

THE PROBLEM
OF
'THE PROBLEM FAMILY'

*A critical review of the literature
concerning the 'problem family'
and its treatment*

by

A. F. PHILP, B.Sc.,
Unit Leader, Liverpool Family Service Unit

and

NOEL TIMMS, B.A.,
Psychiatric Social Worker

with a Foreword by

PROFESSOR RICHARD M. TITMUSS,
Professor of Social Administration of the London
School of Economics

FAMILY SERVICE UNITS

1957



CHAPTER ONE

Describing the Problem Family

A. THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

The literature on the problem family contains some rather casual attempts to identify the historical counterpart of the problem family. There are obvious difficulties in searching the records of the past for signs of a many-sided contemporary reality signified by such a vague, unsettled term as 'problem family', but it has been assumed, rather easily, that the problem family is synonymous with the 'submerged tenth' described by Charles Booth in *Life and Labour of the People of London (1891-1903)* (e.g. 139 Ross) or with 'the social problem group' of the Wood Committee (e.g. 13, 56).

No attempt to trace the history of the problem family can be made without a clear definition. So far attempts to define the problem family seem to have concentrated on (a) the failure of these families to attain certain minimum social standards and (b) their failure to benefit from the social services. Taking the first approach, a distinction should be made between past and present-day standards. Using the generally accepted standards of to-day, it would probably be true to say that, 'One hundred years ago in the general picture of child neglect, lack of education, and of sanitary provision, no one thought of problem families; the whole of society was a problem' (20) or that 'the habits of a problem family and their conditions of life are generally disgraceful, though sixty or seventy years ago they might have passed without comment' (127). It is when we ask 'Comment from whom?' that a difficulty appears and we are compelled to consider the standards in force sixty or seventy years ago. Using these standards, it is possible that certain families stood out from others in similar economic distress, but even at that time such a differentiation could not easily be made. As Bosanquet wrote 'At every turn of their daily lives the two classes (the economic residuum and the true industrials) meet and influence each other . . . to the casual observer their dress, their food, their living accommodation, even their work, is the same in kind, if not in quantity.'⁷ The only record we could have of a distinction which 'is a difference of character and disposition'⁸ comes from the social worker and we are at once involved in a use of the second group of definitions.

⁷ Bosanquet, Helen. (1906). *The Standard of Life*. Macmillan. p. 167.

⁸ Bosanquet. *op. cit.* p. 167.

From this point of view, no beginning can be made in constructing a possible history of the problem family until the social services become organised to some extent. Possibly there were problem families among the 'undeserving poor' of Victorian philanthropy, or among the 'unhelpable' of the Charity Organisation Society. Charitable workers with their view of 'beggars by choice who will remain so to the end of the chapter'⁹ forcefully stated the idea that there were some who would not, and, therefore, could not be helped, but the category of 'unhelpable' was a highly subjective measure which varied from visitor to visitor.¹⁰ This selection through the variation in the opinion and ideas of each social worker is a criticism that can be made—at least in part—of present attempts to define the problem family in terms of its reaction to social workers. 'There is no one distinguishable characteristic which makes a family a "problem" as distinct from a normal one and in the absence of a precise definition a particular social worker's estimate of what constitutes such a family will depend upon several factors, personal and contingent' (39). If this is the case with social workers whose training and duties are comparatively clear to us, the limitations of such an approach in an historical perspective are obvious.

It is possible to find in the evidence presented to the Poor Law Commission of 1909 a detailed description of families living in what to-day we might call problem family conditions, together with some realisation that these families could be distinguished from others in a similar economic state. The description given in the evidence of Phelps is of particular interest. 'The general features prevailing in the homes of these neglected or underfed schoolchildren are strikingly alike . . . There is an absolute lack of organisation in the family life . . . Existence drags along anyhow; the hours of work, leisure and sleep are equally uncertain and irregular. There is no attempt, scarcely a possibility, of thrift, nor is any forecast made for the future of either the parents or children. The pressure of daily cares and needs is heavy enough and seems to crush out all ambition, leaving a dull content with the present circumstances . . . The whole standard of life is low and seems to drift along without pursuing any definite course . . . The important question of food reveals a state of ignorance as to a suitable diet for children. Bread, butter and tea is the only food taken in many families for several days at a time . . . A large amount of money, comparatively, is spent on tinned foods, brawn and food already cooked, to save the time and trouble of

⁹ Second Annual Report. Edgbaston Mendicity Society, 1871-72.

¹⁰ Resistance to the social worker then as now has also a positive aspect. As the Medical Officer of Health for Rochdale said, 'Normal and successful family life is fostered and protected by family loyalties which are admired and treasured. In this group of families (problem families) these same loyalties exist. Unfortunately, they seem most frequently designed for the frustration of the agencies seeking to assist.' Annual Report, 1953.

preparing it. The food is bought from the numerous small shops in the neighbourhood, who give large credit . . . the pawnbroker is an important feature in the lives of the more thriftless and improvident . . .’ Phelps drew a depressing picture but her conclusion was optimistic; ‘with a more widespread knowledge of the laws of physical health, a demand for better conditions and a raised standard of life may be expected to cure this evil which has, as its root, an overwhelming ignorance and apathy’ (90).

We may suppose that many of the families described in her report were able to use the developing social services and welfare legislation to improve considerably their performance and their standards. A small number, we may imagine, failed to improve at all, while others showed some change, though they might still be potential problem families, in that they could fairly soon present problem family conditions if subjected to abnormal outer pressure, such as economic depression. The close connection between the problem family and outer social pressure suggests that problem family conditions in present-day society may be a collection of symptoms that appear when families or certain types of family break down.¹¹ Some families are, of course, more likely to break down than others, but the present failure to reach an agreed definition of the problem family in terms of inherent defects precludes any attempt to use such a view-point in an historical approach.

Since the Poor Law report of 1909 there has been a considerable change in social standards and in the social services designed to implement them. Standards, particularly of health and child care, previously associated with the middle and upper classes have been applied to the whole nation, and the emphasis in the development of the social services has been on attempts to reach a national maximum of attainment.¹² General standards have been raised through the provision of general services, which have aimed at releasing human energy by removing some of the economic frustrations, and at providing the frame-work within which all would have equal opportunities of development. These are important objectives in the ‘Welfare State’. Free education and health services, automatic and general provision for ill-health, unemployment and increase in the family, have had far-reaching and considerable effects; but as the ‘Welfare State’ seeks to provide for each individual to be free to develop to the full his potentialities, those

¹¹ It has been suggested not only that general social stress increases the number of families that may be termed ‘problem families’, but that the particular form of stress shows itself more rapidly in the problem families that already exist. Querido has said, ‘Whatever is the prevailing social problem these families express it in its most acute form’ (92).

¹² For a discussion of the ‘maximum’ and ‘minimum’ aspects of the Welfare State, see Cormack, Una. (1953). *The Welfare State*. Loch Memorial Lecture. Family Welfare Association.

who cannot attain the minimum from which the others, as it were, start, are left more conspicuous but still unreached (120, 143). Yet the acceptance of general social responsibility embodied in the 'Welfare State' entails that those who present social problems shall neither be entirely ignored nor dismissed as 'undeserving'.

This examination of attempts to approach the problem family through an historical perspective suggests that the concept of the problem family is in many respects the outcome of the present situation of social standards and the social services, supported by a sustained period of full employment. It is difficult to trace the history of these determinants and perhaps the most that can be expected from an historical approach is a view of the development of the administrative setting of the problem.

B. DEFINITION

There have been many attempts to reach a definition of the problem family. The acceptance or criticism of the definitions suggested forms one of the main themes in the literature but, in spite of the interest shown, we are no nearer a satisfactory definition. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider these past efforts, and their examination may help in meeting problems of definition in other areas of social work.

There are several kinds of definition. A definition can, for example, give the general class to which the object belongs, or typical instances of the object to be discussed or, more traditionally, the essence of the thing to be defined. In attempts to reach a definition of the problem family it has been assumed that an essential definition was required, but in fact the definitions offered have not been of this kind. They have very often referred only to selected aspects of the problem and, though this is an unobjectionable procedure in itself, the definitions obtained have been interpreted as giving the essence of *the* problem family. Attempts to define have often been ambitious in aim but cursory in method.

While the naming of a characteristic feature common to a number of objects may be thought of as a type of definition, it is difficult to apply this sort of definition to the problem family. To do so is to assume that problem families form a homogeneous group. This assumption is widely held, but is of doubtful validity and is being questioned increasingly. Several writers support the view that 'present usage of the term "problem family" is apt to conceal the fact that it covers an extremely heterogeneous group and to disregard the wide variation in social inefficiency from case to case' (3).

Bowlby has said : 'The problem family is not a unitary condition, it is a symptom with many different aetiologies' (17). Others (136, 112, 154) have suggested that there are sub-groups among problem families, but the existence of such groups has not been demonstrated and no satisfactory criterion for classification has been found.

The actual definitions will now be considered more particularly. These will be grouped under the headings previously used : namely, failure to improve through contact with the social services, and failure to attain certain minimum social standards.

A characteristic of the term when it was first used, and also of later attempts at definition, has been again observed in a recent study of the problem : 'The problem family is in fact not just any family which manifests inefficiency and squalor, but one which persistently resists the well-meant efforts with which social agencies are able to combat these conditions in other families' (60). The reaction of the problem family to the administrative structure of the welfare services has received emphasis in the much quoted attempts of Tomlinson, Stallybrass and Savage to reach a definition. These attempts reflected predominantly administrative interests and tended to produce a very limited definition, replacing the term 'problem' by a phrase too close to the original to be helpful. Thus Tomlinson's definition (135) seems to state merely that problem families are a problem to the existing social services.¹³ Stallybrass (117) emphasizes the inability of the problem family to maintain any improvement, but his definition¹⁴ is so curiously worded that it seems to lack any precision. Savage (99) widens his definition by stating that the problem family mother 'does not give her children at least the minimum of care' and, thus, relates the problem family to the standards of society in one particular area of behaviour, but the addition of 'and refuses to co-operate with the health visitors and make effective use of the technical advice available for her' brings into the definition the criterion used in selecting the group for study. In this connection it is worth observing that none of the attempts to formulate a definition distinguish between a delimitation of a phenomenon for study purposes and a definition of its nature after the study has been made.

Blacker attempted to use as a definition the fact that many problem families had multiple problems and were, therefore, known to several agencies at one time. This, he stated, was the 'simplest and at the same time the most comprehensive definition' (13), but he found that its application depended on the organisation of services

¹³ 'those who, for their own well-being and the well-being of others, require a substantially greater degree of supervision and help over longer periods than is normally provided by existing services'.

¹⁴ 'families presenting an abnormal amount of subnormal behaviour over prolonged periods with a marked tendency to backsliding'.

in the district.¹⁵ Multiple visitation does not necessarily mean multiple problems or even a problem family.¹⁶ The problem family may be, in some respects, what public administrators say it is, but we must first learn what public administration is like. Administrative definitions in general depend so much upon the state of public administration at a particular time and place that they must be considered very limited.

Much of the literature speaks of the problem family in terms of failure to observe social standards. This failure is judged to extend either to the whole behaviour of the family where 'family life, behaviour and standards of living do not conform to the standards generally accepted in the society in which they live' (139 Steed, 75, 123) or to selected aspects, such as 'families manifesting child neglect and squalid homes' (60, 27). Statements are made that the problem families have fallen from higher standards, that they 'have a different moral code to the rest of society and are unable to comprehend normal notions of right and wrong' (74 Hallas). It is important to notice that attempts are only just being made to investigate the standards problem families in fact have (3, 134), or the complex interaction between their own feelings of right and wrong and the standards social workers expect them to observe. Until more work has been done on this subject it is premature to generalise.

Some attention, however, must be directed to considering the relationship between the problem family and one particular area of social standards—care of children. It is care of the children in problem families that causes officials, social workers and the general public most concern, and in the change of attitude towards the 'problem group' noted by Blacker (13) consideration for the children has played a great part. Yet the attempt to define the problem family in terms of child neglect is complicated by the fact that 'child neglect' is itself a concept that needs clarification. In some senses of the term 'child neglect' may appear in families that would normally not be classed as 'problem families'. As one authority says 'Child neglect is not confined to problem families though it is likely that the more chronic and intractable cases are amongst such families' (82). It would seem that child neglect should be viewed in the wider context of the parents' general capacity for personal relationships. One small-scale study of women convicted of child neglect suggested that 'Neglect of their children is only part of a general social failure on the part of these women.'¹⁷

¹⁵ His use of this definition is, moreover, linked with the idea, to be considered later, that the problem families constitute the social problem group.

¹⁶ See e.g. Youngusband, E. (1952). *The Case for a Local Authority Family Welfare Service*. *Social Service*, vol. 26, no. 3. December, 1953.

¹⁷ Report H.M. Commissioners of Prisons (1949). H.M. Stationery Office. Cmd. 8088. Appendix 1 (b).

Many of the difficulties of definition would be resolved if it were possible to speak of the problem family in terms of inherent traits, but no investigation so far made enables us to do this satisfactorily. The definitions proposed are in fact only beginning-descriptions that mark out very vaguely areas for further study. A satisfactory definition will come, if at all, only after deeper studies of more carefully described areas have been made. Yet the probability that the term refers to a mixed group suggests that the search for a definition of the problem family as such will be fruitless. Certainly, before any progress can be made, it seems necessary to be clear for what purpose the definition is needed and so what kind of definition is required.

The difficulties involved in attempts to define the problem family are gradually being recognised, but opinions differ on the best course to adopt. Some feel that we should 'get rid of the term or, at least, become very much more careful in its use' (131); others that though the term 'does not help to solve any problems . . . it serves a limited purpose in indicating the general area to be discussed . . . If the term is used at all, we feel it should not be used carefully but with intentional and obvious vagueness, as words like "powerful" or "foreigners" are used, merely to rule out of discussion at the start a whole range of instances clearly not relevant' (141). This latter view seems to neglect the consideration that the term 'foreigners' rules out of discussion the 'not foreigners' who can be identified as a specific group, the natives, but the term 'problem family' rules out of discussion the 'not problem family' which cannot be identified in the same way. Arguments about definition are, however, rare, and the problem is usually avoided by means of inverted commas and a statement that the problem family is hard to define, but easy to recognise.

C. DESCRIPTION

Little diffidence is felt about the actual description of problem families. They have been described as 'families that live like beasts' (75), 'constantly living in the utmost squalor . . . so slothful, anti-social and apparently so unaware of their own degradation' (8). These descriptions are illustrations of a punishing attitude towards the problem family which has been noted (56) and can be found in both definitions and descriptions.

In attempting to describe the problem family some writers have presented amalgamations of traits taken from several different families rather than actual cases (130, 146). The absence of detailed studies of actual cases is one of the most serious gaps in the literature. Those already published (13, 144, 145) are totally inadequate; they

present a few bare facts about each family, and give no idea of family relationships or the dynamics of family life. As one writer remarks, 'a descriptive method looking at these families from the outside, so to speak, without any detailed personal histories of the individuals who made up the families, seems severely limited' (56). Until this need is met we must be content to examine the traits listed by various writers, though these vary in both their scope and in their priorities. For example, some think that the role of poverty has been exaggerated, that too much has been made of bad housing (27); others that the factor of the broken home affects the problem (43); others that it is not of great importance (5, 149).

Of attempts to convey a general impression of the problem family the following may be taken as an example, typical in both content and manner. 'The characteristics are financial mismanagement and debt, child neglect both physical and psychological, dullness and delinquency of the children; but by no means all of these are present in the case of each problem family' (5). Most of the writers fail to distinguish levels of description, and statements of fact on the fairly superficial level of home conditions and handling of money are often mixed with a consideration of causal factors. The best attempt so far made to examine the general features of the problem family clearly and to show how these are actually combined in individual cases is still Stephen's *Problem Families*.

We shall consider the traits found in the published literature and, for the sake of convenience, will divide these under three headings :

- (1) Conditions and way of life
- (2) Child neglect
- (3) Personal defects.

(1) CONDITIONS AND WAY OF LIFE

There seems to be a large measure of agreement about the dirty material conditions in which problem families live. It is doubtful if later descriptions have bettered that submitted to the Poor Law Commission, 1909 : 'Their homes are nearly always to be found in the poorest quarters where population is densest. Cleanliness and ventilation are not considered of any account. The furniture is always of the most delapidated kind. The beds generally consist of dirty palliasses or mattresses with very scanty covering. The atmosphere is offensive, even fetid, and the clothing of the individuals, old and young, is ragged.'¹⁸ Perhaps the only change that could now be made in this description is that many of the problem families are to be found rehoused on council estates (149), still presenting the same sort of behaviour. Some of the families have

¹⁸ Minority Report Poor Law Commission (1909). H.M. Stationery Office. Cd. 4499. p. 752.

benefited from rehousing, but such measures affect the majority only in so far as they are combined with some form of treatment.

There has been little attempt to analyse the usual descriptions of material conditions or to assess the importance of the factor of dirt. Even if the proposition 'all problem families are dirty' were true, it would almost certainly not be reversible. A study of a sample of some of the children in the care of a local authority found that of the total number of families, seventy-three lived in filthy conditions, but only sixty-six of these were classed as problem families (70). In the Southampton Survey of 104 problem families twenty-one homes were classed as good and thirty-eight fair in regard to cleanliness (39). It is, of course, extremely difficult to measure such things as dirt and inadequate care of equipment, or to assess their meaning in any particular case. A simple judgment that a house is dirty ignores the complexity of the situation: it fails to enquire, for instance, whether the mother really does no cleaning or whether it is that her efforts are unrewarded because her numerous small children are out of control. In the absence of measurement and analysis we are left only with the opinions of social workers and 'one worker's "appalling" is equivalent to another's "passable"' (27). Social workers often use the standards of their own class rather than those of the culture to which the family belongs. This is a point of great importance and applies not only to questions of cleanliness but to the whole life of the problem family.

Most of the available evidence suggests that the majority of problem families come from the lower working classes (13, 135), though the fact that one survey found one parent in Class Two of the Registrar General's Classification (135) might suggest a line for speculation on the 'bohemian family' (50). Very little is known, however, about the areas from which the majority of problem families come. Spinley's book (114) provides an interesting basis for the reconstruction of 'normal' slum life and the impression she gives seems to have very much in common with that gained by those working with problem families, though she thinks of these as a minority within the general slum population. We do not know the extent to which the problem family may form a separate subculture or how far its standards and performance are shared with its neighbours (3). *Our Towns* drew attention to this relationship when it spoke of families that may be described as grey rather than black 'who are dirty and unwholesome in their habits through lack of personal discipline and social standards, often combined in the past or present with poverty and a discouraging environment' (152). The fact that problem families are not a distinct, isolated group has been noted: 'We found that there is no abrupt terminal gradient and the problem family represents the final section on the slope of family inadequacy' (112). Problem families influence, and are affected by,

their immediate environment¹⁹ but we do not know in what ways nor to what extent they are linked with their neighbours, or with the general population.

This social perspective puts into prominence the factor of the social isolation of individual families which has been mentioned by several writers (56, 124, 140). One writer in particular has stressed the causative importance of this isolation which results in the loss of the family's 'sub-clan' (124). It has been stated that 'with all problem families, their ostracism is a constant difficulty. Landlords, officials, house visitors, all who have unsatisfactory dealings with them, tend to treat them with disrespect' (120). Another writer suggests the effect this isolation might have on the children. Commenting on the fact that some of the children were shy and avoided adults she said 'No doubt ostracism at school²⁰ and in the home neighbourhood had promoted this withdrawal from the risks of having their feelings hurt and their advances rejected' (70). However, social isolation remains a characteristic which has not been the subject of very careful consideration. Some authors feel that the problem family is sometimes surrounded and, in a sense, supported by families of roughly the same way of life (32) or that the many social workers that visit break down isolation in some respects (140).

The financial aspect of the day-to-day lives of problem families has received considerable emphasis. This provides an example of their disorganised way of living: 'Problem families are, it seems to me, lawless in the economic sense . . . They are lawless in their irrational disregard of ordinary commonsense management of income' (2). However, attempts to assess the extent to which problem family budgets are mismanaged, are heavily influenced both by general notions that primary poverty has been abolished and that, therefore, any poverty discovered must be due to mismanagement, and also by the highly subjective nature of judgments about essential and inessential expenditure. The following quotation clearly illustrates both these difficulties: 'In spite of the present rarity of poverty, problem families often fail to have any money available for the things most essential for their welfare, such as rent and contraceptives' (36).

Attention has also been given to the place of poverty in causing the problem family. Attempts to measure poverty in the problem family have met with difficulties normal to such enquiries on a wider scale and the adoption of different standards (e.g. 135 and 149) in this as in other matters makes any general statement meaningless.

¹⁹ An example of the interaction between the problem family and socially weak neighbours is noted in the Report of the Medical Officer of Health, Rotherham County Borough, 1953: 'In two other cases families appeared to be adversely affected by lack of suitable accommodation and by their close and continuous contact with problem families consequent upon this.'

²⁰ See also (44).

One writer, however, accepting as arbitrary 'any estimate of the level at which poverty begins,' has said 'it is evident that many of the families of children in care are near the point at which it is difficult to provide the means of subsistence. The worse off were the problem families' (70).

While estimates of the effect or presence of primary poverty differ, there is more general agreement that it would take more intelligence and more stability than that possessed by most problem family parents to budget on the income provided, and to balance successfully long-term and immediate need. The temptations in the environment to easy commitment for the future in such forms as clothing clubs or hire purchase arrangements have been noted (152). Opinions differ on the amount of money spent on drink and gambling, but there seems to be a reliance on immediate satisfaction (60) so that a disproportionate amount of the family income is spent on cigarettes, the cinema, tinned foods, etc. (63). Debts are very frequent and the bizarre patterns of borrowing in some neighbourhoods indicate, perhaps, one of the ways in which generalisations about social isolation need correction. The problem family mother often has to resort to these clumsy ways of attempting to provide for the family because father fails to give her a fair share of the income, or fails through sickness or instability to work regularly (94). The fact that he often keeps, what seems to the outside observer, a disproportionate amount of the income may be seen as part of his social role, though we are not sure how far this is a pattern common to a much wider group of the population.

Descriptions of the conditions of problem family life cannot tell us very much, even when, as in the surveys, some attempt is made to quantify them. Yet these conditions are the framework within which the problem family exists and are at once the result and the expression of an attitude to life. What has impressed observers as the most striking general characteristic of the problem family is its disorganisation; 'perhaps the most common feature of these families is the disorder of their lives' (120). Querido has spoken of 'a general instability, a general inadaptability, an inability to self-maintenance, an irresponsible attitude to the tools of life' (92). Failure to organise effectively the machinery of daily life may be judged to aggravate the personal problems of individual members of the families, to exacerbate faulty relations between husband, wife and children (70).

Not only is there disorganisation, but the family seem to regard 'an appalling state of affairs as adequate'.¹⁷ 'The distinctive feature of the life of a family who have become a social problem is their passive acceptance of their condition' (120). 'The slum breakdown

¹⁷ See p. 6.

family . . . its salient feature is the apathy of the mother who lets things go. Her depression has become a chronic indifference to everything, above all to civilised standards' (125). In making judgments, however, about apathy and general disorganisation it is important to observe that there are two general approaches to the problem which will affect the interpretation of such descriptions. Some writers look on the problem family in terms of 'the collapse or degradation of a family' (154), whilst from other sources it is perhaps permissible to take a concept such as that of a primitive family functioning fairly well on a primitive level.²¹ This is, of course, a crude concept but it suggests an hypothesis that might be profitably investigated. Another writer thinks that some problem families may be acting in conformity with their own 'real' standards in contrast to the generalised norms of society which they do not accept (3).

(2) CHILD NEGLECT

Considerable emphasis has been placed on the high fertility of problem families and this in itself makes them suspect in the eyes of some writers. 'Problem families are rarely troubled by scruples about their high fertility' (12). Eugenic considerations have prompted this remark and it is important to bear in mind the warning of a writer made fairly early in the literature: 'It is apparent that extreme caution is needed in assessing the meaning of the conjunction of social inefficiency with fertility and still more so the association of social failure and fecundity' (135). Large families may be, as some have suggested, the result of sexual irresponsibility or of a compensation for personal inadequacy, but it is important to remember also that it is very often its size that brings the problem family to the notice of the authorities. A large number of children may act as a factor of selection or of causation.

The neglected condition of children in such families is a characteristic that has impressed many observers, though it is frequently stated that cases of physical cruelty are rare among problem families.²² Some writers have felt that the conditions of life in the problem family home are so inimicable to the healthy development

²¹ 'The members of the lower working class present a strong contrast with those of the upper working class, and indeed with the great bulk of the English population. These people with little money or education, and with (mostly) big families seem to resemble more the "poor", as described by such observers as Mayhew, than any other contemporary group in the country; they seem to be in the anthropological sense of the word "survivals" . . . They are the only class for whom drink is a major cause of marital unhappiness (surely, another survival) followed by neglect. They pay little attention to sexual compatibility, give-and-take or mutual trust, as making for the happiness of a marriage; but they do like their spouses to be economical.' Gorer, G. (1955). *Exploring English Character*. The Cresset Press, London. pp. 299-300.

²² A recent study of cruelty (41) discussed some of the differences between cruel and neglectful parents.

of children that their removal is the only possible course of action.²³ Wofinden at one time added this recommendation to his definition of the problem family. Since the early discussions of the problem, however, there has been a considerable change of feeling about the desirability of removing children from their own homes and a growing appreciation of the great emotional stress such separation produces, especially in the case of the very young child. The majority of writers have drawn attention to the fact that, in spite of inadequate physical care, children in problem families often appear to be happy. Lewis examined a group of problem family children admitted to the care of the local authority and found that, of the total of 141 children, sixty-six were quite normal and forty-six had only slight signs of delinquency or neurosis (70).

These indications of the happiness and normality of many problem family children must be balanced against the psychological neglect that can occur in these homes. The child, as part of its everyday life, may be subjected to 'a mixture of spoiling affection and impatient chastisement' (120) or, as a young toddler, be suddenly displaced from attention and coddling by the arrival of the new baby. An American writer has recently drawn attention to 'the deprivations which these (neglectful) parents themselves had experienced (and which) caused them to seek infantile gratifications which were in competition with the children's needs. Even the basic elements of the child's physical care were overlooked since the parent's own impaired sense of reality pervaded the whole family function' (6). In England, Howells has presented the case of a problem family in which 'the striking aspect . . . is the severe disturbance in the personality of the seven children'. His view of the emotional pressure on the children in some problem families has led him 'to experiment with . . . the calculated separation of the child from the parents for as long as possible during the day, and what is termed "day foster care"' (58).

Some writers see neglect of the children as likely to lead to delinquency. Early in the study of the problem family it was stated 'the key to much delinquency, juvenile and adult, must be sought in the problem family' (152). This statement has been repeated by later writers or countered by equally general assertions—'Of themselves problem families do not appear to be productive of a large proportion of juvenile delinquency in the community' (113). What seems to be needed is a much sharper view of the problem so that the two omnibus terms 'problem family' and 'delinquent' are not joined in this unhelpful way, but greater attention is paid to the types of offence and to an examination of the connection between them and the types of the problem family.

²³ For an expression of this opinion see (44). 'Taken from such a home and placed with decent foster parents, or in a well-run and kindly children's home, there is a good chance of her (the girl from a problem family) developing on better lines than her parents.'

It is frequently stated that 'the problem family begets the problem family' (74 Hallas, 154) and if this were so it would seem to be the most important of the wider aspects of child neglect. One survey found eleven problem families that were directly related (135), but the meaning of this connection in such a small number of the families has not been sufficiently elucidated. It is interesting to note the different ways in which writers feel the condition of problem family may be inherited. Some feel it is a question of inheritance through what is basically bad stock (13), others that the problem family begets the problem family through the inculcation in the children of wrong or inadequate standards (74 Hallas), or through a repetition in them when they become parents of the emotional patterns they experienced in their own homes (14).²⁴

(3) PERSONAL DEFECTS

These will be considered under three headings :

- (i) Health
- (ii) Intellectual Defect
- (iii) Mental Ill-health.

(i) *Health.* The poor physical health of the problem family mother receives frequent comment in the literature (e.g. 126, 146) 'There is reason to believe that a wider study of women guilty of neglecting their children would confirm that not only do they not enjoy the kind of robust good health which would make their task possible, but that many would be in very poor health indeed' (153). The picture is usually drawn of a woman 'reduced to exhaustion and hopelessness by work, poverty, bad housing, domestic difficulties and the bearing and care of too many children in too short a time' (138). The health of the mother often suffers because 'she is reluctant to offer herself for medical examination; she is aware of and ashamed of her own untidiness, her lack of personal hygiene . . . to a degree she may be suspicious of authority, even helpful authority, and sensing her inability to respond may deliberately never go near a clinic at any time' (38). Similarly, the fathers in problem families seem often to be suffering from chronic ill-health. But commenting on the poor health of mothers compared with fathers, one Medical Officer wrote, 'Not only does father get better meals than mother, but differential feeding between boys and girls can be observed in the families at an early age'.²⁵

It seems strange that more investigation has not been made of the health of children in problem families. It has been suggested that the children are surprisingly healthy considering their environment (146), but Savage (99) showed that in Herefordshire the infant

²⁴ This idea of repetition of childhood patterns has been adapted to several different aspects of the problem. Thus 'the unsatisfactory tenants of today may very well produce the unsatisfactory tenants of to-morrow' (55).

²⁵ Report of the Medical Officer of Health for Salford, 1951.

mortality rate was double the rate in control families. Wofinden (149), however, was unable to find any significant difference between the infant mortality rate of the Bristol families investigated and that of Bristol families generally. It is likely that problem families absorb a disproportionate share of the time of health visitors and that the children spend longer in hospital or on convalescent holidays than the average child and are significantly more subject to pediculosis. These impressions still need the confirmation of research.

The assessment of the importance of ill-health is a complicated matter. We do not know whether this is cause or effect, i.e. one of the factors producing the problem family or the result of trying to fight against an intolerable situation (149). Perhaps the psychosomatic nature of this illness should be considered more carefully than has been done hitherto (118). Bowlby has stated that 'undiagnosed neurosis and psychopathy in the mother underlie much neglect of children in their homes' (14) and it is possible that much of the minor physical illness which these women suffer should be seen as symptomatic of a more general state of depression or of gross dependency needs which are also responsible for the neglect of their homes and children.

(ii) *Intellectual Defect.* This factor either alone or in combination with 'temperamental instability' is probably the one that has been most stressed. In this connection Savage gave a warning quite early in the development of ideas about the problem family which could have been taken more seriously. 'In addition to what is seen (when we observe the behaviour of a problem family), there are certain ideas and beliefs held by many people about those who seem unable to conform to any kind of order in their lives. For example, it is a common belief that all the parents are borderline mental defectives, that their condition is due to poor inheritance . . .' (101). Such ideas and beliefs are very common; in the absence of evidence they must remain beliefs.

A small amount of investigation has been carried out, but intelligence tests have rarely been used. The Eugenics Surveys, for example, relied on the impressions of health visitors. Savage used Ravens matrices in his investigations (99) but the test was administered by health visitors and it is doubtful whether this was a good test for this material. The different interpretation placed on the results of his survey are of interest. Savage himself says that *only* 30 per cent of the mothers were ineducable (101), while another writer speaks of this number as 'nearly a third' (118). It seems that interpretation of the evidence is hindered by some of the preconceptions mentioned above.

A more careful study of the intelligence of one hundred neglectful mothers has recently been reported by Sheridan (108) who interviewed and tested these women, admitted to Spofforth Hall and the Mayflower between March 1948 and June 1954. The author stresses

that her sample should not be regarded as a cross-section of neglectful mothers, and besides the factors of selection mentioned (such as the admission policy of the institutions) it should also be noted that these are neglectful women who have been sentenced by the courts. The results of the test Sheridan administered (Stanford-Binet, Revised Form L) show that, while the curve of distribution of intelligence is of a similar pattern to the normal, it was displaced widely towards the lower end of the scale so that the average intelligence quotient was 79·8. It is possible to question the validity of the test for adults, but Sheridan seems fairly confident about the reliability of her results. Her sample shows a higher proportion of the imbecile, feeble-minded and dull than the normal population, and also a lower proportion of the normal, superior and very superior. She found five women of superior intelligence.

These results prompted the author to ask two questions: why are people of the very low intelligence she discovered allowed to marry and begin to raise a family, before the authorities become aware of the problems they may create; and how can neglect by women of high intelligence be explained? Sheridan thinks that the women of very low intelligence 'are temperamentally stable, and within their limited capacity they are gentle, friendly, contented and teachable... While they have only one or, at most, two children they usually manage their household fairly well, but when their family responsibilities outgrow their capacity they become overwhelmed and subside hopelessly into dirt and domestic confusion' (108). Her comments on the second group will be mentioned later; the existence of such cases supports the view of other writers that low intelligence is not the major factor in causing social failure (14, 50, 58).

The inference that the backwardness that does exist in problem families is due to factors of heredity is also doubtful. In the case of the educationally retarded children in Savage's survey, for example, it is not clear how far retardation was due to poor endowment or to such environmental factors as poor school attendance and inadequate sleep.

The idea that the problem family presents a problem primarily of inherited intellectual dullness seems to arise from an equation of the 'problem family' with the 'social problem group' (13). The concept was first used²⁶ by the Wood Committee (80) and the following

²⁶ This idea, however, probably has some connection with the notion current in the nineteenth century of the dangerous and criminal classes. Towards the last quarter of the century the anti-social group was identified as the chronic paupers and it was necessary only to add that it was a self-perpetuating group to reach one of the basic ideas of the social problem group. The meeting of these two notions, that of chronic paupers and of self-perpetuation, is recorded in a report in *The Times*, 7th November 1910 (quoted Lidbetter 71) . . . 'The general effect of these reports is to show the existence among us of a definite race of chronic paupers, a race parasitic upon the community, breeding in and through successive generations and only to a small extent recruited either from the ranks of unskilled labour and from the sufferers by the ordinary fluctuations of industry and employment.'

paragraph from their Report has been frequently quoted. 'Let us assume that we could segregate as a separate community all the families in this country containing mental defectives of the primary amentia type. We should find that we had collected among them a most interesting social group. It would include, as everyone who has extensive practical experience of social service would readily admit, a much larger proportion of insane persons, epileptics, paupers, criminals (especially recidivists), unemployables, habitual slum dwellers, prostitutes, inebriates and other social inefficients than would a group of families not containing mental defectives. The overwhelming majority of the families thus collected will belong to that section of the community, which we propose to term the "social problem" or "subnormal" group'.

This does not really define the social problem group and the Report continues with the rather curious statement that 'This group comprises approximately the lowest 10 per cent in the social scale of most communities'. In another section of the Report it is said, 'The findings of our investigation . . . point to the conclusion that the majority of the feeble-minded are to be found within a relatively small social group, a group which may be described as the subnormal or social problem group representing approximately 10 per cent of the population'. The fact that no explanation is given of how this identification is made is but one of several difficulties in the way of a clarification of the concept.

It is, however, possible to present the three main ideas behind this concept. These seem to be: that there is a 'fundamental relationship between individuals subject to . . . various defects and disabilities' (9) such as alcoholism, pauperism, recidivism, mental defect, etc.; that 'poor mental endowment, manifesting itself in an incapacity for social adjustment and inability to manage one's own affairs, may be not merely a symptom but rather the chief contributing cause of these kindred social evils' (80); and that this social problem group forms in the larger cities 'geographical foci of mental deficiency' (80).

It may be possible to isolate a group containing the feeble-minded and deviant without this meaning much more than that in 90 per cent of the population these defects are not obvious. Jones (61, 62) has claimed that 'all the evidence seems to support the theory . . . that in any large centre there exists a social problem group, the source from which the majority of criminals, paupers, unemployables and defectives of all kinds are recruited'. And Lidbetter has said 'The pedigrees show quite conclusively that there is a social problem group'; they 'reveal that there is in existence a definite race of subnormal people, closely related by marriage or parenthood, not to any extent recruited from the normal population, nor sensibly diminished by the agencies for social or individual improvement'

(71). But Blacker has asked 'may not the group amount to no more than a purely statistical aggregate without special biological characteristics?' (9). He has also drawn attention to the very varied assortment of conditions mentioned by the Wood Committee, suggested that some or all of them may be caused through destitution, and pointed out the fundamental difficulty of distinguishing environmental from inherent characteristics. There is a factor of selection at work so that the 'social inefficients' studied are those who have called attention to themselves by their very incompetence. 'The inference that the same people would be incompetent in a different environment or according to different standards is unjustified' (89). Certainly, 'the defects of character and mentality which are so largely accountable for the problem are more easily concealed when such a family is on the middle or upper rungs of the social ladder' (120).

Those most concerned in the discussion have, however, been more interested in the interaction of defects and their perpetuation. For instance, Jones asks (9), 'Is there any fundamental relationship between individuals subject to the various defects and disabilities discussed which would justify us in classifying them as members of a social problem group?' (It will be seen that there is here some difference in the method of identification of the group.) He then goes on to say what is meant by 'fundamental'. 'It will be noted that some writers have used instead the word biological which is more precise and therefore more suitable if it can be taken to imply a relationship established at conception and, so far as our knowledge goes, only capable of subsequent modification within narrow limits.' An answer to his question has never really been attempted. Penrose as early as 1933 (88) pointed out that it had not even been proved that the social problem group contained defectives of the primary amentia type.

The concept of the social problem group remains, then, highly uncertain and of doubtful utility. Jones, who at times seems to have no doubts about the statistical existence of the group, after discussing some of the difficulties in the concept, observes 'all we can say is that intelligence is likely to be one of the key positions in attacking the numerous problems that still await solution in this field' (9). We remain in very much the same position as the Wood Committee when they say, 'Which are causes and which results in this focal group of social problems it is impossible to state from the meagre data collected up to the present'. And Blacker has added, 'it would be wise to regard the existence of the social problem group as described by the Wood Committee as not yet finally proved' (11).

(iii) *Mental Ill-health.* The need to look beyond the immediate symptoms of dirty home conditions and child neglect towards more fundamental factors of mental ill-health and personality disturbance

has been emphasized in the literature (153). Little progress however has been made. Blacker (13) investigated the hypothesis that the problem family was the result of 'intractable ineducability' and 'personality disturbance', but there have been several comments on the crudity of the study: 'The vital heading "psychosis or neurosis" appears to relate only to such gross manifestations as "dealt with under Lunacy or Mental Treatment Acts" or "attendance at psychiatric clinic"' (60, 48).

Some effort has been made to relate the symptoms of the problem family condition to more basic concepts. Bowlby has connected the disorganisation of the problem family with their failure to adopt the abstract attitude and has said, 'It is the ineducable psychopathic character which is the heart' of the problem of the neglectful mother (14). This may apply only to the hard core of problem families. Sheridan finds it is the more intelligent mothers who show mental disturbance and speaks of a 'type of psychopathy' which 'seems to partake of a moral apathy which is not culpable, of a mental withdrawal which is not schizophrenia, of a physical lethargy which is not mere sloth' (108). Querido started with a hypothesis that the problem family was the result of psychotic parenthood, but this had eventually to be abandoned. Instead 'a hypothesis was formed that the mental disturbances might not be the cause but the effect of social failure. The abnormal mental attitude which is so striking in these families was regarded as the result of years of worry, poverty and neglect' (92).

Attempts to think of the problem family in terms of the classification of mental illness do not appear to be very helpful. Most of the investigations so far made have ignored the approach of psychodynamics and have regarded emotional disturbance as just another trait to be observed and recorded. The words of an American survey on delinquency and child neglect are relevant here: 'In looking for causes of behaviour problems like delinquency and neglect attention is usually directed to a series of readily observed and easily recorded characteristics like age, sex, intelligence, family situation, etc. . . . The Survey concluded the presence or absence of such factors, with possibly one or two exceptions, is not sufficient to explain the delinquent and neglectful behaviour found. The children and their families when described in terms of these factors are not so very different from the general run of the population and are certainly not very different from the rest of their own socio-economic group which do not show problems of neglect and delinquency' (31). An exception the report made was emotional instability, and it suggested ways in which this overall term might be broken down by locating the centres of disturbed relationships, whether between mother and children, father and children or between the parents.

This emotional instability is a vague term, but considerable insight into the often disturbed emotional life of the problem family can be gained by considering the personal relationships problem family parents and children establish with each other and with those outside the family. It is only quite recently that attention has been given to the diagnostic importance of the way in which the relationship in casework is used by the problem family client. It has been suggested that problem families may be classified according to the different use they make of this relationship (60). Such an approach illuminates ways of helping these families and also increases understanding of their overwhelming emotional needs, their serious dependency problems and their unsatisfied infantile demands. As Querido has said 'the problem family is one of the most interesting examples of a disruption of relations . . . Re-socialising these families might yield an important contribution to the whole problem of the development and deterioration of inter-personal relations'.²⁷

²⁷ Paper read to the International Conference on Mental Hygiene, London, August 1948. Proceedings of the Conference published by H. K. Lewis and Co. Ltd. vol. 4. p. 232.