

The British Journal of MENTAL SUBNORMALITY

Editor: H. C. GUNZBURG

Vol. XXXVII, Part 2

JULY 1991

No.73

EDITORIAL

Readers of the BJMS will remember the call for papers on the theme "Longitudinal Studies" which we advertised in the July issue 1990. The requirements were simple - or at least they seemed to be. In view of the considerable emphasis in recent years on assessing and evaluating the progress of educational work, whether achieved by direct teaching or changing environmental conditions, and in view of the considerable amount of documentation which must have been the consequence of such efforts, it seemed reasonable to suggest that these data should be worked up. Such reports would present evidence over a wide front regarding the effectiveness of the developmental methods which had been adopted and would thus augment the small scale experimental work by psychologists and sociologists.

Even though such operational research, based on performances which had been recorded with no research intention in mind and where records are often incomplete and unsophisticated, is usually less satisfactory than a properly designed and executed investigation, the information obtained can nevertheless be valuable, significant and stimulating. Such research may present results which corroborate other findings, suggest more effective procedures in future, draw attention to unnoticed aspects and may also encourage colleagues to have a go at analyzing and viewing their own accumulated records against the background of comparable studies even if they are primarily "doers" rather than "researchers". Workers in Mental Handicap are just as accountable to clients, their relations and to themselves as are professionals in other educational areas and measuring progress or lack of it is one possible method to provide such an account.

As the invitation stated, it was only necessary to sift existing records, to collect and collate available data and write up documentation of past efforts, which, with the advantage of hindsight, could be readily interpreted. Yet - the response was disappointing, very disappointing as far as the number of replies was concerned and the question arises why people are so extremely reluctant to getting down to study and analyse their own work, after having spent so much time in recording it in the first instance. Many explanations could be offered as, for example, the two most obvious ones: Firstly, that not enough people have read the invitation - this is not really

convincing in view of the wide circulation of the BJMS with over 50 per cent of the readers outside the U.K. Secondly, that there has not been enough time to prepare the manuscript - this is possible, but one would have expected that prospective researchers would have contacted the editor and discussed this point with him.

A third explanation could be proposed by any observer of recording practices. A would-be investigator would have been faced with a greatly bewildering assortment of records which could not easily be brought on to a common denominator. In the terms of our invitation for sending in longitudinal studies to the BJMS, a well documented report on any subject carried out in one place would have been welcome. Experience had after all shown that unfortunately one could not expect that the same type of recording and of emphasizing particular aspects would have been carried out in technically acceptable terms in a number of centres and this denotes, disconcertingly, a fundamental weakness in our developmental practices.

Enough records are in circulation or saved in the drawers of filing cabinets to give the promise for many revealing and valuable researches. Yet the fact that records are being kept can not guarantee that those records are of a kind which will make them useful for other than purely local and temporary purposes. If records of different kinds are used, with different scoring systems, different criteria, different reference points, and if these records are obtained at varying time intervals by different care workers with little or no experience and a complete disregard of instructions and techniques, there is no way of utilising this checkered conglomeration of odd data for a report based on reliable factual evidence. There is no doubt that a very large proportion of available documentation is useless for serious research work on account of the carelessness with which data are obtained in the first place and would-be contributors to our invitation were quite right to give it a miss if, on inspection, they were confronted with such a motley of undigestible oddments.

Apart from the technical inadequacy of recording procedures, inspection of the files will also have revealed that even perfect execution of the basic requirements of reliable recording will not, in many cases, provide enough documentation on major and significant areas, because there is still no common agreement as to what those areas are. For probably a majority of interested people development of personal independence, skills of social competence may be the main target, whilst others might argue that skills at work execution require maximum attention.

It happens, unfortunately, only too often that the choice of recording instruments is left to local decision and reflects therefore primarily the local management's interpretation of their task. After all, if, for example, the managers of four neighbouring training establishments adhere to four different training philosophies they will select four different types of records which will serve their particular aims best. Manager A believes in workshop training and will look for an assessment method which gives prominence to manual skills, to ability of handling tools and machinery and also to

work attitudes. Manager B aims at improving communication abilities and selects an assessment tool which enables him to record academic progress in the three R's. Manager C tries to increase social competence and chooses a record type which will permit evaluating progress in gaining skills of independence, but Manager D, believing that all these skills will easily be acquired in course of normal daily living, invents his own method of assessing progress in music, painting and dancing because free expression needs to be stimulated and encouraged. Whilst the records of the four facilities will be useful for evaluative purposes within each place, they can not be used for comparing the work of the four places. And if a liberal minded management of a Social Education Centre gives the teachers free rein for developing their pupils' potential individually, the records will reflect the many different approaches chosen by the teachers but can only be used for individual case studies and, at the most for comparisons of small groups.

The incessant stressing of the need for recording and documentation must not give the impression that assessing and evaluating are to be carried out for their own sake, being venerable but rather out-of-date and useless customs. They do present a unique means of highlighting success and failure, offer some safeguards against enthusiastic rushing to conclusions and force one to face up to reality - provided one avoids getting carried away by the magic of figures and does not omit checking "conclusions" in other ways. But to be satisfied with the assertion that "records are being kept" is definitely a sure way of being bamboozled into complacency.

A basic requirement for obtaining widely serviceable information is the employment of a universally used type of measuring approach. This would permit comparisons of results and the making of statements in a commonly understood "language" which can not easily be misinterpreted on account of different terminology and which deals with circumscribed areas e.g. skills of independence. Such a tool offers a basis for compiling reliable and relevant information. Obvious as such requirement seems to be, a search through the files of homes, workshops, training centres, etc. will reveal that this simplest need for measuring and evaluating is not adhered to neither by individual facilities nor by neighbouring facilities which have often occasion to communicate with each other. Records they have, but they are a source of frustration and despair to every user or would-be researcher, who sees a potential treasure trove fade away into thin air, simply because of an extensive variety of records which permit no comparisons since they report in different ways and on widely disparate aspects. They became even less useful for practical work when, on the occasion of a transfer, the record can not be understood and used by other members of staff, because the information can not be interpreted nor does it contain the details they require.

This situation reflects not only the ignorance of the people concerned about the purpose of good recordkeeping (and also their own inadequate training) but even more a general fundamental lack of consensus as to the aims and purpose of training facilities and how to evaluate this work.

Of course, the desired aim of dealing individually with each person requires individual assessment techniques and records. This, however, does not make superfluous assessment approaches which are based on a common philosophy, on a common language, on a common goal setting and use therefore methodologies which permit measuring and comparing of information relating, by and large, to similar concepts.

It is high time that professionals were to agree that all regular documentation in mental handicap must include information on a particular area of common interest, and that this information must be obtained by using a measuring tool designed for assessment of this particular dimension, so as to make inter and intra comparisons possible. Local requirements, different approaches, different emphasis, etc. will determine which instrument will finally be chosen for use in different places. Even though this will often result in the use of a number of different assessment methods, they will all refer to the same area of common interest and findings will be roughly comparable.

There should be no difficulty nowadays to establish common agreement that one of the main purposes of education and training in mental handicap, if not the main purpose, is to give people with a handicap the capability of using and enjoying personal independence in the open community. As soon as a legal and binding obligation is laid down that developmental efforts must primarily be directed towards increasing a mentally handicapped person's independence in his immediate environment and that the obligatory recording of progress should reflect his/her development in this particular area, we shall have set a common target for education and training, which will give direction to much effort which is, at present, often too loosely and widely interpreted by individual workers proceeding independently. It is, after all necessary that individualistic interpretations of a vaguely defined goal, e.g. "to develop his/her potential" do not camouflage the absence of specific commonly agreed targets and priorities.

P.S. We intend to publish the results of our "Invitation for Longitudinal Studies" on the subject "PREPARING FOR LIFE IN THE OPEN COMMUNITY: PROGRESS AND RESULTS OF SOCIAL TRAINING" next year.