

SOCIOLOGY & SOCIAL WORK

Perspectives and Problems

Brian J. Heraud
With a Foreword by Noel Timms

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Sociology and Social Work

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Sociology and Social Work

PERSPECTIVES AND PROBLEMS

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Foreword

“To my mind there is a very close and direct relationship between sociology and social work. It is only between sociologist and social workers that there is no relation, unless it be a negative one.” This comment has a contemporary astringency and relevance, but it was originally made in 1925 at a time when, at least in America, there seemed to be a real chance that social workers and sociologists might together work out the shape and function of their inter-relationship. The debate that ensued was comparatively long—it lasted until about 1932—and completely unproductive. Perhaps some of the reasons for this outcome can be found in the comments of a social worker on a paper by E. Mowrer published in 1929 on “The Sociological Analysis of the Contents of 2,000 Case Records with Special Reference to the Treatment of Family Discord”. Mowrer reported that amongst the techniques in general use in ten casework agencies in Chicago were to be found ordering-forbidding, auto-suggestion, and persuasion. The social work comment on this was that “The very phrasing of the list of direct techniques suggests the days of witchcraft, and their serious acceptance would justify the U.S. Census Bureau in continuing to classify social workers as part of the semi-professional group made up chiefly of mediums, fortune tellers, chiropractioners. . . . Perhaps again our records are to blame, but one is tempted to suspect an emotion-driven bias in the selection of these terms on the part of the author.” Both “sides” carry responsibility for turning what should have been a patient dialogue into a battle, but the social worker’s characteristic belief that the best means of defence is interpretation did not help the sociologists to grasp ways in which their own professional ideologies might prevent them describing, if not explaining, the social workers’ reality.

Since those days the relationship between sociology and social work has not been systematically pursued, but, as Brian Heraud points out, sociology is at present attracting the attention of increasing numbers of social workers and at least some sociologists appear to be interested in developing a sociological understanding of the problems social workers face. In this situation, which Heraud rightly characterizes as inter-actional, we must try to ensure that both social workers and sociologists have the maximum freedom for intellectual movement, so that the various forms of collaboration can be adequately explored. There is room for—and we need—a number of texts devoted to this exploration. Peter Leonard has already provided one, and now Brian Heraud offers what I am sure will be found to be a very useful basic text for social-work students and students of social work. Some of the ground covered in this volume has, of course, been traversed by other authors, but the reconsideration by the present author of such central themes as the organizational context of social work will help the reader to grasp that there is no monolithic set of beliefs that can be taken as an exhaustive description of *the* sociological approach. Some of the questions raised in this volume will undoubtedly in their turn have to be considered again. For example, I am not convinced that “the psychiatric deluge” is a sufficiently good historical description of the psychoanalytic influence on social work in the immediate past or that the explanation of this series of events in the status seeking of social workers sounds altogether plausible. But the fact that the reader may soon find himself arguing with the author is a measure of the accomplishment of this book.

Above all, Brian Heraud shows sociology as an activity. For instance, the analysis of Dahrendorf is not simply presented, as it were to be either accepted or rejected, but we are given some guidelines for the critical examination of the analysis.

This book will, I am sure, come to be used on a wide scale. It will do much to prevent any recurrence of the situation described by the writer whose words begin this foreword: “The social worker who reads the sociological literature and who sees great promise and hope for a more scientific type of social work in the sociological

point of view, finds himself in the condition of the thirsty wanderer in the desert who sees a mirage and expects to drink his fill only to be bitterly disappointed at the frustration of his hopes.”

Brian Heraud has provided a text which gives a good idea of the sociological perspective, which shows how the sociologist works in areas like those of the family, social stratification and community, and which seeks to demonstrate the returns for social work that can be expected from the application of this perspective.

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The book is of course entirely my own responsibility.

London 1970

BRIAN HERAUD

PART I

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CHAPTER 1

Sociology and Social Work—An Introduction

SOCIOLOGY is today attracting the attention of increasing numbers of social workers. This is seen by the number of articles and books appearing in Britain and America which discuss the relationship between the two fields. Sociology is increasingly seen as helping to provide a basis of knowledge on which the social worker can draw in order to work with clients in the context of the complex organizational settings of a modern society. Sociology is not the only social science which makes up this "knowledge base", nor is the relationship between the two of a very recent origin. The whole range of the social sciences are at the disposal of the social worker, or for that matter anybody who wishes to understand human society in a more systematic and scientific manner. In addition to sociology, psychology and social anthropology might be mentioned as disciplines of the most immediate relevance.⁽¹⁾ It is perhaps not sufficiently recognized that it is from these basic disciplines that social workers derive the knowledge that is used. Thus Timms,⁽²⁾ referring to one of the most important areas of social work, social casework, points out that "the knowledge used derives mainly from the disciplines of psychology and sociology, and there is no body of casework knowledge as such". In this sense the relationship between the social sciences and social work parallels that between the biological sciences and the practice of medicine. Whilst the point made by Timms is clearly valid, it is also possible to suggest that the point at which the social sciences and the practice of social work intersect is, at least potentially, one at which knowledge might also be created.