

**CASE-STUDY  
POSSIBILITIES,  
A FORECAST**

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Case-study possibilities, a forecast by Ada Eliot Sheffield

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**ADA ELIOT SHEFFIELD**

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## CASE-STUDY POSSIBILITIES

### A FORECAST

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## PREFACE

The approach here proposed to a scientific study of group relations in family and neighborhood is based on the analysis of histories of a number of unmarried mothers. For social study the unmarried mother problem has special interest. First because it deals with a transient, or casual variation upon the family group. Whereas a normal family is a partnership between a strong worker and a socially competent mate for the long care of helpless young, this group precipitated by nature into a family status, is yet so disrupted by its lack of sanction in feeling that except for social pressure it disintegrates at once, the stronger parent usually taking his natural advantage to abscond, and the mother seeking the first chance to be relieved of an infant that keeps her in a status of maternity without honor. Second, the fact that illegitimacy makes an abortive family group relates it to several important and complex social questions. It involves at once the marriage laws, the social evil, the causal factors in infant mortality, and the phenomena of mental defect and instability. This complexity and theoretical scope, together with the practical oversight it entails for the detached and somewhat ostracized woman with a baby make illegitimacy a problem that, once grasped, should afford valuable data and a working method for other problems.

Adequately to demonstrate the possibilities of the type of analysis here proposed calls for its application to many more social histories. This task I am now entering upon.

The first two chapters of this monograph were read before the National Conference of Social Workers in 1921 and 1922, Chapter I having also appeared in the *Survey*. The first part of this chapter, however, has been entirely rewritten and some revisions made throughout.

I am indebted to the Permanent Charity Fund for the faith and patience they have shown in waiting for results from a piece of work which has proved much more exacting than I anticipated in its demand for carefully thought out preliminaries. I am also under obligation to a number of Boston social agencies which have not only allowed me access to their written records, but have generously permitted me to take the time of their workers for discussing problems involved in the case histories I have used.

A. E. S.

Boston, October, 1922.

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CHAPTER I.

"CLUE ASPECTS" IN SOCIAL CASE WORK

The possibility of gradually building up a science of conduct, of personality conceived as a center of interpenetrating social forces has received recognition from one after another important spokesman in related social fields. A succession of students, increasing rapidly within the last decade, have been taking methodical steps to bring mental science to bear upon significant modes of behavior. This interest has been stimulated in part at least by the increasingly complex associational life of the modern world. Where men are congregated in large numbers, where they form themselves into business associations, trade unions, churches, clubs, lodges, leagues, boards, committees, the situations into which any one man may have to fit himself become infinitely varied. With these multiplied demands upon his adaptability any difficulties of adjustment between himself and his social and physical setting come to stand out conspicuously. Variations in the types of such "maladjustment" appear, while at the same time, so interlocked are social activities, the consequences of these frictions become of more serious import. The hope for social progress is that a systematic study of conduct, of social situations, may lead to a science which can be incorporated into educational methods and practically applied.

Obviously such a study must be based on concrete instances. At first thought one might expect that fiction of the better sort would afford a basis.<sup>1</sup> In it we find detailed accounts of the lives of men and women in a wide variety of settings, built up out of the experience of keen social observers. Why not study these stories? A further reflection gives the reason, namely, that although the best fiction may afford hypotheses for behavior patterns, their validity would still have to be tested out through

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<sup>1</sup> Just as popular proverbs, maxims, and fables and quotations from great writers afford a basis of Alexander Shand's *Foundations of Character*.