

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE ON CASEWORK PRACTICE *

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THERE is no limit—the need as Stein put it this morning is encyclopedic—to that which the behavioral and social sciences can contribute to the orientation and fullness of understanding of all people whose professional task is in the area of human relations. Not only the social worker, but the teacher, physician and lawyer are enhanced in their educational, therapeutic, consultant, problem-solving tasks to the degree they can see people not atomistically but in relation to the world about them—to the degree they can see *man in society*. To this end the social sciences make liberal contribution. This is a generic fact, which we all will not discuss at this time. A more particular question before us is how social work—especially casework—integrates social science theory that is specific in its application to casework—not the social science theory which will make a better physician, teacher, etc. as well as better social worker.

In this context, Stein's excellent paper reports that the social sciences have had a "decided" or "formidable" impact on social work education and social work research, but that social work practice has been "very spotty" in the acquisi-

tion of relevant knowledge and, even more, in efforts at implementation.

Stein's analysis of the unevenness of social science influence on education, research and practice accords with my own direct experience. I wish to center my discussion on the very fact of the unevenness which is most important in itself, raising many issues and questions and, in turn, having certain consequences. I shall discuss it, as the social scientist would say, with the structured bias of the casework practitioner and administrator.

There can be more than one reason for this unevenness: One reason might be that social work practitioners are so occupied with *doing* that they do not spend enough time or energy theorizing. A second reason might be that social work education and research are not held directly accountable for their flights of theorizing—accountable, that is, on the proving ground of demonstrated helpfulness to live clients. Thus their theorizing might sometimes, as in the area of social science, move too far from possibility of integration with practice. A third reason might be that certainly research and possibly education, by their very nature, find useful some concepts of a more generalized or abstract kind than does practice. I believe all three of these reasons are operative.

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There is a question whether we can discuss education, research and practice on the same plane without confusing the issues. Education, research, and practice are not parallel and comparable subdivisions of the field of social work; since social work is a field of professional practice, then social work education is professional education, or education primarily for, and in a sense subordinate to, practice. Similarly social work research, in contrast to social science research, is in last analysis, research about, for, and in the service of practice—whether the research is hypothesis-testing or descriptive in character. Professional practice is thus central. In fact, the hope has been stated that social work move from the “bifurcation” of practice and research toward their merger as a “continuum on which (professional) people are distributed in terms of the degree to which they think about what they are doing with a view to generalization from it.”¹

Research, oversimplifiedly, is a process of generalization from the specifics of practice, and professional education is the preparation of people for practice. If the nexus of research and practice be granted, then it would seem to me to follow that their borrowings from the abstract sciences, such as social science, should have inner consistency and relatedness. That is, the same or related concepts should tend to be the ones most useful to both research *and* practice in social work. I would expect that research would borrow more heavily since social science can and does lend a methodology to research, and also, even in terms of concepts, the general-

izations of social work research would be closer to the abstractions of social science than would the aim of social work practice.

Though granting that with substantial congruence there would be some natural difference between research and practice in their comparative borrowing from social science, it nevertheless seems to me that some of social work research has moved far beyond its inherent needs and has gravitated *into* the realm and concerns of social science, and *far* from practice. Too much of social work research is indistinguishable from that of social science; too many social work researchers speak, write, investigate and affirm values that are indistinguishable from those of the social scientist and are often in a universe of discourse quite alien to the practitioner.

This is a loss to social work, for the almost total absorption into social science of many social work researchers means that they tend to choose subjects for study and to select variables or parameters that are tempting but distant from the concerns of social work practice. If the typical researcher was once in practice, he probably has long since lost touch. Certainly, the typical researcher does not do any practice at all, and this contrasts with what exists in other professions.

All this is reflective of the great abyss that has developed between practice and research and of the peculiar fact that though in the optimum we might like to see the merger of research and practice on a single continuum, in reality they seem to be going farther apart. I am myself generalizing now and do not intend to characterize *all* social work researchers in this way; there are notable exceptions such as Ripple, Gordon, Stein, Polansky, Fanshel, Shyne, but overbalancing these are large numbers who are light years away from practice

¹ Leonard S. Kogan, “Discussion: The Relationships among Social Work Practice, Social Work Research, and the Social Science,” by Leonard S. Kogan in: *Social Science Theory and Social Work Research*, National Association of Social Workers, New York, 1960, p. 138.

and, oddly, some I have encountered who are even anti-practice!

I now return to the question of professional education and practice. Here for the obvious reasons stated above it is even harder to accept a large gap or appreciable difference in theory, since one is direct preparation for the other. Stein has stated that the "job in social work education is picking and choosing content, and keeping it tied hard to the question of what do you do with it, what possible difference it can make, and only if one is prepared to grapple with these questions, does one have a legitimate case for introducing such content in a professional curriculum."

I do not think the rapid overloading of the school curriculum with social science (and, we are told, more to come) meets this test. There is uncertainty what to do with all this content, where it fits in practice and how integrated it is with social work concepts. By and large within the school itself the methods sequence and the courses replete with social science content remain separated by a Chinese wall. Within the methods sequence, there is seepage of theory on role, culture and stratification, as Stein states, into casework instruction, but even there it is hardly integrated by the classroom teacher or the field instructor into the casework concepts, and hardly enters determinatively into the most specific level of teaching, that of case analysis.

The mass of social science instruction to which the Council on Social Work Education alludes is communicated to the student in a large, undigested lump. In my observation, it remains rather walled off in the student's mind and atrophies over time because it is not operational for the student in field practice or, later, in professional practice.

Does this mean, as Stein suggests, that the practice field is lagging, that the young worker graduate comes to the

practice agency with an armamentarium of knowledge that is superior to his supervisor's in that it is made up in part of the "new science?" I don't think it works that way. The new science, being largely unassimilated by the young worker—as it was for his teacher and is for us all—and being largely divorced from matters of diagnosis, skill, method and art in practice, tends to be parked the more he invests himself in grappling with issues of practice.

On the other hand should the field agency, the forum for social work practice, the practitioner or supervisor be doing something more about making up the lag?

I believe the agency and practitioner—hard practice, itself—will be the best litmus paper for discriminating among social science concepts for what is integrable into and operational for the social work field. Certainly the field must, to paraphrase Stein, pick and choose from social science content and keep it tied hard to the question of what do you do with it in helping people, our clients. The whole pyramid of education, research, social action and so on which comprises our field must be related in some way to the function of service to people; that is the final test for the whole superstructure. I reiterate a difficulty I perceive, and that is, the farther away from practice and the test of practice, the more there is the likelihood of picking up excess baggage.

I believe that role theory has been the single most important sociological contribution to casework, if not all of social work. Here I appeal to Stein to rethink what he termed the most important point about role concepts, namely that it is only interactional and is not an intra-psychic concept. Granted that in *sociological* terms it is not a psychological concept, we in borrowing it must psychologize it, so to speak, for it

to be useful to us. We in social work can see that the process of individual adaptation to roles is biologic and psychic as well as interactional and cultural. "A mother does not perform the role of mother apart from her patterned way of controlling inner conflict, alleviating anxiety, and adapting to change. The way in which she mothers her child, how her mothering behavior interacts with her marital behavior, and her subjective experiences as a mother are all expressions of her total self."²

It is in this way that I believe some social science theory can be assimilated usefully into casework: the particular concept needs to be reworked and joined to the casework or psychological frame with no seams showing. It means a process of reduction of the more abstract and general social science idea to a far more specific, lower-ordered level where it needs to be articulated with the biological and psychological. This kind of theory-building makes for the truly psychosocial orientation to people and process.

Theory on culture has also been an important addition to casework knowledge. Here I would emphasize that important though it certainly is for us to learn the cultural heritage of our clients, even more critical for social workers to learn is the *concept* of culture.

It becomes possible for the social worker to grasp the concept of culture meaningfully, if in addition to an ideational learning, the social worker also has some direct cross-cultural experience which is continuously analyzed in terms of differences in family structure, values, and so on. The process of comparison and contrast helps to delineate sharply the idea of culture. It is an

impossibility for social workers to become thoroughly conversant with the cultural and different subcultural backgrounds of all their clients. The comprehension of the *concept* of culture and its assimilation by the worker is a most necessary professional competence. Really having under his belt the concept, the worker develops a built-in, systematic apperceptiveness to the possible cultural components in the behavior of whatever client, of known or unknown culture. Most important, the worker leaves room for these possible cultural factors in the system of ideas and impressions he begins to develop as part of his diagnosis, evaluation and helping plan.

Culture comes in mixtures of strains rather than in totalities, especially in these times of population mobility and migration. Conflicts of cultural influence occur not only between people but within individual persons or families. For example, in working with certain members of a first-generation immigrant Chassidic group, we began to understand that the frequent incidence of rebellion, complaint and depressiveness in the mothers was not alone an expression of the stress and warp in the structure of the individual families. The women were the vulnerable, soft spot where one saw first evidence of the strain developing between the immigrant Chassidic culture and the surrounding dominant cultures. The women, burdened with broods of children, by inferior status, by lack of opportunity for pleasure and personal gratification, seem open to seepage of other conflicting values from the surrounding culture, values that prize and protect women more. Submerged and unsuspected conflict about their role is stirred within the Chassidic women, with resultant depression, nagging complaint, or other symptoms.

Other social science theory has greater or lesser applicability, such as that on

² Sanford N. Sherman, "Concept of the Family in Casework Theory," in Ackerman, Beatman, and Sherman, eds., *Exploring the Base for Family Therapy*, F.S.A.A., N.Y., 1960.

social systems, stratification etc. However, the task of selection and application is the same as for role and culture theory I just discussed: the task is that of selection for relevance, and as part of that task, another of integration on the level of practice.

Over all, the reason for a continuing quest to assimilate such concepts into our theory and practice lies in the imperfections of our psychosocial model of behavior. We have sophisticated concepts that are bio-psychic. Our knowledge and grasp of social and economic aspects, of the social half of the psychosocial model, are comparatively primitive. Whatever can help us from the

social sciences, we should borrow—not however simply to fill in a social sophistication which is separated from and unintegrated with the bio-psychic. This only creates a dualism in our theory that is inoperable in the face of the wholeness and oneness of the person of the client. The client lives and breathes with the social, cultural, biologic and psychological determinants of behavior merged into oneness. So too then must our professional borrowings be merged into a oneness of theory. Only then does the enriched theory help us in the direct personal encounter with the client.