

CASE-WORK AND THE FAMILY

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SOCIAL work might be described as the natural human response of one human being to another who asks for help, and case-work is a (very inadequate) name for the attempt to give the individual person in trouble the individual remedy he requires. A 'case-worker' is the substitute for the 'good neighbour' of a simpler society. In a small community the good neighbour steps in during a crisis with advice and help, able to provide an objective point of view, and ready to step out again when no longer needed, without disturbing the fundamental independence of the person concerned. In a community where everyone knows each other and social ties are firmly knit, this works very well; it was not till the growth of industry and the development of large towns where rich and poor were segregated into different areas that the system broke down.

The social workers of the nineteenth century found themselves complete strangers in experience and outlook to the people they were trying to help. To be the good neighbours they desired to be—intimate, wise, *accepted* friends—they had to evolve a technique based on principles which would enable them to help without patronage or sentimentality. They called this technique 'case-work'. It came into being in 1869 with the Charity Organisation Society (now the Family Welfare Association) from which all other family case-work societies have developed.

The founders of the C.O.S., as it was called, were not out to create just another society for the relief of distress: their object was to cure the evils of modern society by bringing Christian charity to bear on them. Not almsgiving so much as almsdeeds was their object; their method was to establish a personal relationship and to offer friendship, regarding material relief as ancillary to these. To them only one thing mattered, the essential dignity of the human being in his natural setting, the family. Anything that undermined character and independence or lowered family respon-

sibility must be attacked at all costs, however beneficial it might seem in the short run, and this profound conviction often led to an impatience of human weakness and sometimes to a lack of compassion. All the same, it is possible that we owe to it the respect for the family unit which exists today among professional social workers. The probation officer struggling to reconcile married couples, the children's officer insisting that brothers and sisters shall go to the same home, the moral welfare worker persuading a girl 'in trouble' to confide in her mother, have all had the basic principle impressed on them during their training: 'the unity of the family must be maintained'. The breakdown of the family which was the first casualty of the second world war has only stimulated the efforts of social workers, both statutory and voluntary, to keep the family together.

Only too often the break-up occurs before the case-worker meets them: father has deserted, or a boy returned from National Service refuses to share a bed with a younger brother and goes off to a common lodging-house, or a school-child is in mischief because his mother is working late to pay for television or a dining-room suite. (In 1930 it was an Austin 7; in 1920 an overmantel.) It is the family case-worker's job to discover the root of the trouble. The father who has 'walked out' often has an uneasy conscience, and if he can use the worker as a safety-valve for his many grievances, he can sometimes be helped to take a more objective view. If the worker can guard against the danger of generalising and can listen as if the story was quite a new one, the client may begin to see himself as a responsible person whose job it is to look for some remedy other than breaking up his home. Occasionally the very experience of talking things over with someone 'interested and disinterested' is sufficient, but more often the case-worker, resisting the temptation to make even a mental judgment, will need to learn all she can, not only from, but about, the family, before making any suggestion. Sometimes the solution lies in a temporary separation of parents from children and a second honeymoon; sometimes there is nothing to be done but bring all possible pressure on the local authority

for a move to more adequate quarters; often all the members of the family have to be helped to see that the only remedy is the time-honoured one of 'making allowances'.

The first lesson a case-worker learns is to allow time for reflection: the client will go on thinking over each interview in retrospect, and it is a commonplace that often more progress is made between interviews than during them. The old French proverb, *Tout savoir est tout pardonner*, is never truer than in family case-work, and it is with this in mind that the worker tries to learn all she can from and about her clients. It is fatally easy and very tempting to act quickly, to agree to a request for immediate action without knowing more than a quarter of the story and that from one side. An emergency operation is sometimes essential in surgery, but hardly ever necessary in the intricate business of helping people in the solution of their personal problems, and material help *by itself* is very little use in any kind of trouble.

A loan to help with pressing debts or arrears of rent is a common request, and it may well be that it must be given, but after, not before, the case-worker has some idea why the debt was incurred. If the children have their pockets full of betting-slips (not an uncommon event), the loan is not likely to do much good. There are times when there is nothing to be done but steel one's heart, since many people can only learn from a bitter experience.

In family case-work it is usual to hold a case conference or committee when the worker has got as far as possible to the root of the trouble. This is the time for reflection and discussion, and here arises the question of confidence. In some committees the name of the client is never mentioned—a safeguard which may however hamper the case-worker, who might learn much about the family from other members of the conference such as the health visitor or the probation officer. More usually the procedure of the committee has been explained to the client, and when it has been made clear to him that the members will regard his affairs as strictly confidential, it is very rare indeed for him to object. There is no doubt that a case conference can be invaluable to the worker and through her to the client. Two

heads (or more) are better than one, and a plan is often worked out in common which would never have evolved without consultation.

In some countries there are case-work organisations exclusively for Catholics, and in time to come this may be necessary in England. As has been said, family case-workers of every denomination have a deep sense of the importance of the family (and in fact it is usually the Catholic family which has to be separated, if it becomes necessary to send the children to Homes, since we are tragically short of Homes which will take brothers and sisters and every age-group). But now that divorce and contraception are accepted parts of the social pattern, case-workers with no Catholic principles to guide them may do irreparable harm with the best possible intentions. At present the best solution seems to be for more and more young Catholic men and women to become social workers, whether in statutory or voluntary bodies. The need for them is great and the profession is far from over-full. There is unfortunately a long-standing prejudice among some Catholics against a professional training, which they regard as a hardening process destined to turn out sceptical bureaucrats. May it be accepted before long that a professional training is the best of all preparations for the work of Christian charity which the Church has displayed throughout the centuries. The combination of a sense of religious vocation with technical competence will achieve far more than a mere professional skill can hope to do. Equally will it be more effective at the present day than undirected good intentions.