

STUDY OF DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUP WORK PRACTICE IN AGENCIES UNDER JEWISH AUSPICES *

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Background of the Study

IN considering approaches to the fulfillment of its responsibility, the Professional Education Committee of the National Association of Jewish Center Workers has repeatedly found itself at a dead end. Its quest for educational content to prepare students for group work practice in agencies under Jewish auspices has consistently been blocked by uncertainty in distinguishing the content of such practice from that in agencies not under Jewish auspices.

Presumably, the more universal aspects of group work practice have been considered in non-sectarian schools of social work¹ and have provided the frame of

reference for study and deliberation in professional associations. Thus, the American Association of Group Workers, the National Association of Social Workers, the Conference of National Agencies and Schools of Group Work and Recreation, and the Council on Social Work Education, as well as the various precursors of these organizations, have proposed principles and curricula designed to relate the content of practice to the content of social work education for group work majors.²

Ostensibly, the primary task of the NAJCW Professional Education Committee has been to achieve a similar goal in relation to practice in agencies under

* This study was conducted by the Professional Education Committee of the National Association of Jewish Center Workers. Dr. Manuel Cynamon served as Research Consultant. The report was presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Chicago, Illinois, May 17, 1958.

¹ Of interest is the following reference in the Bulletin on the National Catholic School of Social Service: "As a Catholic educational institution the School fosters an understanding of scholastic philosophy and the Catholic religion, and the application of Catholic principles to the practice of social work." In the School's objectives, emphasis is also placed on the development of "Catholic attitudes and approaches in the practice and profession of social work." Equivalent objectives may seem applicable to

education for practice in Jewish setting but neither the level of conceptualization nor the level of agreement among practitioners in these settings are sufficiently high at this time to make such an application. This was one of the factors which led to the present study.

² For examples see minutes of meetings of these organizations as well as the following: "Professional Education for Group Work Practice," *The Group*, Vol. 9 (June, '47) No. 2, pp. 6-9; "Definition of the Function of the Group Worker," *The Group*, Vol. 11 (May, 1949) No. 3, pp. 11-12; *Content of Group Work Practice with Implications for Professional Education*, Amer. Assoc. of Group Workers, 1955 (mimeographed); *Criteria for Review of the Group Work Curriculum as Offered in Accredited Schools of Social Work*: Council on Social Work Education, December 4, 1953 (mimeographed); etc.

Jewish auspices, particularly to the extent that auspices influence (or determine) objectives in a specific religious-cultural direction. However, every attempt to arrive at statements which might be helpful to schools of social work or to groups grappling with the issue of whether a special school of social work is needed for prospective employees of Jewish group work agencies has been impeded apparently by lack of clarity about the characteristics of such agencies which distinguish them from other agencies in a manner sufficient at least to suggest special approaches, content, or facilities for social work education.

Very little comfort has been afforded by allusions to the "x" factor, the "plus" factor, and the "fourth force," although these concepts have provocatively indicated research possibilities. The minutes of past meetings of the Professional Education Committee reflect the despair of conscientious practitioners who had extraordinary conviction about their professional objectives but lacked data which would help to realize them. It is against this background that the current Professional Education Committee decided to conduct an exploratory study in this general field of endeavor.

Purpose of the Study

The objective of the Committee's study was to arrive at a series of distinguishing characteristics, acceptable to most practitioners in group work agencies under Jewish auspices, for the purpose of developing and recommending distinctive content and emphases for professional education. The Committee's aspirations were relatively low, but the implications of its efforts could be quite significant, depending on the results. Very little more was expected than directions for further research, but the results might easily suggest both content and emphases not within reach of professional schools

now in existence, or not reasonably within the purview of most schools now in existence. At the same time, the Committee neither intended nor pretended that its study would result in resolution of the problem of whether a special school of social work is a *sine qua non* for the American, and perhaps the world, Jewish community.

The Development of the Study Tool

Although the study instrument which the Committee used contained several items about which the Committee's members themselves had many doubts, and although it may seem to some purists a very crude schedule, it was not at all casually assembled. On the contrary, it went through many painstaking revisions and these revisions followed considerable scouring of the social work literature. The Committee was ever mindful of the feeling tone associated with issues related to this study, but it proceeded with the determination that, emotions and imperfections notwithstanding, the issues had to be coped with.

Fully aware of the tentative nature of its exploration, the Committee consulted a nucleus of leaders in the Jewish Community Center field long before the rough draft of a schedule was drawn. Subsequently, a pre-test was effected. Comments and suggestions were taken into account so that the study instrument could be refined as far as possible before being addressed to the study population which consisted of the entire membership of the National Association of Jewish Center Workers.

Method of the Study

To conduct this study it was assumed that the most authoritative source of information at our disposal consisted of the judgments of practitioners in the field. Therefore, we addressed the inquiry to the membership of the NAJCW. Re-

sponses were received from three hundred of the Association's five hundred members.

Respondents were asked to make judgments about characteristics which might distinguish group work agencies under Jewish auspices from agencies under other auspices. Respondents employed by agencies under Jewish auspices were also asked to indicate whether these characteristics did, in fact, distinguish *their* agencies from agencies not under Jewish auspices. Characteristics were grouped in the following categories: policies and practices, goals, sponsorship, program and staff.

In addition, a general judgment was requested of respondents concerning the need for a special school of social work for optimal training for professional practice in Jewish group work agencies. Descriptive data were also solicited which might be correlated with the responses to other questions in the schedule, for example, age, sex, training, experience, agency of employment and parental status.

Items of Predominant Agreement

By and large, there was considerable agreement among respondents as to which characteristics they felt distinguished agencies under Jewish auspices from agencies under other auspices. Predominant agreement occurred in the items relating to the goals of helping individuals to identify themselves personally as Jews; helping individuals to identify themselves with other Jewish people; promoting Jewish culture; training Jewish leadership; and providing Jewish experience. There was also predominant agreement with respect to the fact that the governing body is primarily Jewish. Respondents agreed, to an impressive extent, that the following items distinguished agencies under Jewish auspices from others: Commitment of staff to the Jewish component of

the agency's service; staff's familiarity with Jewish literature, traditions, history and culture; helping Jewish individuals to relate to non-Jews; closing on the Sabbath; and emphasis on Jewish content in program.

Negative View

On the other hand, a large majority of the respondents did not consider the practice of admitting only Jewish members as a distinguishing characteristic.

Division of Opinion

There were more even divisions of opinion about the practices of hiring only Jewish professional staff³ and encouraging members' observance of the Sabbath; and also about the goal of promoting Jewish religious practice.

Consistency and Divergence

Thus far we have been discussing what the respondents thought were characteristics which distinguished agencies under Jewish auspices from other agencies. Respondents were also asked whether the characteristics discussed actually distinguished their agencies from other agencies. In general, there was consistency between their judgments about agencies in general and their observations of practice in their agencies. However, it is interesting to note the items in which there was an appreciable difference between their judgments and their observations. These items pertained to the familiarity of staff with Jewish literature, traditions, history and culture; the agency's emphasis on Jewish content in program; and staff's commitment to the Jewish component of the agency's service—in other words, the cultural commitment and equipment of staff and the cultural content of the agency's pro-

³ A minority of forty-seven per cent of the respondents considered this a distinguishing characteristic.

gram. Thus it is possible to infer, from the responses, that although staff commitment to the Jewish component of an agency's service, and staff familiarity with Jewish literature, traditions, history, and culture are distinguishing characteristics, the hiring of only Jewish professional staff and the admitting of only Jewish members are not distinguishing characteristics.

Participants in the Study

The descriptive characteristics of the respondents can be briefly summarized: eighty-nine per cent were males; 41 per cent were between 30-40 years of age; seventy-three per cent were graduated from schools of social work; forty-eight per cent had zero to nine years of experience in social work, thirty-three per cent had ten to nineteen years of experience, fourteen per cent had twenty to twenty-nine years of experience, and four per cent had thirty years or more of experience; sixty-six per cent were members of the National Association of Social Workers; eighty-one per cent were employed in Jewish Community Centers; seventy-eight per cent were parents. Respondents were fairly well distributed throughout the United States.

Differences in Judgments Based on Descriptive Data

On the basis of cross tabulation between the descriptive data of respondents and their responses to questions pertaining to distinguishing characteristics, a few interesting differences were observed. Although only eleven per cent of the sample consisted of women, a consistently higher proportion of men than women judged as distinguishing characteristics the following items: the policy of observing Jewish dietary laws 72% to 52%; the practice of encouraging members' observance of the Sabbath 62% to 48%; and the goal of promoting Jewish reli-

gious practice 47% to 22%. Apparently there was greater sensitivity among the men than among the women to items related to religious observance.

An examination of the relation of parental status to respondents' judgments also reveals a few differences. More parents than non-parents viewed the encouragement of members' observance of the Sabbath (63% to 51%) and the goal of helping Jewish individuals to relate to non-Jews (87% to 79%) as distinguishing characteristics. On the other hand, more non-parents than parents felt that Jewish financial support was a distinguishing characteristic (86% to 75%).

Is a Special School Necessary?

One of the objectives of the study was to solicit an expression from respondents concerning the need for a special school of social work to provide for the distinguishing characteristics of agencies under Jewish auspices. Seventy-eight respondents (26%) felt that a special school was necessary. One hundred and sixty-three (54%) believed that optimal training for practice in these agencies could be effected by supplementing the curriculum in non-sectarian schools of social work. Forty-five respondents (15%) were of the opinion that the curricula of the non-sectarian schools were adequate for the purpose. An analysis of the relationship between respondents' descriptive characteristics and their answers to this question reveals that a greater proportion of the respondents who were not graduated from schools of social work, than of those who were, favored a special school 38% to 32%. Moreover, there was a tendency for individuals with greater experience to favor a special school. In addition, a greater proportion of males than females (28% to 10%) and a smaller proportion of personnel employed in

Jewish Community Centers than those employed in other settings were of this view.

In the other two categories of response to this question—namely, answers which favored supplementation and those which considered present curricula adequate—no sharp differences were manifest.

At any rate, it seems as though the

majority of the respondents felt that supplementation would provide for the training needs in the Jewish field. On the other hand, there seems to be a high degree of agreement that something needs to be done.

In this connection it is pertinent to cite the query of one of the respondents: "Are you blind, what about the Yeshiva

TABLE I

POLICIES AND PRACTICES

(Related to Distinguishing Characteristics of Group Work Practices in Agencies Under Jewish Auspices)

1. Closing on Sabbath—You Think:			GOALS		
Yes	256	85%	6. Goal of Helping Individual to Identify Personally as Jews—You Think:		
No	34	12	Yes	283	95%
NR	10	3	No	7	2
Agency Practice:			NR	10	3
Yes	247	82%	Agency Practice:		
No	35	12	Yes	266	89%
NR	18	6	No	18	6
2. Hiring only Jewish Professional Staff—You Think:			NR	16	5
Yes	140	47%	7. Helping Jewish Individuals to Relate To Non-Jews—You Think:		
No	149	50	Yes	258	86%
NR	11	3	No	31	10
Agency Practice:			NR	11	4
Yes	129	43%	Agency Practice:		
No	153	51	Yes	235	78%
NR	18	6	No	47	16
3. Admitting only Jewish Members—You Think:			NR	18	6
Yes	62	21%	8. Helping Individuals to Identify with Other Jewish People—You Think:		
No	224	75	Yes	283	95%
NR	14	4	No	7	2
Agency Practice:			NR	10	3
Yes	34	11%	Agency Practice:		
No	240	80	Yes	271	90%
NR	26	9	No	12	4
4. Observing Jewish Dietary Laws—You Think:			NR	17	6
Yes	209	70%	9. The Goal of Jewish Survival—You Think:		
No	81	27	Yes	252	84%
NR	10	3	No	32	11
Agency Practice:			NR	16	5
Yes	206	69%	Agency Practice:		
No	77	26	Yes	235	78%
NR	17	5	No	42	14
5. Encouraging Members Observing of Sabbath—You Think:			NR	23	8
Yes	183	61%			
No	103	34			
NR	14	5			
Agency Practice:					
Yes	135	45%			
No	143	48			
NR	22	7			

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University School of Social Work?" Although the Yeshiva School was not specifically referred to in the questionnaire, its status in relation to the subject matter of this study merits considerable attention.

Implications

This study has opened a number of vistas for further exploration and not the least of these is the definition and clarification of those characteristics which distinguish agencies under Jewish auspices from other agencies, and analysis of the training needs which they

suggest. If these characteristics can be intensively probed and examined, they might well offer the clue to curriculum content which deserves emphasis in the educational program for prospective practitioners in Jewish agencies. It may not be necessary to establish a special school for this purpose, but it does seem necessary to make some provision either in existing schools or in collateral programs, as well as in agency in-service training programs, so that the special purposes of Jewish agencies may be more effectively served.

TABLE II
CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS

1. Sex					
Male	268	89%	6. Have You Supervised Students of Graduate Schools of Social Work?		
Female	32	11%	Yes	164	55%
			No	136	45
2. Graduation from School of Social Work?			7. Ever Worked for Full Year in Non-Sectarian Agency?		
Yes	220	73%	Yes	127	42%
No	80	27%	No	172	58
3. No. of Years Experience in Social Work			NR	1	..
2 or less	20		8. Are You a Parent?		
3-5	58		Yes	234	78%
6-9	67		No	66	22
Summary 0-9 yrs.		48%	9. Region (Return postmark of Quest.)		
10-14	58		New England	41	14%
15-19	40		Metropolitan, N. Y.	63	21
Summary 10-19 yrs.		33%	New York State and Canada	25	8
20-29	42	14%	New Jersey	29	10
30 or over	11	4%	Mid-Atlantic	15	5
NR	4	1%	Southern	28	9
4. Member of NASW			East Central	30	10
Yes	197	66%	West Central	22	7
No	101	33	Western	33	11
NR	2	1	NR	14	5
5. In What Type of Agency Employed?				300	100%
JCC	242	81%			
Settlement	2	1			
Camp	11	3			
School of Social Work	2	1			
Federation or Council	13	4			
National Youth Serving	17	6			
Other	12	4			
NR	1	0			