Social work and general medical practice: Revisiting Huntington

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Mosaic of accounts of social work in primary care


Reviews and Reactions


If you choose to buy this book purely by the title which indicates a particular field of interest to you and purely by checking its country of origin so as to ensure relevance to the British scene, then you might not pause long over this book, and that would be a great pity. For though the title suggests a focus on a limited segment of social work practice and the author is a University teacher in Australia, the material covered is much broader in compass than the title suggests and its relevance for practice here is beyond question.

Jone Huntington, an English sociologist who is also a social worker, was working in 1973 when the first of an officially sponsored series of workshops on 'interdisciplinary collaboration in health care' was held in Woking. The stimulation provided by participation in that workshop plus the interest in occupational sociology stems together when she was teaching at the University of New South Wales at a time when Government funding was being made available to a range of community health programmes, some of which were concerned to explore the nature of effective team work.

A group of general practitioners in Sydney asked Jone Huntington to assist in setting up and monitoring a project in which a social worker would be appointed to work in the practices. She proceeded to research the operation of the scheme, an activity which has been done before, but widened the understanding to conduct an exhaustive survey of the diversity literature of both medical and social work as a way towards understanding the relationships which exist between the two occupations, in which conflict is experienced as much, if not as intense, in collaboration.

This brief description places the book in the context of a developing literature on social work in general medical practice which has described and analysed the social worker's experience in several funded research projects in Britain which were published in 1981. '1980' and 1979. Three studies focused solely on the care of patients and problems that a social worker might be involved in helping when asked in a practice. This book adds to and confirms these previous works but that aspect is targeted to the main purpose of this study which adds a new dimension to the subject of interoccupational cooperation in three particular ways. First of all the literature review surveys both the educational and practice literature of social work and of general practice and intends to give a picture of how these two occupations see themselves and each other; equally importantly a picture is painted of how they respectively view their clients and patients. Secondly the author's analysis of this literature, illuminated by experiences from the project research, has implications for collaborative ventures far beyond the bounds of general practice and into those...
'While Huntington deals only with social work and medicine, what she says is really a generic critique of the problems inherent in all collaborative efforts in health care, whether they involve nursing, social work, medicine, or family therapy.'

Why the study in 2003?

• Investigations of forms of collaboration – then badged as ‘modernising’
• Work of JH considered as one of few with multiple perspectives
• Very clear realist approach – not proselytising
• Good social science – observation
• Authenticity – help in seeing problems were long-standing, possibly tractable, and not simply a matter of policy encouragement...
Is it still important and is it interesting?

- Current context of integration
- Sociological insights as a research paradigm
- Insights of non social workers
- Global themes (in developed world)
- Model Social Work Practices on GP Practices (Le Grand)
- Recruit social work students like Medics (Croisdale-Appleby)
- Enduring inter-professional communication issues (see Serious Case Reviews)
Social work & General Practice
JH work in context: earlier accounts

‘Social Work in General Practice’
Marie Dongray, BA., AMIA, Social Worker, Darbyshire House Health Centre, University of Manchester. 
British Medical Journal, 1220, 1958
Precursors of research on social work in general practice 1968 & 1972


Later from Social Work perspective

Social Work in General Practice
(Goldberg and Neill, 1972);
Example from GP perspective

Elisabeth Daly & Hugh Faulkner (both Cavendish Centre) (1973) Social Work and Primary Medical Care, *The Lancet*, 301 (7813), pp 1171–72
JUNE HUNTINGTON’S WORK:
A SYNTHESIS
JH as sociologist

June Huntington (1974)
Social work and the sociology of occupations,
*Australian Social Work*,
27(4), pp 5-16.

Lecturer, School of Social Work,
University of New South Wales.

(incipsion of other professions into traditional social work territory)
UK training activity & ‘involvement’ - what was she doing?

‘Readers’ Comment: Maria Colwell Inquiry’, *Australian Social Work* 30(1) 1977, JH described as Lecturer, presently on leave for full-time research, School of Social Work, University of New South Wales.

- ‘As an English sociologist involved in social work training at different levels in the United Kingdom between 1968 and 1972...’
- ‘My own involvement with the Child Care Service in Britain from 1968-1972...’
University of New South Wales, 1980.
Huntington’s Australian work


Data from a social work attachment project conducted in Sydney, Australia
Back in UK: Mid 1990s


A career in health services...

June Huntington (1993) From FPC to FHSA to ...health commission, British Medical Journal, 306, pp 33-36. (fellow in primary health care management, King’s Fund College)

'By 1986 I had worked with general medical practitioners for 16 years, in both the UK & Australia, but knew nothing of family practitioner committees...Later in 1986 I began to direct a study of the management development needs of family practitioner committees for the NHS Training authority, and found that certain of the committees’ features uncannily reflected those of general practices…'

June Huntington described as visiting professor in primary care development.


Contribution to social work history

Enduring themes

• Need to observe what people do as well as say
• Multiple perspectives – to see ourselves as others see us
• Limits of professional views only
• Current need to see social work in smaller work units, not just LAs.
Contribution to current debates on integration

Enduring themes
Eg Necessary ingredients for integration of services

- Close-knit professional networks
- Mutual sense of long-term obligation
- Little concern about reciprocation
- High degree of mutual trust
- Joint arrangements as core business

(Glendinning 2002, Health Policy)