Why, as nearly as we can, we want our Refugee Centre to be run by people who have known enforced migration

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Books Published:

The Study of Books 1952; *Working with Groups* 1956; *Samples of English Cultures* 1965; *Our Needs for Others and it's Roots in Infancy* 1987; *Doubts and Certainties on the Practice of Psychotherapy* 1995; *Jacob's Ladder* 2003

In order to fulfil some purpose that requires more than one person to get it done, people come together – they organise. Organisations have some advantages: five people each contributing a special skill can often achieve much more than five times what each can do alone. Then, after a certain size and complexity has been attained, one or more other people may be needed who specialise in managing the organisation, so that decisions are properly made and properly carried out in the way that had been decided, and resources are not wasted or misused. Also, the clientele has to be studied so that feedback will show to what extent the organisation is providing the clientele with whatever the organisation set out to provide them with. Trading organisations, which sell goods and services for money, are of this kind, more or less, and there are many books with advice on how to be a successful organisation of this kind.

Not all organisations fit well into this pattern, however. In some, *how* things are done, consciously or in ignorance, is an essential element of the purpose for which the organisation exists. Good heads of schools work hard to create a climate in which students are proud and happy to learn, and teachers to teach. When hospitals had discernible hierarchies, they could similarly be differentiated according to their climate, which was either conducive to patients' recovery, or not. However, the management of 'climate' is only possible in units below a certain size. Unfortunately, in the middle years of the twentieth century, in a bizarre ideological drive for what were thought to be 'economies of scale' – believed to improve output in industry – schools, and hospitals, began to be amalgamated and expanded well beyond the size where benign climates could be maintained. Morale and morals deteriorated, and no way has been found of recovering them, except by creating sub-divisions of more modest size and with clear boundaries, to regenerate the benign climate. In settings where emotional security, hope and healing matter, only small is beautiful.

Schools and hospitals have a major psychological divide, between those who provide the service and those receive the service. True, everyone who provides the service of teaching or healing has had experience of being at the 'receiving' end: the teacher has been a pupil; the doctor or nurse has been ill, but at a certain moment each grew into the 'provider' role. It may be said bluntly that the bad providers are people who have no accurate memories of what it is like to be at the receiving end of the relationship.

In the field of counselling, psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, aspirant 'providers' certainly have to undergo a period of counselling or psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, in the hope that they will benefit from this, but also so that they may know what the process is like at the receiving end of the relationship. Regretfully, it has to be acknowledged that other, largely unconscious, processes in these professions tend toward the opposite, toward an institutionally permitted superiority: clients, the receivers of the service, are routinely assumed to be less sophisticated in their understanding of themselves, and more blind to the implications of what they have been saying. This can become institutionalised, and a patronising climate of 'us' versus 'them' allowed to pervade case discussions, for instance; nor is casual patronising gossip entirely unknown in these circles.

Side by side with organisations of the above kind, are organisations that have attracted the name of 'do-gooding'. These are organisations originally run and staffed by people conscious of their own good fortune and wanting – surely rightly – to be of service to those who have been less fortunate. Originally such organisations were run by well-to-do people who could afford to work without being paid; hence they called themselves charitable organisations. In the twentieth century many of them turned professional, and so social services were born as a profession. Sometimes state-run, some continue to be run or at least managed by unpaid 'volunteers' – hence voluntary organisations.

Increased professionalisation led to courses at universities to teach the aspirant purveyors of services about the less fortunate people who might need their services, who worked with their hands and were dependent on weekly wages. For many reasons these might become 'the poor' and, if there was no work for them, 'the unemployed' and a 'social problem'. Too often it was implied that poverty and unemployment were personal problems for which the poor and unemployed were responsible. In any case, gradually a body of knowledge and mythology came into being about aspects of social work, which the purveyors of social work were instructed in and which was thus perpetuated, with good as well as bad results.

The aspirant purveyors of social services had often little contact with those they were learning to help, until they were appointed to provide the service they had been trained to provide. The resulting gap in knowledge and imagination gave 'do–gooding' its bad name. Richard Hoggart who became, among other things, the head of the University of London's Goldsmiths College and was given a knighthood, came from a stratum of the working class which did not normally need the services of do-gooders but which was close enough to know what it was like to be done good to.

No doubt these things are better arranged now, but when I was a boy our area was shocked by the clumsiness of a Board of Guardians Visitor who suggested to an old woman that, since she was living on charity, she could sell a fine teapot she never used but always had on show. 'Just fancy', people

went around saying, and no further analysis was needed. Everyone knew that the man had been guilty of an insensitive affront to human dignity...
Hoggart 1958, p.59

In the second half of the twentieth century, changes in the education system brought to the universities, and to the professional training-courses, many students whose parents would at the time have been categorised as working class. Some of these students were politicised and vocal, and regarded social work as the profession of 'do-gooders'. *Advocacy* was what was wanted: people who could speak out for the rights of the under-privileged. Acutely sensitive to the patronising nuances of 'us' and 'them' (purveyors and recipients) in much social-work and sociological literature, but in fact often ignorant of the situation of people in real need, they tended to assume – just like their predecessors – that they knew what people wanted and/or ought to have. People must stand up for themselves, and to help them do so they needed advocates who might have to speak for them. At first they considered that little knowledge was needed to do this, except knowledge of the legislation that affected people's rights. It is interesting that this movement had a profound effect on the teaching of social work: good in that law came to be a larger part of the syllabus, but also bad, for many social work skills were lost that had been well used by social workers who did know their limitations, statutory and personal, and were not arrogant, did not overstep their boundaries, had more respect for their clients, could listen and could learn from them. Advocacy is a useful element in working with people in need of social services, along with other useful elements which at this point were getting lost: respect as shown in a willingness to learn from those at the

receiving end, and so on. Once again, people in need of support, when confronted by this new brand of self-assured do-gooders, could only murmur 'Fancy!'

People have tried in various ways to overcome the gap in imagination which separates those in distress from those who seek to alleviate it. From the late nineteenth century on, privileged undergraduates from Oxford and Cambridge spent part of their long summer-vacations in the deprived areas of England's big cities, living simply in a communal house or 'settlement', organising outings and other leisure-time activities, as well as educational events and books for young and old, procuring financial or medical aid for emergencies when they could, and learning to feel more identified with the people among whom they lived. (See: Briggs and Macarthy, 1984, and Gilchrist and Jeffs, 2001.) Some of these young men, and later some young women, became doctors, ministers of religion, and politicians, carrying their knowledge how of the poor lived into less informed areas. General opinion agrees that the settlement movement was a force for good; it still survives in a modest way, many of its functions having been taken over by the welfare state and by the people themselves, benefiting from the general rise in the standard of living.

Another experiment in the social expression of compassion sprang from the work of the Pacifist Service Units which started in the 1939 – 1945 war. In Britain, in the course of that war, successive age-groups were called up for military service, but men who were judged to have genuine conscientious objections to the use of arms in war, were usually directed to other work of a strenuous, unpleasant or dangerous nature, like working in coal-mines, driving ambulances under fire or during air-raids, etc. Some formed themselves into 'Pacifist Service Units '. The

Quaker monthly, *The Friend,* reports in November 1940:-

There are now between 50 and 60 full-time workers in the Pacifist Service Units...Much of the work done is similar to that done by non-pacifists...communal feeding, stretcher bearing, firefighting, First Aid, shelter cleaning...but it is in the approach and sometimes in the method that the distinction arises...The ends and means for the P.S.U. are to help in the creation of the new, non-violent society, through service to the...victims of the old society.

Helping with the evacuation of children from threatened inner-city areas, which were indeed subject to heavy bombing, rescuing people from bombed houses, working in centres where people made homeless could find make-shift accommodation, the Pacifist Service Units came into contact with people they had not met before. They found, side by side with families who were managing to keep organised and cheerful, there were families not simply without money: they did not spend what money there was in ways most of us would consider sensible. There might not be a father, a male breadwinner in the family, or the mother might be unable to cope, and the children would be neglected materially and in other respects. The parents in these families often had histories of childhood abuse. Their own parents had not been able to provide a steady supportive environment to grow up in; they beat their children; they had been beaten as children. They had been shouted at and lied to, and they lied to and shouted at their children. They had agonies of remorse. They threatened abandonment, they had been abandoned; at times a visitor might discover a five-year-old alone in the house, just wearing a woolly jumper, or a baby with just nappies, no food on the premises. A parent usually came back eventually. Unable to sustain steady purposes, feelings were often

intense but momentary, and out of context. Feelings could be named but not talked about. 'What 's there to talk about? So I hit him. I was angry, OK? ' and 'I know I shouldn't, I know it's wrong but there it is – it's happened, what's the use of talking about it?'

Social work, as it has developed since, was in its infancy, and so was the idea that sustained insightful unexploitative personal contact might in some circumstances be useful. But some of the idealistic and concerned young people in the Pacifist Service Units had a natural kindly impulse to relate to those they saw in distress, and they were anxious about the children. Nor is it irrelevant that conscientious objectors suffered in their way as much from the almost superstitious revulsion and anger felt towards them by the general population, as did what came to be called 'problem families'. (Cf. the all-too-frequent popular reaction to 'asylum seekers' at the time of this writing) For an important time they shared some of the life-experiences of those they had befriended – the fear of bombs, the lice, the lack of privacy and of simple amenities, the unpromising future, the public rejection. They wanted to help with cleaning, shopping, child-minding, and could not feel comfortable doing this outside a context of fellow-feeling, companionship and optimism, so that their new friends could feel more in charge of their lives, and emerge from the dreadful depression and anxiety that seemed endemic. And indeed, for some of the women, and rather fewer of the men, this contact made a difference, and people were able to begin to feel less down-trodden and more in charge of their lives. (Stephens 1945).

The young people of the Pacifist Service Units tended to have come from more privileged strata of society. They were meeting a way of life known mainly to the police, some priests and ministers of religion, and the official 'Relieving Officers' who in

certain circumstances could provide 'relief' in terms of money for necessities. But they had something to offer. Their story best told in Alan Cohen's *The Revolution in Post-War Family Casework: the Story of the Pacifist Service Units and Family Service Units 1940 –1959.* Bert Wood, one of the contributors to this history, writes in explanation of why some of Liverpool's Relieving Officers were sending them people in need of help after their houses had been destroyed by bombs:

Here was this rather peculiar organisation of young men who ought to have been at the front fighting for their country but instead were undertaking all sorts of material tasks for these people, almost serving them.
Cohen p.23

Note 'almost serving them'. Mike Lee, who joined the Pacifist Service Units in 1940 and stayed in pacifist relief work for most of his life, writes in Cohen's history:-

One of the things that I used to taunt Family Service Unit workers of the 1950s with, when I was feeling brave, was that they were astonishingly busy insisting that they were professional. Well, one knew why they were insisting, but nevertheless I could not help remarking that I'd always understood the difference between the professional and the amateur was that the professional did it for money and the amateur did it because he wanted to. This of course annoyed them very much but there is this about it, that the welfare state is not really able to love people. But probably the missing element which is making a materially relatively well-off society such a stinking mess, is that there are not enough channels through which to push love, friendship, or whatever you like to call it; sincere fellow-feeling:
Cohen p 58

There are some key-phrases in this literature: 'a new non-violent society', 'almost *serving* them', 'love, friendship, sincere fellow-feeling', and these contrast with some other phrases referring to another perspective. A whole lot of other attitudes was being defined towards the end of the war and in the nineteen-fifties, often partly in reaction to the more unrealistic notions of the more idealistic do-gooders. But soon those attitudes that were thought to be more realistic and professional came to raise as many eye-brows, for reasons that are easily understood...'Fancy!'...Alan Cohen writes

Predictably the P.S.U. response to the prevailing orthodoxy which spoke in terms of a 'social problem group' who were unhelpable and who should, in effect, be rejected or punished, was to seek ways of reasserting the humanity of these families'.
Cohen p 37

Oddly, this led the old stagers to prefer terms like 'problem families' (meaning of course families with many problems) to terms like 'problem group', in 'problem areas'. Cohen refers to a paper given by David Jones and Tom Stephens at an inter-unit conference devoted to 'The Social Problem Group' about some aspects of which he seems clearly unhappy. He apologises for the phrase and refers back to the attitude of the Pacifist Service Units who...

...started with no background knowledge...the only basis of their challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy ...was their pacifist and rational-humanist belief that there must be an explanation for the phenomenon if only the causes could be established by 'scientific' enquiry. It did not occur to them to question the process through which this social problem came to be identified as a 'problem', because at this time the relationship between the characteristics of social problems (what we take to be 'knowledge' and 'understanding' of them) and the social legislation to deal with 'the problem' was barely understood and rarely articulated.
ibid

Much social-work and social-casework theory was being proposed and discussed in this intellectually fertile period but, as so often, the too passionate exercise of pure reason had at times a baneful influence on the subject. By 1945 'friendship' was already becoming 'relationship'.

Manual work, for example – cleaning, mending furniture or the fabric of a family's accommodation – had always been an important aspect of the P.S.U. approach but whereas in 1942 Mike Lee saw it as 'the expression of our friendship', in 1946 David Jones describes it as 'merely one among many other tactics secondary to relationship treatment'. Cohen p39

There is a difference in feeling here, which will surely be felt by the recipients of friendship or relationship. The spontaneity and value-led ideology of the early Pacifist Service Units is opening itself to a less individualistic approach. There is more acceptance of formal training and systematic management procedures; what was a movement becomes an organisation ready to be a salaried part of the Welfare State. Pacifist Service Units become Family Welfare Units, and eventually become absorbed into the profession of social casework, a process that has been known since Weber (1908) as the routinisation of charisma. Ideals of sincere fellow-feeling are giving way to ideals of skilled intervention; the two are compatible in principle, but not so easy in practice.

A detailed account of the organisational aspects of this evolution is given in Pat Starkey's *Families and Social Workers: The Work of the Family Service Units 1940 – 1985.* Published in 2000, of its seven chapters, covering 250 pages, only one chapter has anything to say about *families,* and that chapter is basically a history of academic, political and social-work *theories* about people whom it is difficult to help be rational, co-operative, optimistic, steady and so on.

When action motivated by concepts of skilled intervention replaces action motived by concepts like sincere fellow-feeling, something is gained and something is lost. Sometimes something like a synthesis may emerge. Halfway through the twentieth century, interesting initiatives start to come from the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, whose members seem to some extent to combine these not very easy compatible attitudes. Many of those working in this newer way had had some psychoanalytic experience, and this may perhaps have helped some of them to be more conscious than is usually the case, of the pitfalls hidden in interactions between those who need help and those who seek to help.

Eric Miller, perhaps the most creative of those who worked within this newer framework, writes in a book significantly entitled *From Dependency to Autonomy,* (1993) of 'that theme, of helping people gain greater influence over their environment' (p.xvi). The book gives many examples. One profitably starts with a confession which brings home to the reader how there are pitfalls even for those who are consciously determined to avoid pre-conceptions and learn from and with the people who have asked for help.

Our involvement began as long ago as 1962, when we received a copy of an article from the Le Court Cheshire Home. It argued the case for deploying trained social workers to help residents in homes such as this 'to adjust to their disabilities and to each other'. The writer of the article, in a covering letter, advocated the development of the homes into 'therapeutic group communities', ...and suggested that the Tavistock could be 'of immense help' in a process of change. Our response was lukewarm: we were heavily committed elsewhere and also we could not see where the money would come from to finance such a project. We suggested a

discussion in London. The reply was, in effect: yes, we should like to come to see you, but we are all in wheelchairs, so it would be quite an undertaking.

> *This letter was a shock. We had taken it for granted that we were corresponding with someone involved in the management of the home. We were astonished that instead it was a crippled inmate; and we felt guilty at the unrecognised prejudices that had led us to be astonished.*
>
> *and:- p.68-69*

> *During the early part of the study in particular we felt a deep sympathy and pity for the disabled, seeing them as doubly persecuted by their physical handicaps and by the destructiveness of their institutional environment. But at times we would feel strongly identified with the staff, who could be seen as victims of the insistent, selfish demands of cripples who ill-deserved the money and care so generously lavished upon them.*
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> *p.70*

Long preamble, short conclusion. In all these accounts we have to recognise at least one common factor: there are likely to be failures of understanding when a more favoured person helps a less fortunate one, and this failure often generates a second problem, namely that the help offered will be imperfectly focused. Alcoholics Anonymous and its sister organisations owe their success to the fact that those who are doing the helping have been in situations very like those in which the people find themselves whom they are now trying to help. Learning from books, lectures, 'placements', even from friends, comes a poor second to having it happen to you.

These thoughts come to me with some force when I reflect on my experiences at the Refugee Therapy Centre.

Further Reading

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