

## Social Work and the Jewish Community Center\*

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... there is much in the data from the questionnaires to suggest that social work knowledge, skills, values and ethics are often, if not regularly, fruitfully employed for the purposes of the Center and its membership and leaders.

### Origins of the Project

The concern among Jewish community center personnel about the nature and state of social work practice in Centers, and about its relevance to Center objectives, has endured almost as long as its virtual invention as a way of administering Centers and serving Center clientele. As social work, and particularly social group work, was taking form — with considerable assistance from Center workers — as a critical medium for running Centers and administering their programs and services, doubts began to be generated about its consequences and implications for Centers, Center staffs, Center administrators and leaders, and Center members. The clearer the rationale, ideology, and principles of social group work became, the more uncertain did Center workers as well as Center leadership become about its applicability and impact for the

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Center's assigned function; particularly insofar as certain programs were preferred — whether because of tradition, or habit, or preoccupations about Jews and Jewish life.

Battle lines were further drawn as some of the more articulate Center workers — including those who had something to do with conceptualizing social work as a discipline employed in Centers — crystallized, prescriptively at least, the nuclear position of social work in Center practice; for example: "this commitment to social work is at the heart of the uniqueness of the Jewish community center."<sup>1</sup>

The presenting issue was described in various ways at different times. Sometimes the question raised was whether social group work was in fact what was characterized as the Center's "core discipline," a characterization which evoked puzzlement if not concern about the other disciplines employed in Centers, and about purposes not explicitly amenable to social work implementation, and perhaps even hampered by it. Sometimes the question raised had to do with whether social work was appropriate at all in view of priorities envisaged for the Jewish community.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Sanford Solender, *The Unique Function of the Jewish Community Center* (New York: National Jewish Welfare Board) 1955, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Graenum Berger, *The Jewish Community Center: A Fourth Force in American Jewish Life* (New York: Jewish Education Committee Press, 1966) *passim*.

Sometimes, even when equality of opportunity and responsibility was accorded to professional disciplines other than social work, the problem enunciated was not that social work was not relevant to the Center's function and objectives, but that its practice was prevented or hindered by practical and other circumstances. The complaint seemed to be that though more and more was being understood about social work, social workers had less and less opportunity or motivation to practice it, or lacked the conditions to do so. Or, at times, the deficiency complained of was the shortage of professionally prepared personnel; but even then the social workers who did work in Centers were not always free to do what they considered to be social work.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps another source of puzzlement, if not confusion, was the insistence that, on one hand, a social work background was essential to the fulfillment of Center responsibilities, and, on the other, unrestrained faith and credit could not be accorded to social work in Center practice, either because of manpower shortages, or because of the valuation of other methods, other programs, other approaches, and other purposes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Allan Green, Barry Kasden and Brian Segal, "Jewish Social Group Work Students View the Jewish Community Center Field as a Placement and Career," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 44:2 (Winter, 1967) pp. 168-176; Earl Yailen, "The Crisis in Group Work and Jewish Center Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 45:1 (Fall, 1968) pp. 86-96; Armand Lauffer, "The Future of Social Work in the Jewish Community Center: The Case of the Disinclined Student," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 46:1 (Fall, 1969) pp. 45-58; and Charles S. Levy, "Disparities Between the Idealizations and Experience of Jewish Community Center Professional Personnel," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 45:3 (Spring 1969) pp. 257-266.

<sup>4</sup> Compare, for example, Sanford Solender, "New Perspectives on Staff Organization in the Jewish Community Center," *Journal of Jewish*

More recently, the emphasis has been on the disenchantment with the failure of professional leadership in the Jewish community center field to encourage the development of social work practice and conceptualization through normative reinforcement, recognition, and positive sanctions. One of the ways in which this was expressed was "that not enough attention was being paid to social work practice by the Jewish community center field."<sup>5</sup>

Another way in which this concern was expressed was the following:

While it is true that we need social workers to administer departments within our agencies and to supervise large numbers of part-time people who very often are the primary providers of direct service, we also need to consider from a different vantage point the possibility of developing a direct practice career job ladder within our field. What I have in mind here is the fact that there would appear to be growing numbers of young social workers who are not particularly interested in administration as a primary job function . . . and who very often would remain with Jewish community centers if they felt that as time went on their salary levels increased and they were able to maintain as their primary function direct social work practice. . . . There are an awful lot of people who question whether or not the Jewish community center performs a clear social work function. It is true that we still produce some of the best practice in our profession, but it is also true that we are not doing many of the things that members of our institution need us to do. . . . We must consider making it possible for social workers at all levels to have a clear

*Communal Service*, 44:4 (Summer, 1968) pp. 299-309; Irwin Golden, "The Utilization of Social Work Manpower in Jewish Community Centers: Alternative Models," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 46:1 (Fall, 1969) pp. 59-69; and Alfred Dobrof, "Jewish Community Center Manpower — Now and for the Decade Ahead," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 44:3 (Spring, 1968) pp. 260-270.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Morris, Memorandum on Meeting in San Francisco in June, 1974, that led to the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Social Work Practice in the Center, April 28, 1975.

part of their job load (which is protected) through which they can continue to practice the thing for which they were trained.<sup>6</sup>

### Project Purpose and Procedure

Out of an organized expression of concern about these matters, and a collective will to do something about it, the Ad Hoc Committee on Professional Social Work Practice in the Center Field was formed. Through several meetings, the Committee developed a procedure with which to formulate more clearly than had seemed evident, the nature of the problem of social work practice in Centers, if there was any, and the kind of action that might be indicated, if any. A questionnaire was designed to elicit from participants their view of their experience in applying their social work knowledge, skill, values, and ethics in carrying out their agency assignments, if they felt they had, and their judgments regarding the conditions or circumstances militating against their doing so. Only a small sample of Center workers was surveyed, and only graduates of schools of social work with the Master's Degree. As few as these were, they numbered more than the Committee contemplated when the procedure was considered, since the aim of the project was not any statistical verity but simply qualitative illumination. As the letter which accompanied the questionnaire indicated, it was not the intention of the Committee to arrive at some kind of accounting of the extent to which social work was, or was not, practiced in Centers, or how; nor was any generalization to be ventured. Centers were not to be rated or evaluated. Neither was the sample to be presumed to be representative of the group as a whole, let alone of Center workers in general.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Carp, letter to Social Work Education Committee of Association of Jewish Center Workers, December 10, 1971.

### The Respondents

To the extent that diversity can be equated with randomness, a more "random" group of respondents is difficult to conceive. Sixteen attended 13 different schools of social work in the United States and in Canada, and were otherwise geographically well-dispersed. Only three graduated in the same year, the rest ranging from 1947 to 1973. The breakdown:

<i>Year of Graduation</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
Before 1950	2
1951-1955	2
1956-1960	0
1961-1965	4
1966-1970	3
1971-(1973)	5
	<u>16</u>

All but one respondent had the Master of Social Work Degree (as such), and the remaining one, the Master of Science in Social Work Degree which is hardly distinguishable from it. Twelve had concentrated in social group work, two in social casework, and two had mixed concentrations — which is to say, presumably "generic" or multiple concentration curricula.

Nearly all of the respondents — only one did not — supervised social work students at one time or another, and twelve were still doing so or were scheduled to do so in 1975-76.

The respondents carried agency responsibility at all levels of the administrative hierarchy represented in Jewish community centers, including a full range of assignments either entirely or in part — from direct service to individuals and groups, through departmental leadership and staff supervision, to executive and administrative leadership at the very top of the agency hierarchy or very close to it.

In short, respondents were in a posi-

tion, based on responsibility and experience — usually over a period of years — to make educated judgments regarding the applicability of social work to Center practice at various levels of agency responsibility. Moreover, there was a sizeable representation among the respondents of recent graduates whose recollection of the substance of social work practice would have been sufficiently vivid to apply a fairly strict test of evidence or prospects of social work practice. That is, it is not too rash to surmise that these respondents would have been close enough to the literature, the teaching, and the supervision of social work to be guided — in appraising the relevance and actuality of social work in the Jewish community center — by idealizations and expectations with respect to social work practice, however developed or under-developed.

### Results

Because the questionnaire was open-ended, and provided only generating stimuli to elicit free responses related to the question to which the questionnaire was primarily addressed, a wide variety of expressions was expected and indeed received. There was no restriction on what respondents chose to concentrate on, or how they chose to deal with it. The results reported are not a summation of what the entire group said, only an accounting of the thoughts and the ideas any of them offered. They do not represent the group's consensus; only its various contributions. The objective was simply to organize the kind of understanding to which their responses together added up, and which could serve as a starting point for future study and action. The range of subjects dealt with — some by only one or two respondents — was therefore no surprise, and no problem as far as the project's purposes were concerned. Nevertheless, some patterns of elucidation did occur,

sometimes pervasively reflected in the group of responses as a whole. About some of them one could even infer consensus, if not unanimity.

### Social Work and the Center

One of the themes which run through the responses is that social work is alive and — well, it is alive in the Center field; if not often as a departmentalized, developed, well-staffed, deliberately conceived presence, then as a sanctioned, though sometimes difficult-to-honor, influence on the practice of Center workers. Center leadership is sometimes all for it, whether as a guiding motif in the Center as a whole, or as a valued component of its programs and services.

Center leaders, professional as well as lay, sometimes think well of social work, but they are not always sure how much priority to accord it in relation to other approaches to programs and services. Center leaders sometimes sanction social work as long as it is manageable, is not too costly, and does not intrude disproportionately on practices and services that are regarded as more important. And some Centers make explicit their valuation of social work as a means of fulfilling Center objectives, if only to differentiate it from other approaches which Center members are given the opportunity to choose. On the other hand, Center leaders sometimes are said to doubt that social workers are a sufficiently consistent functional element in Center practice to warrant their partiality towards professionally prepared social workers as staff members.

A less common but nonetheless pertinent judgment regarding the general relevance of social work to Center practice, did not invalidate social work but contended with its occasionally dysfunctional nature. It complained not about the utility of social work for the Center but about the inadequacy of social work

education as preparation for the more brutal realities of Center practice. In short, the implication seemed to be that not only could one's social work background not always be employed, its employment had undesirable consequences, and hence might not be invariably suited to the purposes of Center work.

For the rest, although antithetical attitudes may not be specified, the view of Center leaders sometimes seems to be that it is all right if social work is practiced in the Center, but not at the expense of other Center requirements, and if the Center staff member can find the time and means to do it. This, at any rate, seemed to be the implication when respondents used such characterizations of their situations as the agency "allows," or "doesn't discourage," or has "left me free," to apply their social work knowledge and skills, especially in the context that commensurate time and resources were not provided, and modifications were either not encouraged or tolerated to facilitate such application.

In spite of this wide range of intensity of commitment to social work in Centers, and the often practical as well as ideological influences which generate or color it, as far as the respondents were concerned, social work "fits." Social work was universally regarded among them as suited to the purposes of the Jewish community center — not exclusively, or peculiarly, but in appreciable if not in urgent measure.

There is thus, according to this sampling of views and experience, no doubt about the applicability of social work knowledge, skills, values, and ethics to the Center's function. The only questions are how much, what kind, with whom, under what conditions, toward what ends, in what relationship to the contributions and emphases of other disciplines, and so on. Some of these

questions were also illuminated by the project.

#### **Social Work as Reflected in What is Chosen to be Done**

The use of social work knowledge, skill, values, and ethics is reflected in the very programs and services which social workers in Centers select or emphasize, not as alternatives to Center programs and services, or in contradistinction to activities chosen as means for implementing Center objectives, but precisely in harmony with them. The focus of the social worker in the Center, however, is not merely on the selection of activities which fulfill Center objectives in the social work way and social work objectives in a Jewish way, but in the use of activities to meet the needs of Center members which are functionally related to the Center's reason for being.

#### **Social Work as Reflected in the Values Which Guide What is Done in the Agency**

Although not necessarily in conflict with Jewish values or even appreciably different from them, the values which tended to guide respondents in their practice were frequently seen by them as influences of their social work ideology as they interpreted it. The valuation of the capacity to change, for example — certainly the opportunity to do so at the will of Center members, and starting with them at the point at which they begin — was enunciated by respondents as a guide to their practice, not as a routinely reiterated catechism, but apparently as a carefully considered manifestation in their Center experience, or at least as a value of which they were constantly aware, and which they tried hard to act upon in their practice. Aside from the social work value implications

of the substance of practice issues which respondents observed in their Center experience, respondents also alluded to social work value implications which they detected in their very approaches to practice. Included among these was the manner in which they chose to use themselves in relation to their clientele.

#### **Social Work as Reflected in the Center Worker's Practice**

In a few of the Centers represented by respondents, social workers carry direct-service responsibility with individuals, families, or groups. When they do they are guided by social work practice principles and concepts. That is, their professional function is interpreted in and by the agency in social work terms, presumably implying that it is consonant with the Center's purposes and functions in general, if not integral to them. To the extent that this is true, social work knowledge, skills, values, and ethics are clearly applicable to Center practice.

Even when they do not carry direct-service responsibility, however, respondents have evidently been able to apply their social work background in their Center practice, albeit in variable ways and in varying degrees. This seems to be characteristic more of the way in which they do what they do, than in what they do. Particularly characteristic of their approach to the fulfillment of their responsibility as social workers, in whatever activity in which they engage in the Center, is a kind of acute professional self-consciousness and self-awareness with which they tackle almost any job, and the constraints by which they seem to feel bound as they do so.

The respondents would appear to be the last ones in the world to pretend that they invariably do the "right thing" — as social workers — but they do seem to be preoccupied with the attempt, and bothered by their failures, whether they

are the ones responsible for them, or they are simply victims of circumstances perpetrated or permitted by others. The tenor of the responses, at any rate, conveys an impression of a highly developed social work conscience with a pervasive professional impact, whether or not it actually affects practice. This may not mean much to a pragmatically-oriented person who is moved only by manifest results, but it represents an imposing presence which at least makes possible, if not insistent, the application of social work knowledge, skills, values, and ethics, given the slightest opening for them. Obviously, not all Center workers are thus afflicted, and there must be many among them still consumed with the more normative brute ambition and urge for self-preservation, for whom the social work super-ego is a veritable nuisance. Nevertheless, if the respondents in this project are any indication, Center workers strive to apply what they have learned in schools of social work, and despair when they cannot; they are embarrassed when they do not. And their strivings are clearly encouraged by the conviction that as social workers they do belong in the Jewish community center.

One of the ways this becomes evident is the repeated references or intimations in the responses to the effect that Center workers serve as role models — with Center members of all ages, with Center leaders, with supervisees, and with colleagues. They may not always be able to take the professionally commendable course of action in that capacity, but they never seem to be unmindful of it.

#### **Conditions Lacking or Needed for the Application of Social Work in Centers**

By inference at least, the project suggested how the professional background of social workers in Centers

might be made more serviceable in the fulfillment of their Center responsibilities. The media, it appears from responses, already exist, and some employment of them for social work purposes is occurring, perhaps more than just some. Nevertheless, respondents had a number of observations to make regarding the need for the maturation of social work in Centers, so that social workers could make more and better use of the professional armamentarium with which they come to Centers, for the benefit of Center clientele and the improvement of Center practice, insofar as social workers and social work can contribute to such improvement.

Despite the acknowledgement of various conditions which militated against the optimal use of social work in Centers to achieve Center purposes, conditions over which they obviously had little or no control, respondents consistently, almost unanimously, identified as a key factor in the fate of social work in Centers the social workers themselves. They were not penitent about this; there was no ring of *mea culpa* in their expressions. Nor was there anything nihilistic about these expressions. The implication conveyed was that social work and social workers have something to offer to Center members and leaders, something quite compatible with and appropriate to the Center's function in the community: would that they could do more than they do, and would that conditions as well as their own initiative, capacity, and opportunities permitted them to do it.

#### **The Social Worker as Key to the Application of Social Work**

As one respondent put it, "practicing social work is hard work," and what apparently makes it even harder in Center practice, among other things, is how so-

cial workers view themselves and how others view them, as well as what either does about it. Respondents freely admitted limitations and deficiencies affecting the role of social work in Centers, which, while cast in a courageous spirit of self-criticism and unrequited but hardly illusory potentialities, also provide the framework for future action on the part of the professional association, the National Jewish Welfare Board, and Center administrators and supervisors. One problem, or course, is staffing, not the number of social workers who are employed by Centers merely, or the kinds of assignments they carry, but the kinds of attitudes and convictions with which they approach their agency tasks.

But respondents were not above the humility required to look to themselves as significant variables associated with shortcomings related to their practice of social work in the Center, although they had a realistic awareness of the administrative and practical obstacles to their practice in both the agency and the community.

#### **Summary**

Respondents obviously did not invariably and inevitably fail as social work practitioners. On the contrary, there is much in the data from the questionnaires to suggest that social work knowledge, skills, values, and ethics are often, if not regularly, fruitfully employed for the purposes of the Center and its membership and leaders. Perhaps the spirit in which this material should be received is: How much more might be possible, and how much more social workers might be able to offer, precisely in the implementation of the Center's function, if the availability and proficiency of social workers' competence could be ensured, enhanced, and nourished, without neglecting or impeding that which Centers are committed to do and needs doing.

This project does seem to provide some ground-work for the improvement and the exploitation of social work practice in the Jewish community center and for the achievement of the Center's sectarian, communal, and professional objectives, and it affords some reassurance regarding current use. It provides as well a substantial basis for action in and outside of the Centers which might

inspire and facilitate social work's and the social worker's contribution to the Center's mission and, at the same time, validate, more perhaps than is true at the moment, the background, the competence, and the ideals that social workers have to work so hard to acquire in order to become social workers, and in order to serve the Center and the community as a result.