

# SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: ALIVE AND WELL IN THE JCC

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*A study of JCC professionals reveals congruence between social work and JCC practice. Social workers employed by JCCs are committed to Jewish practices and principles and to the Jewish function of the agency, and they possess knowledge and skills that are very much in tune with the social service mission of the JCC. Some of the anti-social work sentiment that has dominated the literature was based on supposition, rather than actual experience.*

At one time, a social work degree was the most prevalent academic credential and the one most accepted as providing the skills necessary to carry out the mission of the Jewish Community Center (JCC). Changes that have taken place within the JCC movement have caused many in the field to question whether social workers continue to be the most effective professionals for JCC practice, especially given the considerable focus placed on Jewish identity building (Berger, 1966; Bubis, 1980; Fein, 1999; Reisman, 1981; Schaffer, 1978). In recent years there has been a hiatus on the debate within the literature about the role of social workers in JCCs. Left to speculation then are the questions of how the debate was resolved and where social workers now fit within the JCC movement.

This article reports on an empirical study that investigated the extent of compatibility between social work practice and the JCC mission. The findings suggest that some of the anti-social work sentiment that has dominated the literature is based on supposition rather than actual experience. These findings and the research protocol on which they are based may have implications for the study of social work in other host settings.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Over 150 years ago, the antecedents of what was to become the JCC began to take form. Jewish social clubs, literary societies, fraternal orders, and other "liberal interpretations" of Judaism began to attract an in-

creasing number of Jews (Rabinowitz, 1948).

By the end of the 19th century, many of these organizations had merged or evolved into associations of Jews called Young Men's Hebrew Associations (YMHA). The first association to use this name was established in Baltimore in 1854 (Rabinowitz, 1948). Those employed and those who volunteered performed duties that directly matched their job titles. For example, librarians, physical education instructors, and teachers were hired to carry out their respective responsibilities. The early JCCs were not established as social welfare institutions and therefore did not consider retaining social service personnel.

The Eastern European emigration created entirely new issues for the American Jewish community. The 250,000 Jews living in the United States in 1880 primarily consisted of middle- and upper-class Central and Western Europeans. Between 1881 and 1924, close to three million immigrants, primarily from religious towns (shtetls) of Eastern Europe, came to the United States as a result of economic, political, religious, and physical persecution (Waxman, 1983). This massive immigration created an array of socioeconomic issues for the American Jewish community and led the JCCs to adopt and incorporate a social welfare mission and to hire social welfare personnel. At the same time, social work was emerging as a distinct professional field.

The original staff of the YMHAs, with

their cultural, educational, social, and recreational backgrounds, were very different from the social service staff and volunteers who were involved in refugee service provision. This diverse staff became enjoined through consolidation and collaboration toward a goal of meeting all needs under one roof. This amalgam of staff constituted the beginnings of the social work presence in JCCs.

Socioeconomic changes brought about by Eastern European immigration created an ongoing dilemma for the JCC concerning its broad sectarian identity versus a social welfare identity. Should its mission, purposes, and goals be defined from a social work perspective, or ought the JCC focus on its Jewish function using social workers to carry out its mission? Central and Western European immigrants assumed that the new immigrants would want to be Americanized just as they had and so take advantage of all that full acculturation offered. An elaborate system of programs was thus put in place to facilitate the transformation of the new arrivals' religious/ethnic identification into one more appropriate to America. Relevant programs focused on educational and training mechanisms "to transform the linguistic, cultural and behavioral outlooks....Every effort was made to intensify efforts to provide immigrants and their children with new American identities" (Janowsky, 1974, p. 18).

However, many new immigrants rebelled against Americanization shortly after their arrival, expressing resentment about the way that they had been treated (Janowsky, 1974). They felt that their predecessors were interested not in their Americanization but rather in their de-Judaization, which did not match their preferences and beliefs. In order to meet these articulated needs of the new immigrants, JCC leadership argued that staff needed to be committed to and understand Jewish history, life, beliefs, practices, culture, and literature (Altman, 1988; Dubin, 1983; Gold & Pins, 1962; Greenfield, 1982). The education that social work training schools were providing to those destined for

the JCC field was therefore inadequate because it could not provide that knowledge.

Berger (1966) used his position as a leader in the Jewish community to create saliency out of this criticism. He called for the removal of social workers, asserting that as a result of professional ineptitude, the profession of social work has had a tragic effect on Jewish identity. He asserted that the Jewish center field has been "narcotized" by social work concepts. Schaffer (1978) similarly questioned whether social work skills were really the most effective to carry out the new emphasis on Jewish identity. Bubis (1980) concurred, stating: "It is not the option of Jewish social workers, paid with Jewish dollars for work in Jewish agencies, to be parties to the destruction of Jewish life" (p. 234). He declared that if a client makes a choice that is not consistent with maintaining a Jewish life, the worker ought to deny help to that client. These statements reflect the move to make the preservation of Jewish identity and survival the "only valid business of the JCC" (Carp, 1975, p. 46), thus dispensing with its social welfare function.

Those who wrote about the disparity between social work function and the JCC mission were divided into two camps. One group of writers argued for the need for social workers, citing ongoing social service needs, the necessity of a staff with group work skills, increasing psychosocial stress within the Jewish community, and other exigencies that could best be met by social workers (Altman, 1988; Blumenthal, 1948; Carp, 1975; Dubin, 1983; Feldstein, 1980; Ginsberg & Miller, 1961; Jick, 1999; Solender, 1957). A second group wrote about the need to replace social workers with other professionals who could best provide for Jewish survival, education, and other Jewish-based needs (Berger, 1966; Bubis, 1980; Fein, 1999; Reisman, 1981; Schaffer, 1978).

The literature did succeed in inspiring an ongoing debate, which can be seen in the back-and-forth discussions, polemical at times, that appeared in issue after issue in the *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*. How-

ever, in many respects, the conclusions reached were based on nothing more than conjecture, personal opinion, and interpretation of trends. Two key questions remain: (1) To what extent do social workers have skills appropriate to fulfill Jewish mission-based goals of JCCs? and (2) Are other professionals, such as Jewish educators, those with masters degrees in Jewish communal service, or others with advanced Jewish knowledge, better suited to fulfill these goals?

## **EMPIRICAL STUDY OF JCCS AND SOCIAL WORK**

### **Methodology**

Given the polemic nature of the debate about the compatibility between social work and JCC work, an empirical study of JCC work and social work using survey research was conducted. The survey was designed specifically for this study and pretested to establish its reliability and validity. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they fulfilled particular responsibilities within the JCC. Indices were developed that measured the extent to which JCC program staff (1) perceive that Jewish literacy is important for their work at the JCC, (2) experience role conflict between their Jewish and social work roles, and (3) use Jewish-based skills, values, and knowledge in their work.

### **Sample and Setting**

The Jewish Community Center Association (JCCA) lists just over 200 JCCs and branches within the United States and Canada. The survey was sent to practitioners at 191 JCCs; personnel of Canadian JCCs and JCC camps were not included. The sample was drawn from a population comprised of MSW and non-MSW personnel who worked within six departments of the JCC: children, teenagers, college, singles, older adults, and camping. Other departments of the JCC do not generally use social work staff and therefore were not included. Excluded were these departments: physical education, Jewish

education, early childhood and cultural arts. The focus of this study was on full-time program and line staff; executive staff and teachers were not included.

The survey was sent to 600 practitioners who work in JCCs throughout the United States; 178 surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 30 percent.

### **Data Analysis**

A profile of the relevant characteristics of the respondent group was obtained through a descriptive analysis, including means, standard deviations, and the range of scores for all variables. The strength of the relationship between the variables was measured through the use of such statistical procedures as T-tests, one-way ANOVA, chi square, and Pearson's and Spearman correlations. Composite indices were developed for some of the variables. A Cronbach's alpha was conducted to assess the reliability of the scales; the internal consistency of each of the measures was above .70. A two-tailed *p* value test of .05 or less was used to determine significance.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Demographics**

The sample population was disproportionately female (nearly 80%), a finding consistent with the social work profession overall (Gibelman et al., 1977). The mean age of respondents was 39.5, with the youngest respondent at 22 years old and the oldest at 69. The majority of the respondents were married (62.4%). The number of children revealed two modal patterns: zero children for 38.8 percent of the sample and two children for 36.5%. JCC personnel are thus relatively youthful, with the vast majority under 50 years of age.

### **Jewish-Related Characteristics**

The vast majority of the respondents (95%) had some type of Jewish education. Over 70 percent had gone to Hebrew or

Jewish Sunday School, and 23 percent had an extensive Jewish education (Table 1). Almost 70 percent belonged to a synagogue. Eighty three (83%) percent of the synagogue members were affiliated with either a Conservative or Reform synagogue. Just over half of the respondents strongly agreed that, due to the nature of their position at the JCC, they were a Jewish role model.

### Employment Characteristics

Over half of the respondents were employed by a JCC in a professional capacity for 6 years or less. Thirty-eight percent of respondents for this study worked in the largest JCCs (in metropolitan centers) (Table 2).

Respondents were asked to report on the population with which they worked. Just over one-third worked with older adults.

Table 1. *Religious Characteristics of the Sample*

|                                                          | (N) | (%)  |
|----------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Respondent Considers Him/<br>Herself a Jewish Role Model |     |      |
| Strongly agree                                           | 91  | 52.3 |
| Agree                                                    | 60  | 34.5 |
| Disagree                                                 | 18  | 10.1 |
| Strongly disagree                                        | 5   | 2.9  |
| Type of Jewish Education                                 |     |      |
| Sunday School                                            | 116 | 65.2 |
| Hebrew School                                            | 109 | 61.2 |
| Yeshivah                                                 | 16  | 9    |
| College major in Jewish<br>education                     | 12  | 6.7  |
| College courses in Jewish<br>studies                     | 68  | 38.2 |
| Rabbinical school                                        | 13  | 7.3  |
| Jewish studies outside the<br>university                 | 43  | 24.2 |
| Type of Synagogue Attended                               |     |      |
| Orthodox                                                 | 13  | 10   |
| Conservative                                             | 58  | 45   |
| Reform                                                   | 49  | 38   |
| Reconstructionist                                        | 4   | 3.1  |
| Non-affiliated                                           | 5   | 3.9  |

Table 2. *Work-Related Variables*

|                                           | (N) | (%)  |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| Number of Years Employed<br>by a JCC      |     |      |
| 1-3                                       | 63  | 35.4 |
| 4-6                                       | 30  | 16.9 |
| 7-9                                       | 24  | 13.5 |
| 10-12                                     | 16  | 9    |
| 13-15                                     | 17  | 9.5  |
| 16-20                                     | 15  | 8.4  |
| 21-25                                     | 8   | 4.5  |
| 26-30                                     | 3   | 1.7  |
| 31+                                       | 2   | 1.1  |
| Size of JCC                               |     |      |
| Metropolitan                              | 68  | 38.1 |
| Large                                     | 40  | 22.5 |
| Large intermediate                        | 43  | 24.2 |
| Intermediate                              | 27  | 15.2 |
| Population with which<br>Respondent Works |     |      |
| Adults                                    | 46  | 25.8 |
| Camp                                      | 56  | 31.5 |
| Grade-school children                     | 50  | 28.2 |
| Singles                                   | 19  | 10.7 |
| Teens                                     | 51  | 28.7 |
| Older adults                              | 60  | 33.7 |
| Other populations                         | 39  | 21.9 |

Some of the respondents worked with more than one population, which explains why the total number exceeds 100 percent.

### Education

A very high percentage (96.6%) of the respondents had a bachelor's degree. Nearly two-thirds (65.7%) had a master's degree, and over one-quarter (27.6%) had received their degree after 1990. A large number of professionals hold social work credentials, indicating a very strong social work presence in JCCs. Over 60 percent of those with masters degrees had an MSW; 54.2 percent had the MSW as their sole post-baccalaureate degree, and for 5.9 percent the MSW was a joint MSW/Jewish communal service de-

gree. The second largest category was the master's degree in psychology or counseling (11.9% and 13.6%, respectively). Only five respondents had Jewish communal service degrees. The remaining advanced degrees were distributed over a wide variety of fields.

### **Professional-Related Factors**

Two-thirds of the sample reported that the agency offered at least some opportunities for continuing Jewish education. Approximately three-quarters participated in these opportunities when offered.

### **DISCUSSION**

The ongoing exchange within the literature about the utility of employing social workers within JCCs tended, in general, to portray a dismal future. In contrast, the findings of this study indicate that social workers are committed to Jewish practices and principles and to the Jewish function of the agency. Further, they are employed in substantial numbers and ratios in JCCs throughout the United States.

In general, JCC workers are committed to the Jewish function of the agency. Two key findings of this study support this conclusion. The first concerns perceptions about the importance of Jewish literacy for work in the JCC. Alone, this finding merely suggests that workers perceive that a familiarity with key phrases, ideas, concepts, texts, and moments in Jewish experience is important, but gives no indication that these perceptions are reflected in practice. The second finding, however, which examined the extent to which workers use Jewish practice principles, suggests that perceptions about the importance of Jewish literacy are manifest in the way social workers practice within the JCC. This is a significant finding, given that a principal complaint found in the literature about social workers in JCCs was their perceived indifference to the Jewish component of practice. If such earlier observations about the incompatibility between social work practice and commitment to and use of Jewish principles

were accurate, they no longer appear to be descriptive of the current reality within JCCs, at least from the perception of social work employees. Note that JCC administrators may hold a different view, though that would raise the question of why they continue to hire social workers.

As noted earlier, there is a significant body of literature that echoes the view that social workers should be replaced by other professionals who could best provide for Jewish survival-based needs. This sentiment was manifest in questioning how "non-ideological" social workers could endeavor to be "ideologically directive," which according to Bubis (1980), Reisman (1981), and others, had become an expectation of the field. The findings of this study, however, suggest that JCC workers today seem to be able to incorporate both the Jewish-based orientation of the JCC and social work knowledge, values, and skills into a framework for practice.

An important social work maxim is to "start where the client is" (Mattaini et al., 1998, p. 90). In essence, JCC constituents come to an agency under Jewish auspices with an expectation that the staff will have Jewish literacy. This agency function is taken seriously by social workers, given that a major goal of practice is to meet clients' needs. Social workers seem to perceive the importance of Jewish literacy, perhaps because it is seen as an important component of their professional social work role within the JCC. Further, social workers who apply for positions within the JCC typically know the JCC philosophy and mission, perhaps suggesting a self-selecting match between employee and employer.

Garland (1995) explains that in order for church social workers to work effectively in their setting, they need to understand bible, theology, and church values. She states, "These distinctive characteristics of the church context are just as important for effective social work practice as is understanding the culture, history, and current life experiences of an ethnic family that requests family services" (p. 479). With regard to the

Jewish Community Center, the JCCA provides an overview of the scope of Jewish knowledge necessary to achieve Jewish literacy. Their publication, *Guide to Jewish Knowledge for the Center Professional* (1987), suggests key phrases, ideas, concepts, texts, and moments in Jewish experience that JCC workers need to know. Understanding this body of Jewish knowledge is an important component of social work practice in JCCs.

It is also possible that the emphasis over the past ten years on cultural competence in practice has seen fruition (Weaver, 1999). The recent attention to this area of practice has resulted in new sensitivities to the culture, religion, and ethnicity of clients. Devore and Schlesinger (1999) state, "Understanding and knowledge of the history, customs, and beliefs of different ethnic groups are required for effective practice, both at the individual and the institutional level" (p. 144). This mandate is applicable to all practice settings, but has special significance within the sectarian agency.

It is also possible that attention to the Jewish "ethnic reality" has become an important component of social work practice in JCCs. Heilman and Witztum (1997) assert that therapists must be sensitive to the ethnic, cultural, and religious values of clients even "when this seems to oppose commonly accepted therapeutic approaches" (p. 522). The findings from this study are consistent with this viewpoint and seem to repudiate criticisms in the literature of ideological incompatibility.

### **Perception of Role Conflict**

Role conflict was not found to be significant for JCC workers. Perceptions about the need for Jewish literacy and the extent to which workers integrate Jewish components into practice were both related significantly to the use of social work knowledge, skills, and values. This may infer a good fit between social work and Jewish practice, diminishing the likelihood that role conflict would be manifest. If there are conflicts, they are evidently not of sufficient import to affect practice adversely; the conflicts, then,

are resolved in some form without overt negative repercussions. Again, the self-selecting factor in terms of employment setting may obviate some of the potential role conflicts.

It is also possible that roles may have become defined more clearly. For example, several JCCs have been hiring rabbis and Jewish educators to assist in Jewish education roles. These roles, formerly assigned to social workers, are now being handled by others. In effect, these new boundaries of professional domain limit the frequency of value conflicts. The lack of role conflict may be due, in part, to the attention given to delineating roles clearly.

### **Comparison between Social Workers and Non-Social Workers**

Social workers and non-social workers are typically employed by JCCs in similar capacities. In one JCC, for example, the teen director may be a social worker, whereas in another JCC the teen director may be a college student. It was hypothesized that differences in education would result in different patterns of practice. In fact, a significant difference was found between social workers and non-social workers in their perceptions regarding the importance of Jewish literacy; only social workers perceive that Jewish literacy is of value. However, both social workers and non-social workers carry out Jewish-based practice roles.

The literature is clear about the need for Jewish literacy, with the majority of JCC scholars highlighting the importance for workers of having a well-defined Jewish knowledge base and the expertise to engage constituents in significant Jewish experiences. Some espouse the masters in Jewish communal service as the most appropriate degree for accomplishing these goals. Despite the emphasis placed on the Jewish communal service degree, findings reveal that only 3 percent of JCC workers within the departments studied have a masters degree in Jewish Communal Service, with an additional 1.5 percent holding a joint degree in Jewish communal service and social work.

In contrast, 40 percent of JCC professionals who work in the six departments included in this study have either an MSW or a joint social work degree. Thus, despite the "meaningful difference" that the literature purports to exist between graduates of programs in Jewish communal service (Fein, 1999; Jick, 1999; Shevitz, 1999), relatively few JCC staff members hold a masters in Jewish communal service.

### IMPLICATIONS

This study found that MSWs perceive Jewish literacy as important. As a result, it may be important to consider initiating in-service training programs within JCCs to fulfill Jewish mission-based goals. As established earlier, social workers, by the nature of their professional role, are interested in incorporating the agency's mission into practice.

JCC work embraces Jewish-based experiences. As a result, for social workers, competent practice involves the incorporation of the agency's Jewish mission. Contrary to some of the literature on social work in JCCs, social workers are positioned, because of their education and knowledge, to fulfill this role. A heightened sensitivity about diversity, commitment to a person-in-environment theoretical framework, and knowledge of ethnic-sensitive practice are some of the unique perspectives and skills that social workers offer to sectarian institutions.

Continuing education is one vehicle used to maintain and enhance competence. The widely accepted value placed on continuing education causes it to be seen as a lifelong commitment (Gibelman et al., 1997). For the JCC social worker, this mandate provides the impetus for MSWs to become Jewishly literate and immersing themselves in Jewish culture, religious practices, and history. Continuing education opportunities are now available for many JCC workers. Conferences often involve Jewish education components, JCCs typically offer Jewish learning classes for its staff, and many JCCs have Jewish educators or rabbis on staff who en-

gage JCC workers in Jewish sensitization experiences and Jewish learning opportunities.

The JCC is an agency that serves Jews from all walks of life. The unique competencies included in social work education, as described above, enable the MSW practitioner to design and facilitate strategies for working with a Jewishly diverse constituency. In addition, this knowledge gives social workers an advantage over other workers in understanding the complexities of successfully meeting the needs of all Jews, regardless of background.

The results of this study suggest that social workers possess knowledge and skills that are very much in tune with the social service mission of the JCC. Social workers are uniquely positioned to provide services that are focused on both the individual and group while concomitantly giving attention to social welfare concerns, social change, and social justice. As a result, social workers are genuinely interested in and attentive to these components of the agency's mission.

The findings reveal that 30% of the JCC professionals who responded to the survey do not hold professional credentials at the master's level. In a recent study of all JCC professional and executive staff, Schor and Cohen (2001) found that between 1987 and 2001 the number of JCC professionals with any type of masters or graduate degree shrank from 56 to 42 percent. In addition, they found that the number of those without a BA rose from 2 to 11 percent. The findings from the Schor and Cohen study, as well as those from this study, are consistent with claims in the literature that many people in the field lack the requisite knowledge and skills to perform the jobs at levels expected of them. Clarity regarding the skills needed for JCC practice can be gleaned from JCCA's publication, *Standards for JCC Practice* (JCCA, 2000). The findings indicate that MSWs, to a greater extent than their non-MSW counterparts, carry out the responsibilities listed in the *Standards for JCC Practice* and that non-MSWs may not be providing the same level of service and prac-

tice proficiency as MSWs. Future research is needed to elucidate how differences in practice influence and affect the provision of service.

The findings of this study suggest that there may be practical, as well as ideological advantages to hiring social workers. The findings support the cliché, "You get what you pay for." Untrained workers may lack the knowledge and skills that have been identified as being standard practice principles. As a result, JCCs may need to consider the implications of hiring non-credential workers, both in terms of the goal of maintaining professional and Jewish-based standards, as well as safeguarding constituents against "bad" practice.

### CONCLUSION

Although the mission of the JCC is broader than its original social service function, it continues to maintain goals of enhancing the individual's growth both as a Jew and as a total personality (Boeko, 1997). The center's social service function continues to stem from its concern for individual, family, and community interaction. This function translates into providing opportunities for enhancing mental and physical health, offering rehabilitation services, offering day care and respite services, scholarships for the needy, opportunities for volunteerism, socialization groups, and educational opportunities. As long as these goals continue to be a fundamental component of agency function, there will be a continued need to maintain a social work presence in the agency.

Philosophical preferences and perceptions found within the literature over the years have professed a diminution of the social work role in JCCs. The findings of this study of JCC professional staff suggest that those perceptions may have reflected what commentators think "ought to be" based on their own frame of reference, not necessarily on the reality. The results are instructive in at least partially negating much of the earlier and continued dialogue about the role of social work in JCCs.

Social workers in JCCs possess two distinctly important competencies that JCCs seek in their workers: social service and a commitment to Jewish practices and principles. These findings, it is hoped, will be noted by JCC management in their ongoing examination of hiring patterns and personnel needs.

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