

**THE SOCIAL CASE
HISTORY:
ITS CONSTRUCTION AND
CONTENT**

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The social case history: its construction and content by Ada Eliot Sheffield

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ADA ELIOT SHEFFIELD

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S O C I A L W O R K S E R I E S

THE SOCIAL CASE HISTORY

ITS CONSTRUCTION
AND CONTENT

By

ADA ELIOT SHEFFIELD

DIRECTOR, BOSTON BUREAU ON ILLEGITIMACY



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UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

THE SOCIAL CASE HISTORY

1

THE PURPOSE OF A SOCIAL CASE HISTORY

THE nature of a social case history is determined by the kinds of purpose it is intended to subserve. From its subject matter down to the thickness of the paper it is written on, from the facts to be selected as important to mechanical devices for convenience, all questions relating to it must be decided in this light. The first step, therefore, in a discussion of the case record is to make clear the use we expect to put this document to.

Defined in terms of purpose the case history of today is a body of personal information conserved with a view to the three ends of social case work; namely, (1) the immediate purpose of furthering

THE SOCIAL CASE HISTORY

effective treatment of individual clients, (2) the ultimate purpose of general social betterment, and (3) the incidental purpose of establishing the case worker herself in critical thinking. These ends did not originate at the same time with the first record keeping, but have come about by a slow development paralleling the development of social case work.

The Historic Stages in Record Keeping.—*Early stages reflected the immediate purpose.*—The stages by which case histories have widened their functions show a continuity in that they have preserved a common motive; namely, that of chronicling the practical activities of the agency in the case. There has been, however, a progressive enlargement of the conception of "practical activities." Case records of the first stage were hardly more than lists of names (often even without addresses), and jottings of money disbursed, of groceries and coal given, or of children taken for care. These old records reflect case treatment that would not be regarded as "individualized" in the modern sense. Since in a more primitive social order the things to be done for a client were

PURPOSE OF A SOCIAL CASE HISTORY

but slightly differentiated, histories were correspondingly meager. For example, the old books of a relief agency show the following entries:

Name*	Wood feet	Cash	Resi- dence	Remarks
Mary Peters	2	1.50	City	Sick with cancer.
John Robbins	2	2.00	City	Broken leg.
Josephine Adams	1	1.00	City	Partly blind.
Elizabeth Carter	2	2.00	City	And 3 children.
Margaret Riley	1	1.50	Ireland	Drunk H. 3 ch. under 8.
James Smith	2	1.50	City	Sick, wife & desti- tute child.
William Jones	1	1.00	City	Large family.
Susan Miller	1	1.00	City	Widow, etc.
Marie Schmidt	2	2.00	Germany	Destitute.
Martha Campbell	1	1.00	Scotland	Aged and destitute.
Julia Williams	1	1.00	Maryland	Ditto.
Mary Winston	1	1.00	City	Ditto.
Walter Simpkins			City	Died this month.
James Davis	1	1.00	Ireland	Injured by a fall from a horse.
Winifred Waters	2	1.50	City	Lame & has an idiot son.
Annie Flanagan	1	1.00	Ireland	Widow, 79 in March.
Jessie Bryant	1	1.00	City	Very aged.
Michael Sampson	1	1.00	City	Non compos.
Celia Cohen	2	2.00	Russia	Wife of Joseph. Left her.

The above items are taken from records dating

* The names given here (as elsewhere in the illustrations) are fictitious.