Forty years after he was my personal tutor on my postgraduate social work course at Sheffield University in the UK, the work of Eric Sainsbury still resonates for me. I was privileged to hear his lectures on diagnosis/assessment, which were obviously the core of his text *Social Diagnosis in Casework* published by Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1970, the year I qualified. I recently have had the opportunity to reflect on the lasting impression of Eric’s work while working on various projects associated with the teaching of assessment in social work (Coulshed and Orme, 2004; Crisp et al., 2005, 2007).

Eric Sainsbury studied at Oxford, Sheffield and the London School of Economics. His career before becoming a social work academic at the University of Sheffield included being a school teacher, probation officer and family caseworker. His academic studies and his career choices shine through both his early influential text and the research and scholarship that developed from it. He was one of the early social work academics in the UK to make efforts to make research relevant to practice – an important project for this journal.

The slight text (only 107 pages) on social diagnosis is a rich amalgam of description, analysis and reflection drawing on literature from social work, sociology and psychoanalysis. His fluid writing uses case examples throughout to illustrate and explore different theories and explanations in a way that inspires good practice. The descriptive literary style is more effective in capturing the essential elements of situations than the current use of ‘pedagogic boxes’ (those text boxes at the end of chapters that include a worked example or an exercise for the reader). Best practice involves, as the preface states, practitioners using social diagnosis as ‘the thinking in helping or the helping through thinking’.
This maxim fits well with the mission of *Qualitative Social Work* to provide a two-way bridge between research and practice.

Sainsbury saw the three elements of practice (study, diagnosis and intervention) not as separate stages of a linear process but as interacting elements in a single process. Importantly he saw diagnosis as an exercise in reflecting on what is known, which includes the facts of the situation and the explanatory theories which might be employed in understanding these facts (Sainsbury, 1970: 36). Throughout the text he emphasizes that the complex process of all social work interventions includes the ‘lively interaction of theoretical knowledge of various kinds with the attitudes of the individual workers towards other people and their needs’ (Sainsbury, 1970: 73). I have added the emphasis at the end of this quotation because it signifies what is the defining characteristic of this and his subsequent work: social work has to include clients’ views.

However, this is not a simple invocation to be inclusive. In *Social Diagnosis in Casework*, Sainsbury is clear that involving the client in diagnosis of his (sic) needs and capabilities in solving them requires help in understanding the extent and limitation of the agency. His subsequent work explores the continuing tension between agency function, social work values and definitions of client need. The exploration of agency function led to his work on description of agency function in the UK. *The Personal Social Services* (1977) is a comprehensive study of UK social work within wider social welfare, underpinned by social policy. The constant struggle for social workers to meet client need while also having to meet organizational requirements features strongly in his concluding chapter on the nature of social work and is discussed further in his *British Journal of Social Work* article on ‘The State of Welfare’ (Sainsbury, 1979). The article anticipates many subsequent debates about the role and function of social work in the UK. It draws on a wealth of social sciences theory, policy analysis and research evidence to explore the relationship of services to need and reviews the values of social equality. However in acknowledging the contribution of these other perspectives he also gives a timely warning that social workers risk being ‘inchoate subjects buried beneath the weight of contributory disciplines’ (Sainsbury, 1979: 3). The distinctiveness of social work theory, research and knowledge and the contribution it can make to other disciplines is a lively concern of UK social work academics in the 21st century.

Sainsbury’s own writing and research provides a very clear focus for social work, which he argues is not just about focusing on the economically disadvantaged as a separate and different group, but also requires understanding of the structural and attitudinal causes of deprivation that lead to them becoming dependent on services. This he suggests requires promoting public welfare and recognizing the discrepancies in distribution of resources and welfare. His conclusion that social work students should not rely totally on entirely personal or entirely political explanations was an important message to UK social work
in the 1970s. It highlighted the dynamic tension between casework and the radical critique.

The wealth of his scholarship and his ability to draw on both psychoanalytical insights and sociological concepts evident in *Social Diagnosis* reflects an interdisciplinary approach required of those writing about qualitative social work. This and his concern for reciprocity also underpin his later empirical work. Sainsbury demonstrated that qualitative methods required rigour and could produce richly interesting insider perspectives, an approach that resonates with many who contribute to this journal. Two major client studies in (Sainsbury, 1975; Sainsbury et al., 1982) took a step further than those undertaken by Mayer and Timms’ (1970) study by gaining direct evidence from both clients and social workers. In a typically modest response to a review in the 1970s of this work by one of the editors of this journal he suggests that empirical work into the client/worker relationship requires minute detail and therefore is undertaken on a reduced scale (his first study involved 27 families and sought to reveal how the processes intrinsic to social work were perceived). Because of this he points out that he does not claim wider validity but a ‘series of consequential hypotheses’. This is a useful distinction for those researching the complexities of social work interventions, although he argues that conclusions can be drawn from small-scale studies which then can be tested in other studies might suggest a slight lack of confidence in this research approach. His own work demonstrates his point. The findings of his early qualitative study with families in one agency (Sainsbury, 1975) was used as the basis for a more quantitative study that compared work with families in different agencies (Sainsbury et al., 1982). Later work in which he was involved focused on a specific group of service users (Fisher et al., 1983).

His reflections on the methods, process and outcomes of his client studies are the subject of an important overview article (Sainsbury, 1987). Again he touches on issues that resonate today when he explores the limited utilization of client studies by practitioners and managers. Returning to themes that underpin much of his writing he addresses the way in which social workers are constrained in their interventions by agency policies:

> We can, however, detect that a shift has already occurred – away from studies based on clients’ responses to and satisfactions with a professional activity assumed to be self-regulating and internally coherent, and towards studies in which the importance of organisational factors is recognised as influencing and moulding professional judgement. (Sainsbury, 1987: 637)

There is a certain irony here. Research into child care in the UK has led to assessment frameworks that are more to do with organizational frameworks than the professional judgement outlined so comprehensively in Sainsbury’s description of good practice in assessment (or social diagnosis). He suggests that the
focus, process and outcome of client studies has to change to offer more dynamic partnership between practitioners and those who are benefiting, or otherwise, from their interventions. He offers methodological complexity in terms of what should be evaluated, and how.

However, his work with those who are recipients of services provides no easy answers to the rhetoric of both left and right emerging during the 1980s for participation or partnership in service delivery. In his exploration of the themes in a chapter on participation and paternalism he suggests that little is achieved by a false polarization of the concepts. He urges caution in ascribing to a total commitment to participation. Although I do not remember him overtly ascribing to the emerging feminist critiques in his lectures his arguments in this piece that community participation might merely increase the ‘burden’ of responsibility on to unpaid helpers resonates with feminist critiques, as does his exploration of the ‘ethic of love’ and the ‘ethic of duty’ (Sainsbury, 1989: 103).

He also returns to his earlier theme of resource allocation arguing that equality is a good worth pursuing and requires the social rights of citizens, who include those in receipt of social services, to be matched to resource allocation principles. However, in this analysis his support for ‘paternalism’ seems surprising. It reflects his continuing concern with the context of social work but also an attempt to articulate social work expertise. Also, in the context of social work provided by the state he suggests that there is always an element of control, which he associates with a benign paternalism. In language and arguments that pre-empt social work in the 21st century he argues that ‘paternalism’, stripped of undertones of exploitation, patronizing, moralism and the denial of the client’s own competence, has a role in helping to clarify perceptions of the situation, events and resources. Respect for persons as an underlying principal of social work values is not only a moral statement but an underlying pragmatic operational principle. To recognize the contribution of clients (to use the nomenclature of the time) and workers distinctions have to be made between means and ends. Clients Sainsbury suggests are expert in defining their problems and needs while social workers are expert in defining the means by which the needs can be met (Sainsbury, 1989: 104).

Such a position would not necessarily be supported today. Feminists and others would question whether there can ever be benign paternalism, or that issues of control in social work have to be gendered. Advocates for recognition of expertise from experience argue for more than participation in defining problems, they demand services organized and delivered by representatives of service user groups. Sainsbury might recognize that there is a place for such service provision if the arguments have been developed from detailed examination (through research which involves clients) of the association between ‘procedures of practice and the needs of clients’ (Sainsbury, 1987: 643). In one of his later articles (Biehal and Sainsbury, 1991) he brings together two of the
strengths of his work. Describing research to test the potential and limitations of partnership between workers and clients he explores the notion of ‘rights’ and the complexities of researching social work interventions. The recommendations of how practitioners can incorporate rights into their practice skills are a synthesis of his commitment to social work. He recognizes the need for high-quality professional practice. Quality is defined, in part, by need to work in reciprocity with clients/service users.

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to undertake an overview of Eric Sainsbury’s work decades after I benefited from his warmth, humour, enthusiasm and sheer professionalism as my lecturer and personal tutor. I commenced the review focusing on the impact of his work on social diagnosis, but as I reread this and his other publications I realized that his enthusiasm for research, his conviction that practice has to be underpinned by research, his commitment to the redistribution of wealth and his ability to acknowledge diversity but recognise individual need permeates all his writing and, I hope, influenced my own practice and writing in some small way.

Notes

References

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