Eric Sainsbury

The post-war pioneer of social work education and research, Eric Sainsbury, who has died aged 88, was at the forefront of efforts to ensure that practice is informed by the service users’ voice. In an academic career spanning nearly three decades he was responsible for some of the most significant and enduring social work research and was an inspiration to generations of students currently practising and teaching social work and probation as well as in careers far beyond the social services.

Born in Newham, East London, where his father was a wages clerk at the London docks, Eric grew up in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex, and spent the early part of the second world war in Formby, Lancashire, after his father was relocated to Liverpool docks. There he was a pupil at Southport high school. He volunteered for the RAF at the age of 18 but was drafted instead into the Yorkshire coal mines, where he spent 3½ years as a Bevin Boy at Barnburgh Main No. 6 Colliery. He lived in Goldthorpe and found fame in amateur dramatics and playing piano at the Clog and Hatchet Working Men’s Club.

Eric took the Oxford University entrance exams in the local vicarage, with the vicar as invigilator, as the Ministry of Works would not let him travel away from the pit. Having passed he switched to Oxford from Goldthorpe in 2 days and remembered the culture shock of his new privileged surroundings. The occasional lapse of memory shot him from his bed in panic at 4.30am thinking he was late for the morning shift at the pit.

After Balliol College, Oxford, where he studied English language and literature, Eric taught English in Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, for 3 years and then took a postgraduate diploma at Sheffield University (1953-55) and a further postgraduate certificate at the London School of Economics (1955-56).

After working for 5 years as a probation officer in Brighton, he returned to the University of Sheffield in 1961 as a social work tutor, in a novel joint appointment with the Sheffield Council of Social Services. At Sheffield he was Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and, from 1977, Professor of Social Administration. Following a spell as Head of Department (1982-85) he and his close friend and colleague, the leading sociologist John Westergaard, took early retirement in order to protect the future of the Department of Sociological Studies in the face of government imposed cuts: a typically selfless act by both of them.

In key texts published between 1970 and 1982 Eric’s contribution to ‘client studies’ was huge. He also helped to shift the focus of social work from individual pathology to social factors such as poverty and deprivation. Social Diagnosis in Casework (1970) emphasised the complexity of social work interventions and the necessity to listen to service users. Social Work with Families (1975) and Social Work in Focus (1982) were path-breaking because they were based on direct evidence from both service users and social workers. The first qualitative study of families in one agency provided the foundation for the second larger quantitative investigation comparing work with families in different agencies. Social Work with Families is acknowledged as a classic study of how the core social work tasks, skills and values can build trust, respect and rapport with service users to successfully achieve change in their social functioning. Sadly the ever-increasing pressures on social work have devalued these fundamental skills. The
Personal Social Services (1977) examined the institutional context of social work and made a passionately reasoned case for a redistributive welfare state. Other important contributions to social work were on mental health, childcare and working with children in need. All of his books and scholarly articles are characterised by a fundamental commitment to social work as a force for good in troubled relationships and wider society, a user-centred perspective, the importance of the personal in social work practice and deep humanity rooted in his Christian faith. Their exceptional craftsmanship reflected his Oxford grounding in English. His contributions to social work education were recognised by an honorary degree from Birmingham City University and an honorary fellowship from Sheffield Hallam University.

Eric was a highly accomplished teacher whose door was always open to students and who devoted himself to both their academic and their pastoral needs. Numerous leading social work educators and practitioners have acknowledged his inspirational influence. Professor Joan Orme, at the Glasgow School of Social Work, for example, said ‘Forty years after he was my personal tutor on my postgraduate course at Sheffield University … the work of Eric Sainsbury still resonates for me’. He held several professional social work related appointments including membership of the Advisory Council on Child Care at the Home Office, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work and was Scientific Advisor to the Chief Scientist at the Department of Health. He was a Justice of the Peace for over 30 years.

Before and after his retirement, Eric was devoted to voluntary service, holding leadership positions at local level, including the South Yorkshire Probation Committee, Sheffield Council for Voluntary Service, Target Housing, Sheffield Alcohol Advisory Service and, nationally, with Alcohol Concern, Victim Support, NCH Action for Children and the now defunct Family Service Units. He was appointed OBE in 1996 for services to the community, particularly to voluntary organisations in Sheffield. In retirement he pursued his long term interest in theology and enrolled on a part-time BA degree course.

In both professional and personal life Eric was the nicest person you were ever likely to meet, a judgement made by countless colleagues and acquaintances (often in disbelief about just how nice he was). Among his defining characteristics were warmth, charm, honesty, integrity, empathy, erudition, humour and a fundamental commitment to social justice and equal value. His love of Greece was life-long. He was delightfully urbane, had a famously winning smile and was adept at both classical and jazz piano.

His commitment to social justice and social work never faded. He was enraged by the present government’s welfare policies, their dishonesty and lack of humanity, and even when hospitalised following a stroke, was scathing about the ignorance of recent official statements concerning social work education.

Following the tragic death of his son Julian in 2007, he is survived by his beloved wife of 58 years, Audrey, and one grand-daughter, Amy.

Eric Edward Sainsbury, social work educator and researcher and charming person. Born 16th December 1925; died 11th March 2014.

Alan Walker