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PUTTING ONE'S FOOT THROUGH IT

David Drucker*

SOME years ago a famous exhibition of photographs, under the title of "The Family of Man"* was assembled by the Museum of Modern Art in New York and subsequently was shown in many capitals around the world. In a section portraying education there is a picture of serried rows of students in a tall lecture theatre earnestly attending to the lecturer. The lecturer is not shown but you can imagine him on a dais behind an imposing lectern. Another picture shows a number of men sprawled informally about, listening to a lecturer who is sitting on a table with his foot up on the desk.

I was reminded vividly of these pictures just recently when I was talking to a group of Asian students preparing for a new venture in field work. I had been explaining the relevance of social work method to their impending experience. *Observation and study*, I said, leads to *diagnosis* — the giving of meaning and direction to our facts — to be followed by *planned action* based on our diagnosis with a built-in *evaluation* of our action which in turn progresses to further understanding, keener observation and study, and so on.

During a period of discussion I was sitting in a relaxed manner on the edge of a table and a colleague was translating for me. Unconsciously I raised my knee and my heel rested on the edge of the table; this was unexpectedly met with a round of laughter. I could not make up my mind at first whether the laughter was related to something my colleague had said or perhaps embarrassingly my trousers were undone, or dimly I wondered whether there was something impolite about my posture. . . . I searched in my experience for a meaning and slowly decided from half-remembered responses in other situations that the latter explanation was, though surprising, the correct one. However, I asked the class in a friendly way what the joke was. It was the turn of the class to be embarrassed but they hesitatingly gave me to understand that such a position was generally considered impolite. However I was hastily assured that "we know that you are English and therefore it is alright". I privately wondered whether all English are considered naturally impolite. But then one of the students volunteered that he had laughed because my posture was "unusual"; he had suddenly recalled that when he was

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a small boy his father had admonished him for sitting so, and now this present incident had led him to wonder why impoliteness was attached to some physical gesture and not to others. I resisted Freudian speculation at this point and instead tried but failed to get what ideas and thoughts were associated with a foot up on the table. (It may well be connected to the idea of the feet being unclean —one takes one's shoes off before entering a Moslem house.) Instead, the students continued to reassure me, politely, that it was perfectly all right. I pointed out that it was only all right as long as they had the information (a) that I was a foreigner unfamiliar with local custom, and (b) that my intention was not impolite; that what had been illustrated here were the meanings given to observed behaviour based on different terms of reference (a kind of diagnostic process), and that although much of my behaviour was strange in contrast to local behaviour, my foot on the table obviously had crossed the boundary lines of true acceptability because this must be what the laughter indicated. The students, I said, would recognise their behaviour in laughing as a form of social control. To this they agreed.

I then retracted the processes in this classroom interlude; starting with the laughter (an observation), I tried — by casting my mind back to what had preceded — to put it into a proper context, and to find terms of reference; I came up with three alternative hypotheses: (1) a joke by my colleague which I had not followed because of language difficulties; (2) my being improperly dressed, which my leg raising had made conspicuous; (3) an impoliteness of cultural origin. I then established, by seeking more information (clarification) from the laughter themselves, that number of three was the case. However, if I had acted upon the laughter without seeking further explanation, I might have done nothing; or smiled at a joke in sympathy though I did not understand it; or looked

down surreptitiously at my trousers; or crossed my legs, trying to look unselfconscious; or put my leg down; or apologised; or possibly acted in a variety of other ways, but all would have been related to my "diagnosis". What I in fact chose to do (planned action) was first to clarify my differential diagnosis by seeking further information and then to involve the class in an examination of processes to illustrate the common manner in which we all seek to find appropriate reactions to situations, which in social work we consciously strive to make use of, in order to reach certain goals: in this case that of my teaching social work method to the class — trying to relate theoretical understanding to a practical situation.

I then proceeded to admit to the fact that I had on a number of occasions been made subtly but uncomfortably aware that my normal (to me) gesturing and style (flamboyant, apparently, to Asians) was breaking down my communication efforts rather than enhancing them. I had thought about this at some length. One consideration was that although I ordinarily (in the non-Asian context) use movement and gesturing, even miming and play-acting (hamming?) to illustrate what I am talking about, in Asia, handicapped by the language barrier, I had stepped up my gestures, not recognising that this too was a "foreign" language. However, I had persuaded myself that this matter of body movement was a basic and universal means of communication. In my mind's eye I now see that Asian dance and gesture is completely foreign to me and conveys little, and that (though I am not dancing, be it ever so inelegantly), there is no reason why my gestures should be immediately recognisable without the "language" first being understood: "... you are English and therefore it is all right". However, though somewhat aware of this problem, I went on to discuss (and justify, I suppose) *why* I had

deliberately chosen (planned action, in this case possibly misjudged?) to continue with my own style of informality.

My experience had been in many countries that I (and others) are led to a more dignified position in relation to an "audience". All the behaviour of those involved is directed towards stressing my social superiority to my audience. The speaker is expected to adopt this posture (the raised dais, the lectern, often the unnecessary and awful microphone) and to respond formally (Mr. Chairman, honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen, etc.) I notice too that in visiting villages, institutions, private homes and the like, quite elaborate rituals are conducted to establish my role as a truly honoured guest (the best and unusually large quantities of food, for example). In return I often feel that the "instant" miracles and pronouncements seem to be expected of me. I confess to a sense of fraud at these times, although I am also immodestly self-bemused by my new status (like a new set of gorgeous clothes — not "usual", but "how well they fit", "I look rather good in them don't you think?"). Flattering and ridiculous though the situation is, one of the main effects is to put distance (even more than naturally exists) between me and the audience. To a large extent I have observed that the same distance is mutually mapped out between social welfare personnel and the people they are there to serve. It seems to me that this social distance — the "us" and the "they" element — runs counter to social work relationships, which call for a more equalitarian sharing in which authority and status, where they are of relevance to all, should derive from skill in the helping relationship rather than a socially defined superiority. Self-help concepts and involvement of the client in the problem-solving process in social work specifically declares itself as part of the democratic ethic. Social work style therefore calls for "democratic behaviour". To

my mind this implies divesting oneself of the trappings of status, and politely declining to have these thrust or politely placed upon one. Status can only be freely accepted on the basis of the mutual dignity of being a "man among men". But what are the postures and gestures *understood as democratic*? Do I lift up the servant girl who approaches (charmingly?) on her knees? Is the answer "yes" in my social work role and perhaps "no" in my personal capacity as guest? I won't even begin to touch on the terrifyingly difficult question of the conflict between what I can accept personally in the way of status rewards in contrast to my professional working status. What concerns me here is the minute matter of whether my informality and resistance to the forms of politeness — the foot on the table (I feel uncomfortable as I write it now) actually makes my point. How can one break down the traditional (feudal) forms and use the break constructively to implant a sense of mutual self-regarding status democratically? I may see my activity that way, but does the viewer? Perhaps one positive aspect lies in the fact that this incident did enable me to raise these issues for scrutiny on these many levels. What is confusing is that my idea of what is democratic behaviour, which I hope serves as a model for social workers in an (overly?) status-conscious society, does not necessarily appear to the people or the students in that society as necessarily democratic or for that matter democratic at all. Perhaps social workers trained outside the country in which they normally serve might have something to contribute to this kind of concern. How is status to be managed in positive social work ways?

An interesting thing is that although the serried ranks picture (from Czechoslovakia) still seems antithetical to my idea of the social work teaching "model", the "foot on the table" picture (American) on careful reconsideration seems to have an unexpectedly

formal quality too — a formality which was not in my memory when my classroom experience reminded me of that picture. Perhaps it is that the relationship between Oppenheimer the physicist (for it is he portrayed) and his "fellow students" (?) does not attempt to demonstrate a model for the *subject matter* being discussed in that class, whereas in my case I was eager to use our own living classroom experience introspectively to demonstrate the subject matter. In this respect I am increasingly taken by an adjoining and forgotten picture from Bechuanaland. It shows an old man, his eyes alight and his mouth wide, arms upstretched, expressive fingers, surrounded at his own level on the ground by an enthralled audience of naked black men, women and children, carried away in a union of experience. One can almost hear what the old man is saying merely by looking at the picture. Perhaps gesture

and the human body convey something fundamental about the Family of Man after all, and it is merely subtleties of dialect rather than a whole language we need to learn. But what, I wonder, would the spell-binder from Bechuanaland make of the lecture situation in the Czechoslovak picture? This question of sensory and intellectual communication across barriers intrigues me — teacher and student, foreigner and national, dignitaries and the people, old and young. Pop music and pop dress have become an international phenomenon, conveying real meaning — what? — between young and young and certainly interfering with communication between the generations. Social work is the stuff of meaningful communication across outer and inner barriers to more creative approximations of reality. Can anyone take this matter a stage further by communicating their thinking and experience through this journal?

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