health and Welfare Services* (Young-husband Report) H.M.S.O. 1959.

⁸ Page 238, para. 1.

⁹ Page 239, lines 6-8 and 14-16.

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