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Social Work, Health and the Home: New Directions in Historical Research

Event report

George Campbell Gosling

This workshop was hosted at the Centre for the Social History of Health and Healthcare in April 2011. Organised jointly with George Campbell Gosling of Oxford Brookes University, it brought together a wide variety of speakers and contributors, including research students, early career academics and well-established academics. Each drew upon new research from historical and social policy and social work perspectives.

A special session focused on the Scottish case, in which research was presented by Emeritus Reader Dr Chris Nottingham on the social work profession and child protection and by Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) research student Stephen Plunkett on the introduction of community care. These presentations formed the basis of a wide-ranging and lively discussion, which included two expert commentators: Honorary Professor George Irving, a former Director of Social Work, and Chris Robinson of the Social Work Inspection Agency. The idea of Scottish distinctiveness was questioned and discussed; in particular, the role of the Church in social work was seen as being different in Scotland.

Beyond the special focus on the Scottish situation, three core themes emerged in the workshop. The first of these was social work as a profession. Should we think of social work as a profession or a set of activities? This theme was most directly addressed by Professor Malcolm Payne, who separated 'work, profession and discipline' as distinct aspects of social work to be researched and discussed. The first session encompassed the 18th and 19th centuries, where we can see recognisable activities taking place before the beginnings of the social work profession in the 1890s. Dr Graham Bowpitt, Reader in Social Policy at Nottingham Trent University, drew attention to the use of rational methods and social science approaches to deliver 'spiritual regeneration' and

serve as a form of evangelical outreach in the foundations of social work. Dr Georgina Brewis of the University of London's Institute of Education and Lynn Bruce of the University of Glasgow both discussed the place of university settlements and projects in the first decades of the 20th century.

George Campbell Gosling considered the various responsibilities of the hospital almoner in the pre-NHS era. Sir George Irving, who was once an almoner's assistant, recognised the account of the role as more centred on means testing and social enquiry than social work as we know it today. John Stewart considered the place of the psychiatric social worker in the mid-20th century, working alongside psychiatrists and psychologists in the 'classic' child guidance team, and Mike Burt, former social work lecturer at the University of Chester, examined the move from a focus on 'ascertainment' to one of 'assessment' as social work struggled to find a secure position within the local authority between the 1950s and 1970s.

The second core theme was the relationship between social work and the family. Malcolm Payne noted at one point that in the past, much of the discussion would have focused on social work in institutional settings, but ours was primarily on social work in the home. This was evident from the opening paper, as Dr Alys Levene of Oxford Brookes University examined the role of home visiting in the charity work of the late 18th century. This was followed by Stephen Byrne, a research student at Oxford Brookes, who argued that the late 19th century saw the established notion of 'collective responsibility' for child protection, on the part of the whole community rather than the family alone.

John Stewart's paper located psychiatric social work within 'the family constellation' by means of the practice of home visiting. How suitable was the child's environment?

Gosling, by contrast, identified that the hospital almoner investigated the family situation with both social need and the ability to make a financial contribution to the hospital in mind. Meanwhile, Dr Pamela Dale of the University of Exeter placed social work activities with unmarried mothers within a wider context of health and welfare programmes in the 1940s.

Should we think of social work as a profession or a set of activities?

The third core theme of the workshop was an introspective one, as the discussion returned repeatedly to the various uses of history. The key question was: 'Is it our intention to use social work as a way of understanding the social world of the past, or is it to use history to inform our understanding of social work today?' Given the presence of researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, it is not surprising that no definitive answer emerged. Rather, it prompted delegates to think about how they conceptualise and might develop their work in future.

Of particular value was the information shared about networks and archives in the field of social work history, including the Voluntary Action History Society and the Social Work History Network. Janice West, retired Senior Lecturer in Social Work at GCU, gave an engaging presentation on the Heatherbank Museum of Social Work as a potential resource. It remains Europe's only museum of social work, even though it no longer has a physical space on the GCU campus and has been incorporated into the university's Special Collections (www.gcu.ac.uk/researchcollections/index.html).

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