

Non-Jewish Staff in Jewish Family and Children's Agencies

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ONE issue of importance in the discussion of sectarian welfare agencies concerns the ethnic identity of the professional involved in the service. Specifically, is the background of the professional a help or a hindrance to the delivery of effective service? There are many discussions of this issue in the literature but little research in the field.

Since Jewish welfare agencies have in the past decade shifted from hiring only sectarian staff to also employing non-sectarian professionals, this empirical study was designed to examine this problem. Two questions were addressed: 1) What is the staff perception of the effect on the clients served? 2) What is the agency's role in staff orientation in regard to its sectarian function?

Review of the Literature

There are many reasons discussed in the literature for maintaining Jewish social work.¹ The discussion is largely theoretical and conceptual. In regard to the essential attributes of Jewish staff members, Axelrad points out² that while there are distinct beliefs, customs, val-

ues, and social patterns among the Jews, the essential quality is that the worker be able to accept the client's identification with Jewishness regardless of the worker's own relationship to Jewishness.

Hofstein³ specifies some of the qualities expected of the professional: these include a knowledge about the Jewish people, their value base, the Jewish heritage and social forms, and an awareness of Jewish diversity. In addition, and of great importance, is a sensitivity and a self-awareness about one's own Jewish identity in order to help others. Pins and Teicher⁴ focus on the fact that the worker must also have professional competence.

Another body of literature identifies factors of relevance in a discussion of the use of professionals who are not of the same ethnic background as their clients. A crucial period in the client-worker relationship has been identified as the initial study, or intake, phase by several writers. A client very often finds it difficult to ask for help and it may be easier for the client if his initial contact is with someone within his own ethnic group.⁵

¹ Charles Miller, "The Jewishness of Jewish Social Service," *40th General Assembly Papers* (November 13, 1971), pp. 3-4.

Morton Teicher, "Reexamination of the Rationale for Sectarian Social Work," *Social Casework*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (February, 1972), pp. 78-84.

Arnold Gurin, "Sectarianism: A Persistent Value Dilemma," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1 (Fall, 1966), pp. 38-48.

² Sidney Axelrad, "The Jewish Components in Social Work," *The Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, Vol. XXVI, No. 3 (March, 1950), pp. 320-331.

³ Saul Hofstein, "Preparation of Workers for Casework Practice in the Jewish Agency," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLV, No. 2 (December, 1968), pp. 156-164.

⁴ Arnulf Pins, "What Kind of Jewish Communal Worker Do We Need?" *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLIII, No. 3 (Fall, 1965), pp. 60-72.

Morton Teicher, "On the Meaning of Being A Jewish Social Worker," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLVII, No. 3 (Spring, 1971), pp. 191-195.

⁵ Emelicia Mizio, "White Worker-Minority Client," *Social Work*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (May, 1972), pp. 82-86.

Furthermore, the identity of the agency as a sectarian service may be important to the client seeking help.

There is some literature available concerning the aspect of client-worker difference as it relates to the black-white experience. It was found by Brieland⁶ and Barrett and Perlmutter⁷ that a worker's competence was preferred to his race. Barrett and Perlmutter support the importance of the first interview as it relates to this discussion:

It is important, however, to emphasize that the initial interview in the agency is differentiated from the ongoing counseling experience. Thus, all of the trainees from the black urban community preferred a black counselor at the point of initial contact, when the program and the agency environment were new and foreign to them, as a means of feeling more at ease. This suggests a differential utilization of staff, with black staff members performing the initial orientation function and black and white staff offering ongoing services.⁸

The principle to be transferred to the sectarian setting is the importance of having a member of the client's ethnic group at the first point of contact.

Kadushin (1972) emphasizes that "the nature of the interpersonal relationship established between two people is more important than skin color . . .,"⁹ thereby supporting the attributes of professional competence rather than ethnic identity. This study, hopefully, will contribute to professional practice of social work within the Jewish setting as it further explores one aspect of ethnic identity.

⁶ Donald Brieland, "Black Identity and the Helping Person," *Children*, Vol. XVI (October, 1969), pp. 171-176.

⁷ Franklin Barrett and Felice Perlmutter, "Black Clients and White Workers: A Report From the Field," *Child Welfare*, Vol. LI, No. 1 (January, 1972), pp. 19-24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ Alfred Kadushin, "The Racial Factor in the Interview," *Social Work*, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (May, 1972), pp. 88-98.

Methodology

This is an exploratory study which is designed to provide information about an unexplored area as a means of "clarifying concepts, establishing priorities for further research. . .; [and] providing a census of problems regarded as urgent by people working in a given field of social relations."¹⁰

Two agencies in Philadelphia were selected for this study: The Association of Jewish Children (A.J.C.) and Jewish Family Service (J.F.S.). Both are highly professional agencies, primarily casework oriented. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the executive directors and an open-ended questionnaire was administered to the professional staff in both agencies. There were 27 respondents in AJC and 25 respondents in JFS.

Non-Jewish staff were employed in both agencies as a result of a shortage of qualified Jewish professionals, a decision made with conviction by both Boards of Directors (which are 100 percent Jewish). In J.F.S. the shift occurred in 1948 when there was an increased demand for services as a result of the influx of refugees. In A.J.C. the shift did not occur until the late 1950's; the shortage of qualified Jewish staff applicants at that time was attributed to the fact that Jewish and non-Jewish social workers were becoming more involved with the civil rights movements and broader community programs.

Description of Respondents

The staff consisted primarily of social work professionals who had worked for an extended time period in both agencies and consequently were knowledgeable about the issues involved. Of the

¹⁰ Sellitz, Claire, et al., *Research Methods in Social Relations* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1959), p. 51.

Table 1 Religious Identification of Staff

Table 1 Religious Identification of Jews														
AJC								JFS				JFS&AJC		
	Total		Jews		Non-Jews		Total		Non-Jews		Total		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N		%	N	%		N	%
High	12	46.1	7	41.2	5	55.6	11	44.0	11	45.9	—	—	23	45.0
Medium	6	23.0	4	23.5	2	22.2	9	36.0	8	33.3	1	100	15	29.5
Low	8	30.9	6	35.3	2	22.2	5	20.0	5	20.8	—	—	13	25.5
	26	100%	17	100%	9	100%	25	100%	24	100%	1	100%	51	100%

fifty-two respondents,* 19.2% (N = 10) were administrators or supervisors, 75% (N = 39) were caseworkers, and 5.8% (N = 3) were psychiatrists and psychologists. 26.9% (N = 14) have been working at their agency less than one year, 36.5% (19) have been working at their agency one to three years, 15.4% (8) for three to five years, and 21.2% (11) for five years and over. 80.7% (42) were Jewish and 19.3% (10) were non-Jewish. All but one of the non-Jewish staff members were at A.J.C. where nine of the 27 staff members (33.3%) are non-Jewish. J.F.S. had only one non-Jewish staff member at the time of this study.

Religious identification** of the staff was measured by their own stated degree of identification as well as their attendance at a religious institution. In regard to the degree of religious identification, a high degree of identification is the modal response in both agencies, for both Jews and non-Jews.

And yet attendance at a religious institution does not reflect this high degree of religious and/or ethnic identification: only 15.7% attend regularly, 35.3% attend occasionally, and 49% attend rarely. Comparisons were made between Jewish and non-Jewish staff at A.J.C.; the differences were not statistically significant.

* Not all 52 respondents answered all questions. Discussion of the data is based on the number of responses to each item.

** For purposes of this discussion religious identification includes religious and/or ethnic identification.

What is the staff perception of the effect on clients served?

Fifty percent (N = 26) of the total staff group felt it was very important for the staff to be all Jewish; specifically, this helped the client to identify better with his own group. (50% of the total non-Jewish staff (N = 5) were of this opinion.) 36.5% (N = 19) felt the religious/ethnic staff identification of clients and staff need not be the same, although the social workers were obligated to know the religious and cultural standards of the community they were serving. (40% (N = 4) of the total non-Jewish staff were of this opinion.) Of the 9.7% (N = 5) who felt religious/ethnic staff identification was not important at all, one (10%) was not Jewish. One respondent felt a common staff identification was not important after an initial contact and relationship was established. Only one respondent raised the point that clients expected their social worker to be Jewish.

Both executive directors stated that they hire staff on the basis of professional qualifications and not religion; both agreed that if the worker has the skill he should be able to handle the problem of difference. This thought was further developed by one of the executive's statement that it is a necessity for the non-Jewish professional to "face the difference with his clients, to identify it, use it, clarify it, and have it removed as a barrier in the helping relationship."

It is interesting to note that although

both executives agree that competence is the most essential quality being sought in a worker, if qualified Jewish workers were available they would hire them. The explanation given was that if a Jew applied to work in a sectarian agency, he would have a greater empathy for the Jewish people than the non-Jewish worker.

Most of the professional staff had experience working in a non-sectarian agency. The main difference between a sectarian agency and a non-sectarian agency was identified by 53.8% (28) who felt that a sectarian fosters a religious identity, an emphasis on Jewish values and a sense of community; 26.9% (14) said there were no differences in the two types of agencies. (50% (5) of the non-Jewish staff shared this feeling.) 13.6% (17) felt a sectarian agency made the worker more aware of his own religious/ethnic feelings.

It thus appears that even among professionals more directly involved in this practice issue a definitive answer is not possible. Thus half of the staff believes Jewish identity of the professional is a crucial variable; the other half generally does not view it as essential provided that knowledge and understanding about the Jewish community exists. The executives' position, given equal competence, supports the preference for Jewish staff.

In regard to the more specific issue concerning the importance of Jewish identity in the casework process, staff was asked at what point was the client's Jewish identity important: intake

primarily, ongoing counseling or whether the issue never entered into the casework process. 56% of the responses indicated that it was relevant throughout the on-going counseling experience; 33% saw it as important primarily in intake; 10% did not view it as important at any time. Again, the difference between the Jewish and non-Jewish staff is not statistically significant in this perception.

The question of Jewish identity was identified by 25% of the respondents as important in relation to a larger identity crisis, especially in adolescents. One example was cited: a young Jewish client, caught up in the Jesus movement, is relatively ignorant about Jewish values; rejecting being Jewish, however, is rejecting a part of herself and has broader meaning than ethnic identity *per se*. Almost half of the non-Jewish respondents (44.4%) agreed that Jewish identity issues were part of a larger identity crisis. It should be noted that only 25% of the respondents stated that elderly clients, primarily, could communicate more readily with a Jewish worker, an assumption generally accepted in practice.

The Staff Orientation Program

The two agencies differ sharply in their orientation programs. In Jewish Family Service there is a formal educational program consisting of seminars conducted by outside speakers and agency staff in contrast to AJC which has no formal educational program. The A.J.C. executive focussed instead on the

issues selected by a committee for weekly staff discussions which often concern Judaism, ethnicity, religious practices and ethnic difference. Yet, in both agencies, only one of the 51 staff members perceived that any agency-sponsored program was offered. While 20% of the J.F.S. staff perceived themselves as involved in ongoing Jewish education this was identified as taking place outside the agency; 20% of the A.J.C. saw their ongoing Jewish educational activity as "self-taught."

Thus while both executives are concerned with the on-going educational orientation of their staffs, and while each agency approaches the problem differently, the effect on the staff may be less than is desired.

Summary and Implications

No definitive answers emerge as a result of this study: 50% of the respondents believed it was important that the staff in a sectarian agency be all Jewish. Furthermore, competence appears to be a crucial variable in service delivery, especially since Jewish aspects in the on-going counseling process are viewed as related to broader identity issues. However, it was agreed that an understanding of religious and ethnic aspects of the Jewish community being served was necessary for all staff working in a sectarian setting.

Thus it appears that the position of the two administrators is supported by their staffs; all things being equal the Jewish applicant should be hired to better meet the special needs of the group being served; but competence is clearly a crucial variable in the decision.

The important finding from an administrative point of view concerns the role and responsibility of the agency in its staff development and training program. It is obviously not enough to offer an orientation program, irrespective of its form, and to assume the job is being done. There must be on-going feedback and evaluation from the staff members who are, ultimately, the recipients of this particular agency service. And in fact they may well need to be actively involved in the planning and execution of this ongoing educational function in order to assure its relevance to client needs and practice realities.

Whether Jewish or non-Jewish professionals are delivering the casework services, a pledge or code of identification is not extracted or expected. Rather the expectation is one of concern and respect for the client's total needs coupled with the skill to perform a service for that constituency. Therefore, an ongoing agency program can more adequately assure a flexible and meaningful institutional response to client needs, ethnic and other, than can any rigid expectation concerning ethnic identity *per se*. The active awareness and appropriate use of ethnic identity in the casework process could thereby be more adequately handled.

Several questions in regard to ethnic identity of agency staff must be posed for further research: what are the perceptions of the Jewish clients; do different age groups require differentiated staff assignment? These merit further exploration since the problem is important and insights derived from one cultural group may benefit others in our pluralistic society.

Table 2 Importance of Jewish Identification in the Casework Process

	AJC		JFS		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Intake Primarily	5	20.8	11	45.9	16	33.3
Ongoing Counseling	14	58.4	13	54.1	27	56.3
Never Important	5	20.8	0	0	5	10.4
	24	100%	24	100%	48	100%