

THE PROBLEM
OF
'THE PROBLEM FAMILY'

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

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FOREWORD

It is often assumed to-day that Britain discovered its so-called 'problem families' during the evacuation of the cities and the mixing of social classes in the early years of the Second World War. The social contrasts, then made so disconcertingly apparent, undoubtedly gave rise to a wave of public interest in 'the condition of the family'. It would, however, be truer to say that there is a long, though discontinuous, tradition in this country of concern about a segment of families in the population, supposedly characterised by similar traits, and thought to represent a closed, pathological entity—in Lidbetter's phrase, 'a race of subnormals'. Since 1941 this ill-defined group has come in for a great deal of attention and investigation. Survey has followed survey. Many remedies have been proposed and some pursued. A variety of measures have been put into practice by voluntary and statutory bodies. Yet, as this book shows, the debate about the 'problem family' has been conducted in a singularly uncritical manner. Precision in the use of words and in the observation of phenomena has been generally lacking; heterogeneity has been mistaken for homogeneity; biological theories have obscured the study of psychological and sociological factors; the classification and counting of 'abnormals' has proceeded regardless of the need to set them in the context of contemporary social norms; in short, what knowledge has been gained from all these inquiries has not accumulated on any theoretical foundations.

Throughout this period these families have predominantly been seen as an administrative problem and as a challenge to social casework. Both the administrator and the social worker have not been able to escape taking some action; thus, they have inevitably had to adopt certain attitudes; certain moral values. The extension of the social services in recent years has meant more contact between social workers and the members of these families and, similarly, more officials, especially local government officials, have been made aware of the circumstances attending the lives of these families. The growth of social policy has confronted us with the problem of the social vagabonds—those who were not tolerated in Plato's Republic. The more action that is taken the more does it become necessary to make explicit the ethical and social values which underlie and inform all administrative and casework intervention.

Although this is only one of the issues discussed in this book, it is, in the view of the writer, the most fundamental of all. Alone it justifies the publication of this careful and comprehensive review of

the literature on 'problem families'. Whether we think of them as vagabonds, 'problems', vagrants, social defectives, nomads, gypsies, tramps, *clochards*, bohemians or as sub-humans, the attitude that society adopts to its deviants, and especially its poor and politically inarticulate deviants, reflects its ultimate values. To provide social services is not enough. To engage in voluntary activity or to administer conscientiously is also not enough. We must learn to understand the moral presuppositions underlying our actions. This, if nothing else, is reason enough for the education of the social worker to recognise the duality of her responsibilities to the individual and to society.

It is encouraging, as one reads this book, to observe in recent years a growing recognition among social workers of all that is involved in the use and misuse of authority in relationships between the worker and the client. The contrast with the writings of administrators on 'the problem of problem families' is clearly marked. It is therefore hoped that this book will be widely read by administrators of both statutory and voluntary services as well as by social workers. It is warmly commended to them all, not only because of the thoughtful way in which it brings to the surface and examines these ethical issues, but because of its critical study of the literature, and its review of the now impressive volume of voluntary and local authority efforts to help and support these families.

November, 1956.

RICHARD M. TITMUSS.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'problem family' was first consciously used in 1943 (152)¹ in an attempt to characterise a group of families living in squalor and unable or unwilling to make constructive use of the social services. Workers in the field of public health had long been aware of the existence of families continuing to live in conditions society could not tolerate (28, 43), but the nature and extent of the problem had not been fully realised. The general public, certainly, knew very little about conditions of life in the slums and nothing of the intractable minority within those areas, termed in 1943 'problem families'.

This lack of knowledge has been explained by the assumption that the social services were so well developed that conditions of living had automatically improved everywhere (152) and by a previous 'deterioration in the standard and output of social facts'.² It was, according to the literature, the experiences of evacuation which corrected this ignorance, but the shock of sudden knowledge resulted in what seems now an exaggerated view of the number of problem families. 'Large numbers of the children—5 per cent in some areas and fifty in others—and a proportion of the mothers had lousy heads. But it did not follow that it was just to stigmatise them all as problem families'.³

¹ The expression 'problem family' can be found earlier than this—Blacker, C. P. (1937). *A Social Problem Group?* p. 122. Here, however, the use of the term seems accidental and does not carry the implications of present usage. This also applies to the appearance of the term in the *Eugenics Review*, vol. 31, no. 3, October 1939, p. 55. It is interesting to note that in his Report for 1942 the Medical Officer of Health for Norwich said 'These people constitute a problem—they are "the problem people".'

² 'One further reason, which helps to explain why public opinion was shocked by the experiences of evacuation in 1939, was the absence, for some years before the war, of adequate public information by central and local authorities about their activities in the field of the social services. Statistical intelligence and annual reports on work done had still not recovered from the curtailment of published facts in 1915, in the early nineteen-twenties and again in 1931. How serious this was can be demonstrated by a simple sum. Despite retrenchment in 1915, caused by financial economies and staff shortages, the five annual reports of the Chief Medical Officer of the Board of Education during 1915-19 totalled 1,164 pages, whereas during 1934-38 inclusive the corresponding reports were no longer than 651 pages in all.' Titmuss, R. M. (1950). *Problems of Social Policy*, H.M. Stationery Office. p. 131.

³ Titmuss. op. cit. p. 135.

Since the first attempt to place the experience of evacuation in some perspective, interest in the problem family has been both considerable and sustained. Several Conferences have been called to discuss the problem (73, 76, 98), articles on the subject have appeared frequently in various types of journal and there have been several small-scale studies (13, 39, 50, 120, 149). A list of the published material dealing with the problem family shows not only the continuity of interest, but also its extent. The fact that it includes publications designed for the general reader (e.g. 59, 128, 129) and also for more specialised audiences illustrates the breadth of the interest shown and the social importance the problem has assumed.⁴

The scattered nature of the material also presents serious difficulties to those wishing to study the subject and the literature has been reviewed from time to time (10, 13, 135). These reviews, however, have been too influenced by biological considerations and have neglected several important aspects of the problem,⁵ particularly the principles of treatment. The bulk of the literature written before and since these reviews testifies to a constant concern rather than to the gradual accumulation of knowledge, but we considered that a full critical bibliography of the literature would prove useful. Our study does not present new hypotheses or fresh facts, but considers the work published on problem families up to November 1956. We hope that this bibliography will encourage a critical approach to the problem and, on the basis of the assessment of present work and opinion, prepare the ground for new research.

It should be observed, however, that a full picture of the development of thought and action on the problem family cannot be obtained from a study of the literature alone. Such a study is, we believe, important, but it must omit the unobtrusive work of many individuals and unofficial bodies which is not recorded in articles and conference papers; and it will fail to show the way in which the general interest in the problem family has been built up through separate humanitarian concerns for housing, child neglect and delinquency, the constant pressure and interest of certain Members of Parliament and changes in the theory and practice of child care. It is unfortunately beyond the scope of this essay to attempt to trace the contribution each of the interests has made to the recognition of the problem family as a social problem.

⁴ The importance of the problem to the general public would have appeared greater if we had included in the bibliography the numerous articles that have appeared in the more popular weekly journals, and the many references in the Daily Press.

⁵ This second criticism can also be made of the bibliography on the problem family in *Bibliography of Social Work and Administration* by the Joint University Council for Social Studies and Public Administration (June 1954) which is neither complete nor selective.

One of the striking characteristics of much of the occasional work has been the way in which writers uncritically refer to, and quote, unsubstantiated opinions found in earlier works which thus achieve a general authority and acceptance not always deserved. An illustration of this is the picture of 'problem family' life first presented in 1944 (146) and quoted so frequently from that date that it 'has now become classical' (12).⁶

'Often it is a large family, some of the children being dull or feeble-minded. From their appearance they are strangers to soap and water, toothbrush and comb; the clothing is dirty and torn and the footgear absent or totally inadequate. Often they are verminous and have scabies and impetigo. Their nutrition is surprisingly average—doubtless due to extra-familial feeding in schools. The mother is frequently substandard mentally. The home, if indeed it can be described as such, has usually the most striking characteristics. Nauseating odours assail one's nostrils on entry, and the source is usually located in some urine-sodden, faecal-stained mattress in an upstairs room. There are no floor coverings, no decorations on the walls except perhaps the scribblings of the children and bizarre patterns formed by absent plaster. Furniture is of the most primitive, cooking utensils absent, facilities for sleeping hopeless—iron bedsteads furnished with soiled mattresses and no coverings. Upstairs there is flock everywhere, which the mother assures me has come out of a mattress she has unpacked for cleansing. But the flock seems to stay there for weeks and the cleansed and repacked mattress never appears. The bathroom is obviously the least frequented room of the building. There are sometimes faecal accumulations on the floors upstairs, and tin baths containing several days accumulation of faeces and urine are not unknown. The children, especially the older ones, often seem to be perfectly happy and contented, despite such a shocking environment. They will give a description of how a full sized midday meal has been cooked and eaten in the house on the day of the visit when the absence of cooking utensils gives the lie to their assertion. One can only conclude that such children have never known restful sleep, that the amount of housework done by the mother is negligible and that the general standard of hygiene is lower than that of the animal world.'

The apparently unquestioning acceptance of the growing authority of this description ignores its limitations and the inappropriateness of its general application and use.

It is possible also to identify within the literature two separate approaches to the problem. These are here presented in rather extreme terms and some studies may well have characteristics from

⁶ For the most recent instance see (38).

both categories. On the one hand the problem family is seen as an administrative problem that should be solved here and now in a pragmatic manner. Problem families are thought of as a single group presenting a common problem to the public administrator: such families can be ascertained, and their characteristics discovered, through the technique of the survey, and in so far as a more searching examination is made of their problems it is based largely on biological assumptions. The other approach questions these methods and assumptions and seeks a deeper analysis of the complexities of the problem and an understanding of the personalities involved; it proceeds by case study rather than social survey.

A discussion of the problem family could lead quite easily to a consideration of other, wider, subjects. We have tried to avoid diversions into neighbouring fields of study, but some more general topics are of such importance for the problem family that occasional trespassing has been unavoidable. This is probably most noticeable in the section on casework principles.

The bibliography contains the main works on the problem family from both American and English sources. Material which is of more general interest, or in which mention of the problem family is incidental, is confined to footnotes. Where a quotation is followed by several references the first number will indicate the source of the quotation; where reference is made to a publication by several contributors, the name of the particular writer concerned will follow the number.

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