

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS IN CASEWORK WITH ADULT CHILDREN AND AGED PARENTS *

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IF one of our social work historians were to survey the developments in casework over the past ten or fifteen years, casework with the aged would surely have to appear as one of the highlights of that period. Although most of us are aware that this area of casework has not yet reached its full potential there is no gainsaying the fact that it has achieved, in addition to a healthy respectability, a growing body of knowledge, skill and practice.

One of the reasons we have been able to get so far is that caseworkers in the field for the aged have been their own severest critics, and by dint of constant and continuing re-evaluation of method and practice are well on the road to greater knowledge, greater skill, and greater enrichment.

There will be general agreement that not all aspects of casework with the aged have developed evenly and it seems to me that one of the areas in which there has as yet been only minimal achievement is the adult child-older parent relationship. This is so not because of our lack of casework skill, nor because we lack diagnostic understanding of this relationship. I believe this is due to another factor, one which has received increasing attention in social work but

which may at times be easily ignored, namely, the absence within our thinking and practice of an adequate and dynamic socio-cultural underpinning as a basic and inseparable part of our casework practice with the aged and their families.

By way of introduction I should like to say that to the extent that my experience stems from Jewish social work, this subject will be viewed from the perspective of the Jewish social agency and the Jewish social worker, although the general principles pointed up may very well apply to all of social work.

Socio-cultural factors generally and, more specifically, their application to casework helping, have been defined by many writers.¹ In brief, these factors

¹ Katherine Spencer, "The Place of Socio-Cultural Study in Casework," *Socio-Cultural Elements in Casework*, Council on Social Work Education, New York, 1955, pp. 3-12; Sol W. Ginsburg, M.D., "The Impact of the Social Worker's Cultural Structure on Social Therapy," *Social Casework*, Vol. XXXII, October 1951, pp. 319-325; Otto Pollak, "Cultural Dynamics in Casework," *Social Casework*, Vol. XXXIV, July, 1953, pp. 279-284; Sue W. Spencer, "Religious and Spiritual Values in Social Casework Practice," *Social Casework*, Vol. XXXVIII, Dec. 1957, pp. 519-526; Henry S. Maas, "Culture and Psychopathology," *Mental Hygiene*, Vol. 41, July, 1957, pp. 408-414; William Gioseffi, "The Relationship of Culture to the Principles of Casework," *Social Casework*, Vol. XXXII, May, 1951, pp. 190-196.

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include the traditional or learned ways of behavior that have become established in social groups and which each individual member makes part of his own way of life in relation to himself and the group. More specifically, they include knowledge, art, morals, law, customs, and habits acquired by an individual as a member of a group or society.

Socio-cultural factors and their use by caseworkers are not new phenomena in social work. To a certain extent these factors have always played a role in the casework process. Certainly an understanding of the varied social and cultural factors that have shaped the client's life, his background, his particular ethnic and religious group, his ways of living, his values, his attitudes, have been, at least theoretically, as important a part of the definition of casework as have been an understanding of the psychological factors shaping the client's life and his relationships.²

That casework, however, had for a long time undervalued socio-cultural factors is a matter of common knowledge. The influences of psychiatry and psychoanalysis in casework had the effect in some respects of leading us to a denial of these factors. The great emphasis upon changing the individual led us at times to think of socio-cultural elements, which are rooted in tradition, as barriers to change. We saw in them constraining factors rather than differences within which individuals could achieve freedom and scope.³

In recent years, however, social work has been developing a renewed interest in

these factors and in their implications for helping clients. For the most part the contributions to our knowledge in this area have come from the social sciences—sociology and social anthropology in particular. Research in these fields has resulted in the postulation of new theories regarding the changes that have taken place in American society, in the family and in patterns of behavior over the last half century. Similar studies have been made with regard to the changes that have taken place within the Jewish group in America in this same half century, and these, too, have added to our knowledge of the American Jew, his changed patterns of behavior and his adjustment to the American scene. Finally, in the field of the aged, the major interest of this paper, numerous studies have been made by many persons in an effort to evaluate the social and cultural changes that have occurred in the place of older persons as well as in the attitudes toward older persons in American society as a whole.

Some Pertinent Aspects of Contemporary Culture

The last half century has been characterized by the growth of scientific thought, by shorter hours, by the increase in the number of aged persons, by the development of an urban versus a rural economy. We have developed, according to David Riesman,⁴ an "other-directed" society where the direction for most areas of living comes from others, from the outside, from our contemporaries, from our mass media. We learn to rear children from books, we eat what is advertised, we behave in fixed ways, and we are sensitive to how others look upon us. We have developed a conformity which is internalized for it is implanted early in our life and continues on through our

⁴ David Riesman et al., *The Lonely Crowd*, Doubleday Anchor, New York, 1956.

life. The parents of today having grown up in a setting that was more "inner-directed" find at times a loss of old certainties, of self assurance in their role as parents.

Dr. Phillipp Sottong,⁵ in a recent article points out how the parent of today often doubts whether he is the proper person with whom to be identified; he may have lost his self esteem because of the shift in authority from the parent to the expert. In the past, he points out, the precepts of the grandparents were handed on to parent and then to child. Now a parent may find generations of child rearing methods questioned by outside experts.

The urbanization of American life, changes in traditional forms, in education, in recreation and in other areas of living have tended to eliminate the grandparent from the home. He is a stranger, less endurable. While the child's parents try to keep up with the young, this cannot be done by the grandparents, hence their role is largely a negative one.

The American family has become a mobile family, constantly on the move, not establishing roots anywhere. We place a great deal of emphasis upon the future, on goals to achieve; we thus have little patience for the past, for tradition. The breakdown of the extended family system and the emergence of the nuclear family consisting of parents and non-adult children living at home; the development of a kinship loyalty only to

⁵ Phillipp C. Sottong, "The Dilemma of the Parent as Culture Bearer," *Social Casework*, Vol. XXXVI, July, 1955, pp. 302-306. See also, John P. Spiegel, "New Perspectives in the Study of the Family," *Marriage and Family Living*, Vol. XVI, Feb., 1954, pp. 4-12; Frederick H. Allen, "The Dilemma of Growth for Parents and Children," *Child Study*, Vol. XXXV, Spring, 1958, pp. 4-7; Otto Pollak, "Social Factors Contributing to Character Disorders," *Child Welfare*, Vol. XXXVII, April, 1958, pp. 8-12.

spouse and children has similarly given less importance to older family members.⁶

The Jewish group in America, by virtue of its recent immigrant status, has experienced even greater change during this period of time. The Jewish family today is essentially a first or second generation family, the adults or their parents having immigrated to this country. Any transfer from one society to another, separation from the old to the new, leads to feelings of insecurity, to isolation, or to a desire to submerge oneself in the dominant group.

Bernard Weinryb⁷ points out how the Jewish group's contact with the new world had within it the seeds of both adjustment and alienation. On the one hand, economic necessity—the need to find employment in the community—forced a measure of integration and adjustment. On the other hand, the tendency in a strange land to live among one's own, to go to one's former countrymen for assistance, to set up religious and cultural institutions according to the way it was done in the old country, made for alienation from the new environment.

All of these pressures in addition to his loneliness and lack of sense of belonging created many contradictions in the Jewish immigrant's behavior: "hopelessness and a sense of wanting to achieve; resistance to change and willingness to give up old ways and mores; clinging to group identity, yet having the urge for assimilation; religious piety and laxity; political conservatism and radicalism."⁸

One of the characteristics of an insecure minority is to try to accept the

⁶ Reuben Hill, "The Changing American Family," *The Social Welfare Forum*, 1957, Columbia University Press, N. Y., 1957, pp. 68-80.

⁷ Bernard Weinryb, "Jewish Immigration and Accommodation to America," *Publication of the American Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. XLVI, March 1957, pp. 366-402.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

² Gordon Hamilton, *Theory and Practice of Social Casework*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1951, pp. 83-114. See also, Helen Harris Perlman, *Social Casework, A Problem Solving Process*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1957, pp. 17-26.

³ Herbert H. Aptekar, *The Dynamics of Casework and Counseling*, Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston, 1955, pp. 1-42.

behavior patterns, the fashions and values of the majority group and by the same token also accept or internalize the low esteem the majority has for them.⁹ The individual begins to accept as valid the stereotypes attributed to him by the majority culture. As a result many Jews during the early part of the century developed a sense of self-hatred which also transmitted itself to family and children in the form of a denial of their socio-cultural heritage. However, as new opportunities opened for him, the immigrant worker rose economically. The Jew, having come from an urban culture, manifested a high degree of occupational and class mobility. He and his children gradually became part of the urbanized, industrialized American middle class. He became as much part of our "other-directed" and market society as did his middle class Protestant neighbor. Contrarily, his emergence and accommodation to his American environment had lessened the need for assimilation, self-denial and self-hatred. The result was a return to his socio-cultural heritage. In our day, as the desire for group identification increases, we are beginning to see the emergence of a Jewish group which has accommodated itself socio-economically, in language, in external way of life to the American environment and culture, but which clings to its heritage, activates Jewish values, and has an emotional attachment to the Jewish group.¹⁰

I think it is important to point up the obvious fact that the profound changes that have taken place in the Jewish group have had their impact upon

⁹ Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts*, Harper and Bros., New York, 1948, pp. 192-197.

¹⁰ See articles by Herbert J. Gans, Solomon Sutker and E. Digby Baltzell, in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, edited by Marshall Sklare, The Free Press, Glencoe, Ill., 1958, pp. 205-287.

Jewish institutions, Jewish social work among them. The controversies that formerly raged between the advocates and opponents of "Jewish content" in Jewish social work are no longer in the forefront today.¹¹ Just as, among other factors, the earlier concern for assimilation into the American scene led the Jewish social agency to a change in emphasis from a religio-cultural orientation to one that was predominantly secular, the recent trends mentioned are having the reverse effect of reawakening interest in Jewishness on the part of Jewish social agencies and social workers.¹²

Social Values and Client Attitudes

As we consider the implications of socio-cultural factors in the adult child-older parent relationship, I should like to discuss two relevant principles. One is that in all of casework we deal with what might be called a *generational component*; the second is that the caseworker is one of the primary bearers of this component in the casework relationship. By

¹¹ The controversies referred to here are documented in papers given at the various meetings of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service and which subsequently appeared in this *Journal* and its predecessor, *The Jewish Social Service Quarterly*. These differences were sharp and had their impact not merely on the attitudes of workers but on the development of programs as well.

¹² It is important to mention that the changes referred to were influenced also by earlier shifts in casework's concern from an emphasis upon external and environmental factors to one which brought into focus the internal structure of personality. Today, however, with the firm establishment of the importance of psychological dynamics and personal relationship, there is a renewed interest in both the role played by cultural factors in personality formation and the use of an understanding of those factors in casework and counseling. See William Posner and Saul Hofstein, "The Use of the Agency's Jewishness in Casework Process," *The Jewish Social Service Quarterly*, Vol. XXVI, March, 1950, pp. 332-340.

generational component, I mean first, that we deal with individuals who may be of different ages from each other and second, that we deal with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, traditions and values, which have at their base, generational implications. In a child guidance situation, there is the undeniable fact that we have a child and parent who are of different generations. We also have a caseworker who is of a different generation from the child and perhaps of the parent too.

In working with the aged, we are faced with the same phenomenon both in relation to the aged person and his adult child and in relation to the caseworker and the aged person, and in many instances in relation to the adult child. This is, I suppose, one of the dilemmas of casework. How can we help the child or any client, for that matter, who represents such great difference from us? How can we help a parent in relation to a young child whose basic problem may be a generational one? Or how can we help an older person and his adult children in the face of their generational difference—their socio-cultural differences as well as our own? I think that we as workers sometimes fear to give attention to many of the socio-cultural elements we deal with, particularly as they may be related to our own background and traditions.¹³ Essentially, we may fear the differences older people represent insofar as American cultural tradition is concerned. Yet, unless we known or have some awareness of our client's cultural tradition as well as our own, we shall find the greatest difficulty in giving our help.

¹³ William Posner, "Adapting and Sharpening Social Work Knowledge and Skills in Serving the Aging," *Social Work*, Vol. 2, October, 1957, pp. 37-42. Also "Casework with the Aged: Challenge or Retreat," *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. XXVIII, April, 1958, pp. 328-333.

To understand more clearly the adult child-older parent relationship as seen from the perspective of the Jewish agency, I should like to represent it as a four dimensional entity consisting of agency, worker, adult child and older parent, all interrelated with each other. I like to visualize it pictorially as a triangle with the worker at the apex, the adult child and older person representing each, one arm of the triangle, and the agency representing the lower connecting arm.

The agency, of course, is primary to our consideration. The Jewish social agency is an instrument of the Jewish community. No matter what its function may be the agency represents the Jewish community to the client. Although many clients may come to the Jewish agency for lack of similar non-sectarian services, many clients, certainly most aged clients, do choose the agency precisely because it is Jewish. For all clients, in whatever group they fall, the agency's Jewishness has some special meaning. There is the client who expects that because he comes to a Jewish agency his every need or desire will be met regardless of whether the agency is set up for the purpose or not, or whether it feels the client can really be helped with the service. In such cases, the Jewishness of the agency may constitute a problem in helping the client face realistically the limited conditions under which the agency can provide help. There may be other clients who, though not giving expression to it, may be fearful of the particular Jewish ideology the agency may represent, or the demands or expectations the agency may make upon him. The agency's Jewishness may thus intensify that fear.

For another group of clients, the Jewish agency may represent the "conscience" of the Jewish community. For these clients, bringing a problem to the Jewish agency implies that they are disclosing it to the Jewish community which

it represents. Such an action might arouse a fear of leaving themselves open to condemnation by the Jewish community. Very frequently such an attitude will be presented by adult children in coming for help for their aged parents. There is shame and guilt; a feeling of running counter to the Jewish tradition of caring for one's parents no matter what. On the other hand, for many clients, the fact that the Jewish agency is ready to accept them and their problem and help them with it may have the symbolic significance of forgiveness. If the Jewish agency does not need to condemn them then maybe their own condemnation of themselves need not be so great.

The agency, in relation to adult children and aged parents, must therefore be accepting of all segments of the Jewish community whether they be of East-European cultural background, German, Sephardic or American. For without this basic acceptance by the agency, we cannot begin to offer help.

The caseworker is the pivotal point as well as the connecting link, with the agency on the one hand, and the adult child-older parent on the other. For one thing, the caseworker in a Jewish agency must possess some knowledge of the changes that have taken place in society with regard to the family as a whole, specifically the Jewish family, and the changed relationships with respect to the aged person in society and the family. These relationships are at variance with what has been described as the family relationship at the turn of the century when the older people of today grew up. It is important for the worker to know too that these changes in family living, although accepted by the second generation American Jew as valid for him, certainly may run counter to the socio-cultural attitudes of the first generation American Jew—the older person of today. Those of you who are familiar

with the description of Jewish life in the old *shtetl*, know what a different orientation some of our older people of today come from. The independence of the individual was safeguarded and in the eyes of the *shtetl* society the individual was no less a person because he needed help, or because he was old.¹⁴ These attitudes and traditions were brought over to this country in the various immigration waves of the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries.

For the caseworker to have this knowledge as well as knowledge of religious practices, customs, and the changing patterns of family and community living gives him some of the basic equipment required in his approach to helping in generational conflict. It goes without saying that this knowledge must consist also of a psychological understanding of the meaning of the changes that have taken place in America with regard to adult child-older parent relationships, such as the reversal of roles, which is characterized by the older person's relinquishment of accustomed patterns of behavior or certain aspects of independent functioning, and by the assumption of new roles by the adult child.

Social and Cultural Values of the Caseworker

Perhaps of equal importance is the worker's knowledge and understanding of his own psychological and socio-cultural orientation as it impinges upon the adult child-older parent relationship. Dr. Sol W. Ginsburg¹⁵ some years ago

¹⁴ Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is With People*, International Universities Press, New York, 1952. See also, David G. Mandelbaum, "Change and Continuity in Jewish Life," in *The Jews: Social Patterns of an American Group*, op. cit., pp. 509-519.

¹⁵ Ginsburg, op. cit., p. 320. See also Weston La Barre, "The Social Workers in Cultural Change," *The Social Welfare Forum*, 1957, Columbia University Press, 1957, pp. 179-193.

described quite admirably the implications of the social worker's own socio-cultural orientation as it permeates his work. Although not specifically related to work with the aged and adult children, there is no question about its application here too. He points out that the:

"personality the social worker brings to his job is a complex resultant of many forces; that in the development of this personality, cultural factors have played a vital role; that his attitudes toward himself, his clients and his job reflect his own life experiences, his values and goals, his expectations and ambitions and his image of himself as a person in a social setting; that these experiences will reflect not only the worker's racial, economic and religious background and upbringing, but also his social class status and that of his family, his class allegiances and awareness and, especially in our country, practices and habits of thought and behavior which are native to the particular region in which he spent his formative years; that these attitudes and goals and needs may conflict with those of his clients who are also materially influenced by the impact of their own culture; that even when there is no conflict, the worker's own culturally influenced attitudes must inevitably play an important role in his understanding, handling and treatment of the client's problems; and finally, that this interaction is not by any means always conscious and recognized but often, as with other human attitudes, may be active entirely at an unconscious level, disguised in rationalization, and rationalized in theoretical assumptions and technical procedures."

Dr. Ginsburg goes on to point out how cultural forces (both inner and outer) shape the very choice of social work as a vocation by individuals; the need to help people in a prestige profession and one which at the same time allows one to exercise some power over the lives of others.¹⁶ Although we try to be objective in the helping relationship, we inevitably inject our own feelings, emotions, cultural background into our work with clients. Actually there is nothing wrong about this provided we understand this

phenomenon in ourselves, are conscious of our as well as of the client's cultural differences.

Otto Pollak,¹⁷ in a somewhat related discussion of cultural dynamics in casework, points out how important it is for understanding of basic personality and diagnosis in casework to have a knowledge not only of the client's cultural background, but of the caseworker's own as well.

Although social workers may find it easy to talk about and to accept cultural relativity, that is, the difference that exists among groups or individuals, it is another matter when a person of a different culture comes for help and when we have to develop a close relationship with him. The attitude then is to consider him to be somewhat deviant and the temptation exists to reorient that person in line with our own cultural attitudes. It is difficult for us to accept emotionally that which may run counter to those attitudes that have become part of our own ego and superego structure, for this would represent a denial of ourselves. The culture conflict which results can often create innumerable difficulties in our work with clients. It may lead us at times to consider a cultural difference as an aberration of some sort or it may lead us to a treatment plan which runs counter to the client's own cultural orientation.¹⁸

It should not be difficult for us to apply these views to our work with the aged and their adult children. In work with problems of the aged, our own personal feelings, shaped as they are by our own background and socio-cultural orientation, will play a tremendous role in the help we can give to clients. We must come to grips with problems of identification and separation; with our attitudes toward institutional care and

¹⁷ Pollak, op. cit., p. 281.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 281.

our socio-cultural feelings of children's obligation to their parents.

This emphasis that I put upon the worker's understanding of his own personality as shaped by his socio-cultural background is based upon my belief that therein lies the lead to an understanding of the dynamics of any casework relationship including that of the aged person and his adult child. For such an understanding leads inevitably to an understanding of the client's own background and the resultant meshing of the two toward real help. It makes it possible for us to utilize more effectively our psychological and technical skills.

I think that one of the questions we have to answer with regard to adult child-older parent relationships is related to our overall goal in helping. Do we want to make for likeness? Do we really want to remake the aged person and adult child in each other's image or in our own image for that matter? Or do we want as our goal an acceptance by each of what I have called before the *generational component*? In our changing society today generational differences are axiomatic; the aged person cannot be or act like the adult child nor can the adult child have the same feelings as the aged person. If we can accept this need for difference, our help to clients has to be related to their acceptance of each other's difference with the least amount of guilt possible.

Herbert H. Aptekar¹⁹ in his "Dynamics of Casework and Counseling" makes this point very succinctly:

"An even more complicated situation arises when there is a third person to whom the worker must be related. Here there are wheels within wheels, so to speak, and the worker must be continually attentive to the effect of his relationship with one person upon the other. An adult son or daughter, for example, may come to an agency to place an aged parent and, of course, will talk about his relationship with that

parent. The parent must be party to the placement, however, and his attitudes will be more important to its success than those of anyone else. But parent and child seldom see eye to eye on such a matter. There is conflict between them which must be resolved before the placement can ever be effected. In this type of situation, the worker becomes the focus of conflicting wills. Both persons who are at odds with each other, and who certainly have a different stake in the social service which is to be rendered by the agency, bring their conflict to the worker. He is the same worker, but what he has to offer is seen differently by the two persons directly involved. It would be possible to identify with one party to the conflict or with the other. The experienced and skilled worker who is dynamically oriented, however, will do neither. Both clients will project onto him their interests, thoughts, opinions and feelings. They bring their reactions to the service which he is able to render, and he can bring to them the real facts about placement which they need to know. He can tell them what he can do, recognizing that an important question is whether they want the service which he has to offer and whether there can be any mutuality in their wanting it. How much together or how separate must they be in this? Can either move from his original position to see some of the outlook of the other? Can each one give in to the other sufficiently so that placement will become possible? Or must each hold on to the old view? The elderly person seldom looks for profound change in his way of living. The younger person may often feel that he is being blocked by his elderly parent in his efforts to live differently. Each has a different outlook, a different goal to achieve, and the question is whether placement will enable them to achieve their respective goals."

Summary

An understanding and use of socio-cultural factors are basic aspects of the casework process. They are particularly important in work with adult children and aged parents for we deal in large measures with generational differences. Experience has demonstrated that people tend to find expression for their personality and internal needs in the culture of which they are a part and to project upon specific aspects of their environ-

ment and culture their internal conflicts. We know, too, that relationships tend to express themselves in forms which are culturally determined.

For older Jews particularly, their Jewishness is often the point at which such projections are made. This recognition imposes upon the Jewish social agency and social worker a responsibility for developing skill in working with socio-cultural factors and their varied meanings for the client. Coupled with

this, the truly skilled and helpful worker must of necessity be aware of his own socio-cultural background, his attitudes and feelings toward it, and how this impinges upon his work with his clients.

The guide lines set forth in this paper with respect to the importance of socio-cultural factors will, I hope, challenge us. It is only in this way that we shall be able to achieve the required perspective, knowledge and skill to help older persons and their families.

¹⁹ Aptekar, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.