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Are you being served? : Research in the human service

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EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

• **INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURE** •

**"Are You Being Served? - Research
in the Human Service"**

Professor Roderic Underwood

Professor of Human Services

Edith Cowan University

4 December 1991

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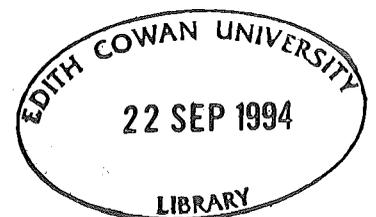
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**Professor Roderic Underwood, B.A. M.A.
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Professor Underwood is Dean of the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences at Edith Cowan University. Following undergraduate and graduate study at the University of Western Australia he completed the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Illinois. Professor Underwood was a teacher and guidance officer in the state education system and has been involved in tertiary teaching, research and administration for nineteen years. He has published extensively and his professional experience has included consultancy and research in a wide range of human service areas, including mental health, speech and hearing disability, and correctional services. Professor Underwood has served as a consultant psychologist to business and industry and in recent years has carried out research in the area of criminal justice. His current research is focussed on young offenders with intellectual disabilities in the criminal justice system.



Today, I will consider briefly several research projects in the human service field undertaken at Edith Cowan University in recent years. I hope to demonstrate the paucity of research available generally, but particularly in Australia, in this area. I will then examine the role of the researcher in the development of human service policies. After commenting upon the singular lack of success experienced by the social scientist in attempting to move beyond description to explanation I will explore future roles for the human service researcher.

For the purposes of today's lecture I will be considering the term "Human Services" to include those fields of study listed below which are offered at the University:

- Aboriginal and Intercultural Studies
- Aged Studies
- Career Studies
- Children Studies
- Counselling
- Habilitation Studies
- Health Education
- Human Service Management
- Justice Studies
- Police Studies
- Psychology
- Recreation
- Women's Studies
- Youth Work

In 1992 there will be more than 1,000 students enrolled in these programmes from Associate Diploma through to Doctoral level.

These programmes have been designed to provide students with an understanding of the field, to equip them with relevant skills, and to develop a critical sense of the services in which they are employed or in which they hope to find employment.

It has become apparent to lecturers that a dearth of knowledge exists in so many aspects of the human service field. For example, one of the programmes offered by the University is in Children's Studies. Graduates of this programme find employment in a diverse range of children's services outside of the formal education system including day-care centres and out-of-school care centres. The out-of-school care programme in Western Australia caters for thousands of children on a daily basis. However, you would be hard pressed to find evidence of any research that might relate to the provision of out-of-school care programmes. A Children's Service policy maker might, for example, be interested to know something about the characteristics of parents using the services or the reasons why they use out-of-school care services. This information would be useful in planning future services. A colleague of mine, Vicki Banham, who is the co-ordinator of the children's study programme, recently conducted an exhaustive search for any studies that had been done in Australia. She came up with one study.

So, while the University is making a significant contribution by the provision of educational programmes for the human services, it is also necessary for its academics to become actively involved in fundamental research. To this end the University has formally recognised the field of human services as a priority research area.

DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH

Much of the research to date has been of a descriptive nature. That is, the investigator is interested in finding out what is, rather than trying to verify a theory of juvenile behaviour or to test an hypothesis about the efficacy of different diversionary programmes. Information has been sought simply to describe the nature of a particular issue.

For example, a study completed several years ago undertook a detailed analysis of the utilisation of computers in youth work agencies throughout Western Australia (Underwood, R. & Sheridan, B., 1990). In this study the investigators were interested in:

1. The extent to which computers were being used in youth agencies throughout Western Australia.
2. We also wanted to know the purposes for which computers were being used. Were staff using computers primarily for word-processing, keeping client-information on a data-base, or were youth workers running budgets and staffing details through their machines, were they using computers as desk-top publishers to produce newsletters?
3. We sought information on the types of computers being used in agencies. Were youth work agencies networked to mainframes or were they generally using personal computers? What sort of software were they using on their machines? Were there field standards in terms of word processing packages, spreadsheets and data base programmes?

4. How were youth workers being trained to use computers? Did they generally have to teach themselves, did the computer suppliers provide adequate training, did staff go to a TAFE course in their own time? If there was a need for more training how should this best be provided?

The study was subsequently replicated by the Recreation Department. So we started to acquire some definitive information about the extent to which computers were being used in different sectors of the human service field; the types of computers being used; the purposes for which the computers were used; the type of software being used; and the opportunities for training available to human service workers.

Since the study was undertaken the Faculty has spent more than \$500 000 on computing equipment. I would like to think that the money has been spent more wisely as a result of these studies. But, just as importantly, I hope our graduates are more productive in the field.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH IN HUMAN SERVICE POLICY DEVELOPMENT.

I doubt that anyone involved in the human service field would find the proposition that policies are sometimes developed and implemented in the absence of a strong research base, to be a particularly contentious one. Obviously, there are many factors that influence the development of human service policies including the political ideology of the government of the day, the monies available for a particular programme, the effectiveness of different pressure groups in the community and so on.

How can research contribute to the development of human service policies? In the first place, it is very often the researcher who brings to the attention of the policy maker the existence of particular problems in the community. For example, in a recent study of emergency accommodation services it was found that more than 70% of workers reported that they were dealing with young people suffering from mental illness on a frequent basis (Underwood, Lee & Jackson, 1991).

A good deal more research is required to verify the observations of the accommodation workers but it is nevertheless clear that many young people suffering from a mental illness do not have access to adequate support services.

This brings us to the second aspect of the contribution a researcher may make to the field of human services. That is, describing the nature of the problem and attempting to explain it.

If there is any truth in the recent press report that there are 8000 school children "wagging school" on any one day then perhaps the social scientist can help to understand the nature of the problem.

Imagine, if you will, 8000 children running around the suburbs of Perth and country towns throughout the State is a fascinating one. One could easily conjure up an image of Western Australia being taken over by an unruly horde of psychopathic dwarves? However, it is probably not unreasonable to expect that two kids out of every 100 seek to avoid a situation where they may have:

Experienced failure, in some cases, year after year. As I have said to student teachers before, if any of them failed the first year of university we would not think it unreasonable if they sought a new career direction. Nor would it be unreasonable to repeat that year again. If, however, they failed the course a second time we may be surprised if they did not seek an alternative occupation. Should they fail a third time and still seek to become a teacher we would have good grounds for questioning their capacity to make rational decisions. Is it not strange then, that we expect kids who have been placed in a failing situation for as long as ten years to remain 'fat, dumb and happy' in the classroom?

Some kids are not going to go to school because of the violence they have experienced at home. Other children will seek to avoid school where they have experienced the ill feelings of their classmates. Kids become victims of their peers for all sorts of reasons: it may be as simple as having an unfortunate name, looking different to other kids, eat different food or whatever. We have all been there, we know what it can be like.

The task of the social scientist then is to describe the nature of the problem. For example, we would want to know which children comprise the 8000 truanting school. We would predict that they would be mainly high school kids. They would be low achievers with poor literacy and numeracy skills. Perhaps, they have low self-esteem and so on.

Clearly, the better the picture of the client group the more likely any intervention strategies are to succeed. One study in which I and several colleagues are engaged in is concerned with examining the issues that confront people with intellectual disabilities when dealing with the criminal justice system. The first phase of study was concerned with the perceptions of those who work with people with intellectual disabilities, including psychologists, social workers, lawyers and hostel managers (Jackson, Cockram & Underwood, 1991). When asked to identify possible ways of improving the circumstances of offenders with an intellectual disability the two most frequent responses from this group were:

Police officers and other criminal justice system personnel must be trained in identifying, questioning and generally dealing with people with an intellectual disability.

The police force must issue and publicise special guidelines relating to questioning of people with an intellectual disability.

The next phase of study addressed the same questions to a group of police who have worked with offenders who are intellectually disabled (Cockram, Jackson & Underwood, 1991). According to the police the most useful ways to assist these offenders would be to provide:

A 24 hour service for criminal justice system personnel to turn to for special help or advice; and develop

Special diversionary programmes for these offenders.

Further phases of the study will be concerned with the perceptions of judges and magistrates as well as corrective service personnel. We will also seek to understand the problems faced by offenders from their point of view. What we are attempting to do is build up a comprehensive picture of a social system from as many sources as possible to optimise the impact of policy developments.

ISSUES CONFRONTING YOUTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Another project which illustrates the significance of this approach investigated the needs of young people in different rural settings (Omelczuk, White & Underwood, 1990). If one is concerned with the development of social policy then obviously an understanding of the concerns of people in different circumstances is essential, particularly in Western Australia where the living conditions can vary so markedly according to geographical location.

Youth workers in the wheatbelt town that was selected for the study reported that the young people with whom they worked are confronted by the police seeking an explanation as to what they are doing almost on a daily basis. Some years ago I was walking past the Marylebone Police Station in London with a friend when we were asked to participate in an identification line-up. That was not a pleasant experience. By the time the victim had walked up and down the line a couple of times I was sure that I was guilty. Being asked by a policeman to explain why I am walking down a particular street, or sitting under a tree or whatever, would certainly cause me some discomfort. Can you imagine what it must be like for a young person in a small country town to face this sort of occurrence day in and day out?

In the northwest mining town selected for the study youth workers reported that young people had a real problem with accommodation. In the metropolitan area there are a variety of accommodation arrangements available to young people seeking protection from a hostile home environment. In country towns young people do not have these options. And yet the percentage of young people with a permanent address using youth services in the Pilbara is about 36%. That leaves over 60% of young people using youth services in these areas without safe and secure housing.

The number of incidents of incest for rural centres also varied considerably from town to town. Youth workers in one town reported that they dealt with more than two cases of incest every month. In another town, the youth workers did not expect to deal with more than one case of incest every two months. There may be a variety of factors which can account for the differences in the rate of reported incest from town to town. For example, it may be that individual youth workers in one town have developed a higher sensitivity to the problem because of workshops or other awareness-type programmes that they have attended.

Clearly, the evidence shows that any social policy developed for rural young people must take into account the fact that not all country towns face the same problems.

CAUSAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SOCIAL FACTORS

The social scientist would want to do more, however, than describe the different dimensions of a social issue. Essential to understanding any such issue is an insight into what factors are contributing to the problem. Why do young people steal cars? Is it because they seek the respect of their peers? Do they hold a grudge against society? Has their moral development been retarded through unfortunate childhood experiences?

The notion of finding a causal relationship between two or more social variables is right up there with the Holy Grail and Lasseter's Reef. I was recently approached by someone interested in demonstrating that there is a relationship between participation in organised sport and the propensity by young people to indulge in anti-social behaviour.

This is the sort of problem that social scientists thrive on. A variety of theories have been developed in an attempt to explain why young people who play sport are not likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. The psychologists have the Recapitulation Theory, the Surplus Energy Theory, Personality

Theory and the Stimulus-Seeking Behaviour Theory. On the other hand, sociologists have the Boredom Theory, the Subculture Theory, the Strain Theory and the Control Theory, to mention but a few that have been reported in the literature.

The traditional experimental paradigm could be used to address the question. In this case the procedure might call for the identification of some two hundred 13 year old children drawn at random from the metropolitan area. We then divide this group of children into two subgroups. The first subgroup is prohibited from participating in any formal sporting activities, whilst those in the second subgroup join clubs and play lots of sport. The social scientist monitors the behaviour of individuals in the two groups over a period of time. After 5 years the scientist counts the number of offences committed by members of both groups. If the sporting group has committed less crimes than the non-sporting group then the scientist can proclaim that participation in sport reduces criminal behaviour in teenagers. A relatively straightforward procedure. It is then left to the scientist to explain these findings in terms of one or other of the theories mentioned above.

The roots of sports as prevention are found in the mid-Victorian era. The person most associated with the origins of the concept is Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School from 1828-42. In his efforts to stamp out the bullying, drunkenness, gambling, poaching and other forms of delinquent behaviour, which had previously dominated the boys' leisure-time, Arnold encouraged organised sports, and gave the traditional games he found at Rugby, a privileged place in the curriculum. Since then the belief that delinquent youth can be redeemed by participating in sporting activities has become the corner-stone of social policy in most countries of the western world.

So after 150 years what have social scientists learned about the relationship between sport and delinquency? In their recent review of the literature on this issue Mason and Wilson (1988) found that:

1. The evidence provided by research suggests that for boys there is a negative relationship between participation in sport and delinquent behaviour. That is, boys who play sport are less likely to engage in delinquent activities than non-participants.
2. Socioeconomic background appears to be a factor affecting the sports-delinquency association. A research study in the United States examined the background of a group of high school sports participants. Socioeconomic status was divided into three levels (high, medium and low). Results of the study revealed that (for the sample) there was a greater number of sports participants in the middle class who engaged in delinquent behaviour than there were sports participants in either the high or low classes who engaged in delinquent behaviour. On the basis of this study we might want to preclude middle-class kids from joining sporting clubs.
3. Not only do sporting male youths commit less crime than their non-sporting counterparts, but it appears that they are even less likely to become involved in the more serious offences.
4. Boys participating in major sports (that is, more popular and highly publicised sport) tend to be more delinquent than those engaged in minor sports. Should we decree that boys should only play badminton and underwater hockey?
5. The more aggressive sports may even have adverse effects upon participants. According to U.S. research boys who participate in highly aggressive sports, such as ice hockey, may commit more offences than their non-sporting peers.

The major difficulty arising out of this research is to establish whether there is any causal relationship between the different factors. As pointed out by Mason and Wilson (1988) it is possible that participation in sports does act as a deterrent against delinquency, but it is equally plausible that those boys who are more prone to be delinquent choose not to participate in sports.

So it is, that after decades of research by social scientists in North America, Europe and Australia we can say with no more certainty than Thomas Arnold that participation in sport is a prophylactic against antisocial behaviour. Personally, I am reassured by the fact that social scientists have found the causal relationships so elusive to establish. I am not convinced that the state of the social sciences, or our political system, permits us to have any confidence in the social engineering that would result from such knowledge.

EVALUATIVE RESEARCH

Researchers in the human services are going to be called upon more and more to become involved in evaluative research. Increasingly, funding authorities, such as the State and Federal governments, are demanding that human service agencies be more accountable for their monies. Professor Richard Harding of the Crime Research Centre recently observed that in Australia we are spending some \$4 billion annually in direct costs on crime control and prevention services. This figure takes in police services, criminal courts, corrections and juvenile justice (Underwood, 1990).

According to Professor Harding the funds are not always well spent. Inevitably, hunches and fashions, as well as political exigencies, influence the adoption of new services and programs. Some initiatives are taken which with hindsight, appear to have been ineffective or positively misguided. He claims, for example, that the motorisation of police patrols in urban areas, virtually to the exclusion of foot-patrols, can now be seen to have been an expensive mistake.

In Western Australia, as in other Australian States, we have tended to slip into assumptions about what programs are effective. For example, even such a key mode of intervention as Probation has not been evaluated other than in terms of client compliance whilst it is running.

There is a discernible change of approach in the criminal justice system. Proposed programs such as sobering-up shelters, Aboriginal visitors to lock-ups schemes and the establishment of a pilot Victims of Crime Office, all within Western Australia, contain an evaluation component. However, other programs are being developed and policy initiatives taken which treat evaluation as being, at best, a burdensome task.

Clearly, human service researchers are bound to play an increasingly important part in determining the efficacy of policies and programs.

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Before concluding, I would like to make some further observations about the future role of the human service researcher. Some of us here today have had the opportunity to sit in on research seminars conducted by Michael Kendrick, recently a visiting fellow with the Centre for the Development of Human Resources. Michael is a staunch advocate of the participatory research paradigm.

What is participatory research? The paradigm has its origins in development projects based in Third World countries. It has been recognised for many years that to implement change in a community it is essential that members of the community feel that they have control over events. That is, it is the people that have recognised the problem and worked at its solution. In this context the researcher becomes very much an educator. The researcher endeavours to inform the community of possible options, often technical in nature. However, the decision-making process remains in the hands of the people. Thus, the process engenders a real sense of ownership of knowledge. Kendrick argues that unless the project is 'owned' by the community, people simply become dependent upon outside expertise.

In the field of human services we have a long history of social scientists "doing things" to the poor and dispossessed - those without power in our community. Thus, government develops and implements policies which it believes are in the best interests of low-income earners, the aged, single parents and so on. Bob Hawke is probably sure that his government has "done" more for these people than any other government since Federation. John Hewson may be just as confident that his government will "do" even more for those who are socially disadvantaged.

Kendrick's point is that unless the recipients of these policy directives feel a real sense of ownership then all the "doing to them" in the world will be of little consequence. Let me give you an example of how this principle has been applied in a limited sense. Suppose it costs the government \$50 000 per year to provide services for a person who is paraplegic. That is, the government provides accommodation, transport, physiotherapy, occupational therapy, medical and nursing care, etc.,etc. An alternative is for the government to disburse the monies directly to the person with the disability, who becomes responsible for purchasing the services that he or she needs or wants. It may be, for example, that the person chooses to spend some money on the services of a prostitute rather than on an occupational therapist. Of course, this example raises all sorts of ethical issues which I will leave you to ponder in your own time.

Essentially, any researcher is seeking to solve problems. Unlike physical scientists who are able to perform experiments "on" things, or educational or health researchers who may have relatively captive subjects for research purposes, the human service investigator is going to move more and more to the participatory research paradigm.

The answer to the question "Are you being served?" will only be in the affirmative if the researcher is acting genuinely as an educator and facilitator in the service of the community. The alternative, of course, is that the community gets screwed.

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