

The Unique Jewish Family Agency

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The rationale for the Jewish family agency has been a recurrent issue in American Jewish social welfare. Over the years, many articles have discussed the question from various perspectives. Two themes, however, have been of continuous interest: first, is there a special content in Jewish casework which distinguishes it from casework in general; second, what is the special contribution of the Jewish family agency to the Jewish community?

The first question concerning the distinguishing characteristics of Jewish casework has been discussed through case illustrations which demonstrate the unique nature of Jewish practice.^{1, 6, 8, 11} More recent approaches, spurred by the new legitimacy of ethnic assertiveness, have suggested that the primary commitment of the agency is to Jewish purpose rather than to clinical method. It is urged that the agency move beyond exclusive casework practice modalities in order to make a greater contribution to Jewish survival.^{3, 7, 15, 19}

Other explorations of the special contribution of the Jewish family agency to Jewish survival have emphasized its communal maintenance functions.^{4, 13, 18} Similarly, Glick⁵ has argued that, for millenia, structures facilitating mutual aid among Jews have provided a crucial support for Jewish survival in the Diaspora. Consequently, one distinctive contribution of the Jewish family agency to the Jewish community lies in its unique responsiveness to special Jewish social service

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needs.^{4, 9, 12, 17} The agency serves client groups who would be served inadequately or not at all by public and non-sectarian agencies: New Americans,⁵ youthful prospective olim,¹⁶ and others. Thus, current discussion appears to emphasize the uniqueness of the Jewish family agency as an institution; the literature suggests that it will continue to exist not only because of its communal maintenance functions, but also because it meets unique service needs of special client populations.

Since much of the literature is theoretical rather than empirical, this study examines the actual nature of the Jewish content in family agency practice. The exploration is guided by the questions identified above: (1) is there a special content in Jewish casework which distinguishes it from casework in general; (2) what is the special contribution of the Jewish family agency to the Jewish community?

Methodology

This exploratory study was designed with a view toward clarifying concepts and establishing priorities for practice.¹⁴ The agency chosen for the study is the Jewish Family Service of Philadelphia.* Three branches of the agency participated in the study: the Northeast, Main Line, and Personal Aid Bureau. The Northeast and Main Line branches serve a general caseload of voluntary clients under the age of sixty-two. By contrast, the Personal Aid Bureau (PAB) serves law offenders; these are clients who are either referred by the court or contacted through agency outreach.

A random sample of forty-nine cases was drawn from the three JFS Philadelphia

branches from all cases which were active during April-May, 1975. Thirty-four of these were from the general caseload; fifteen were from the Personal Aid Bureau. In addition, group interviews were conducted with the social workers at the three participating branches to determine what part, in the workers' estimation, issues of Jewish identity play in the casework process.

A limitation of the data should be noted in that the case records reflect the caseworkers' perception of Jewish content. The reader should keep this in mind as the findings are discussed.

Presentation of Findings

Jewishness is a vital part of the casework process in this study of casework practice. While less prevalent on a quantitative level in the sample under study, the substantive or qualitative content deserves special attention in the field. Of special interest are the differing needs of the two populations, the general caseload and the P.A.B. clients.

There was a sharp differentiation between the general caseload and the P.A.B. clients: of the thirty-four cases in the regular client caseload (Main Line and Northeast) only six (18%) were found to contain some Jewish issue in contrast to eight of fifteen P.A.B. cases (53%). This finding is statistically significant,¹ indicating that the same distribution could be expected in the total client population and that Jewish-related content would appear with greater frequency in this special P.A.B. group.

The higher incidence of Jewish content in the P.A.B. caseload can be attributed to the manner in which the P.A.B. cases were opened: all the clients in this group were contacted through outreach by workers acting on court referrals. Client and agency Jewishness were always mentioned by the worker at first contact as the reason for outreach. Consequently, the disproportion of Jewish content in this caseload consisted, in part, of client reactions to the outreach effort. Use of Jewish identity for relationship-testing invariably ceased after the first two or three case

contacts.

In the general caseload the Jewish content was primarily contextual, an aspect of relationship-testing in the early phases of the casework process. A client often prefaced a remark in an early interview with, "You're Jewish, so you'll understand this," or a similar statement. Here Jewish identity was used as an attempted shortcut to establishing rapport with the worker, rather than being directly linked to the presenting or clinical problem. Only in 12% of the general caseload was the Jewish content related directly to the presenting problem in the case or to the worker's intervention. This is consistent with the findings of a study of a Black agency where the ethnic identity of the setting was critical at the point of contact, rather than in the ongoing counseling process.¹

Even in this limited sample it is interesting to examine the aspects of Jewish content which were identified in all fourteen cases. These fell into three content areas: (1) problem related, (2) population related, (3) Jewish technical information.

Clinical Problem Content

When the content was clinical or problem-related, the Jewish dimension was one part of a broader pathology; however, a knowledge of and sensitivity to the Jewish component was a critical professional contribution. For example, Jewish issues were used to express conflict in troubled marriages. One kind of marital conflict relating to Jewish identity presented itself when spouses were committed to different persuasions within Judaism. This was most common in couples where one partner was of Orthodox and the other of Reform or secular Jewish background. Conflict in these marriages was often rooted in guilt of one or both partners over disloyalty to parents.

Mr. T. had been raised in an Orthodox Jewish home; therefore his involvement with a gentile woman was viewed by his parents with disfavor. But the involvement deepened, the woman agreed to convert to Judaism, and

the pair became engaged. Mr. T.'s parents accepted the engagement, but remained dissatisfied because their son's fiancée was converted by a Reform rabbi, and the couple's wedding was held in a Reform temple. The T.'s were married for about five years, during which time they had held membership in a Reform temple, when Mr. T.'s father died. The death was sudden and untimely, and upset Mr. T. greatly. Following his father's death, Mr. T. reverted to Orthodox practices, visiting an Orthodox synagogue daily to recite *Kaddish*. The long hours demanded by Mr. T.'s job meant that he usually had little time to spend with his wife. Reciting *Kaddish* daily at a synagogue some distance from their house further reduced this time. Mrs. T. began to express feelings of having been abandoned by her husband. As Reform Jew of gentile background, she viewed the Orthodox mourning regimen as unreasonable and excessive. The conflict became serious, and eventually led the couple to seek counseling.

It was Mr. T. who initiated contact with Jewish Family Service. Early in the case contact, it became apparent to the worker that Mr. T. had brought a hidden agenda. Because this was a Jewish agency, Mr. T. expected the worker to support his mourning practices, and to convince his wife that he was acting in the proper way. Several times in case interviews he appealed to the worker by saying, "You're Jewish, you know what you're supposed to do."

Mr. T. was torn between conflicting loyalties to his wife and father. Treatment necessitated a defocusing of the Jewish issues, and a refocusing on problems of intergenerational loyalty.

Among intermarried couples, conflict was often precipitated when one or the other spouse sought to assert his ethnic-religious identity more strongly. For instance, one husband sought counseling after leaving his non-Jewish wife because she had embraced a "Jesus Freak" group. An intermarried couple in counseling were at odds because the Jewish wife would not share her husband's involvement in Transcendental Meditation. In such

cases, ethnic-religious conflict was one aspect of broader marital dysfunction.

Jewish issues were also involved in cases where the presenting problem was adolescent rebellion. Rejection of Jewish identity was used here to express adolescent rejection of parental values. Typically, a teenager, often one who had been in earlier years an excellent student in Hebrew school, would confound and worry his/her parents by joining a "bad crowd," composed entirely of non-Jews. The teenager would refuse to take part in any Jewish activities. Extreme hostility toward Judaism may express deep-seated adolescent alienation.

Linda was a teenage girl living in Northeast Philadelphia, a white middle-class area with a sizable Jewish population. Her family first experienced problems with her when she became involved with a "bad crowd," all non-Jewish, at her high school. The case record notes that Linda began to associate only with non-Jews, and to express open hostility toward the Jewish teenagers at school. Her involvement with this crowd led her to take part in several robberies, and when apprehended she was brought to the Philadelphia Youth Study Center, a juvenile correctional facility. It was at the Youth Study Center that JFS reached out to establish contact with Linda.

Linda was transferred from the Youth Study Center to a correctional school outside Philadelphia. At first she appeared to have made a good adjustment, and got along well with other students at the correctional school. But after a term, she complained that most of the students she had known had been discharged from the school, and that a new group, predominantly black, had replaced them. Linda complained bitterly about anti-Semitic taunts from the black students. These turned to threats, she said, when the U.N. passed its resolution equating Zionism with racism.

The JFS caseworker became concerned over Linda's complaints, and set out to investigate them. She found after a thorough check that Linda's reports of anti-Semitic hostility at the school were largely fabricated. Linda later admitted, and her mother con-

firmed, that much of the hostility she had experienced she had provoked herself.

In this case, Jewish identity is related to expression of pathology. Linda's rejection of Jewish friends and hostility toward Jewish peers is one aspect of her early anti-social behavior. In her term at the correctional school, Linda once more used her Jewish identity as a vehicle for expressing pathology.

Jewish issues also arose in the casework process as a vehicle for expressing problems of individual adjustment. A small group of JFS clients, plagued by severe feelings of rejection and personal inadequacy, returned to the agency repeatedly with requests for concrete help and for counseling. Clients with problems of individual adjustment may put part or all the blame on their Jewishness. Anti-Semitism is blamed for feelings of isolation or for the problems of children in school. Such blame of anti-Semitism is sometimes reality-based, but generally not, in the opinion of the workers polled. A disturbed client may seek to enlist Jewish values or Jewish authority as a support for pathology, as in the following case illustration.

This case involved Mrs. J. and her daughter Madelaine, age fourteen.

Mrs. J. is described in the record as extremely hostile and a borderline schizophrenic. She had been divorced when Madelaine was a baby, and never remarried. The worker notes that Mrs. J. and Madelaine had a "hostile-dependent" relationship.

Mrs. J. requested counseling for Madelaine because she complained that her daughter had become "disobedient and lying" toward her. She asked that the social worker "teach Madelaine respect" for her elders. The social worker began individual counseling with Madelaine, but soon concluded that the major problem lay in the relationship between mother and daughter, and related largely to Mrs. J.'s refusal to allow Madelaine to lead her own life. The worker communicated this to Mrs. J., explaining that she could only help if both were willing to work toward change. Mrs. J. became furious at this, and accused the worker of siding with Madelaine. She was especially shocked that

this could happen at a Jewish agency, she said, in view of the strong Jewish value of obedience to one's parents.

Mrs. J. terminated treatment at JFS. The agency later received a call concerning Mrs. J. and Madelaine from a local Hasidic rabbi. The rabbi informed the agency that Mrs. J. had brought Madelaine to him with the request that he teach her Jewish values of respect for one's parents. He added that counseling was not his area of expertise, that he was doing his best, but would like some professional help from JFS, and so was planning to refer Mrs. J. and her daughter there. The referral was never completed.

In this case, Mrs. J. sought to use Jewish values concerning filial duty as a support for her own efforts at pathological control over her daughter. The worker's refusal of support infuriated Mrs. J., who then accused the agency of not being true to Jewish values. The client's distorted sense of Jewish values concerning the family served as a defense against acknowledgment of her own responsibility for family problems.

The Jewish content found to arise in casework with marital, adolescent, and individual problems was negative in nature. In most cases the content involved rejection of Jewish identity or a conflict over Jewish beliefs and practices. In very rare instances were Jewish values used by the worker to reach a positive resolution of a presenting case problem. For instance, the Yom Kippur liturgy was utilized in one case to relieve a woman of guilt over a sexual encounter she had had years before. Such direct use of Jewish sources for therapeutic purposes appeared unusual, however. No specific therapeutic value for Jewish content or identity was found, beyond the general comfort and support felt by many clients simply by being in a Jewish community agency.

Population Content

A second important dimension of the Jewish content identified in casework practice related to the needs of specific client populations. In two of the eight PAB cases showing Jewish

content, the clients were Black Jews. A fair volume of discussion of Jewish identity took place in these cases. The discussion was not specifically problem-related, but simply a result of the unusual nature of this client population.

The Black Jewish clients in the PAB cases were anxious to identify openly as Jews, and to discuss the problems of affirmative Black Jews living in inner-city ghetto areas. Worker intervention in these cases was divided between counseling and brokerage of services. In one of the cases, the worker acted as broker-advocate in helping his client gain admission to a job training program aimed at black teenagers. In the other of these cases, the worker helped a younger brother of the teenage client to enroll in a JYC summer camp. This was a positive use of referral both to afford this Black Jewish youngster a satisfying socialization experience, and to draw him more closely into the Jewish community.

Another client group for whom Jewish content was population-related was new immigrants; two of the PAB cases with Jewish content were in this group. One case involved a Russian-Jewish family recently arrived in the United States after several years of living in Israel and South America. The teenage son of this family had become a heroin addict. The other case was of an Israeli girl in her late teens, also recently arrived in the United States, who had fallen in with a "bad crowd" and been implicated in a series of thefts. In these new immigrant cases, worker intervention was centered on socializing clients to the norms and behavior of their new society and mediating for them with social institutions.

Technical Content

A third trend in client presentation of Jewish content was observed in requests for technical information regarding Jewish law and practices. Workers were occasionally presented with such questions as how to obtain a Jewish divorce, how to convert a prospective non-Jewish spouse or the baptized children of an estranged non-Jewish partner.

In summary, Jewish content was an important dimension in 28 percent of the sample. The content was varied, related to clinical problems, special populations needs, as well as Jewish technical information. While a larger proportion of cases came from the special category, Personal Assistance Bureau, the issues addressed in all the cases including the general caseload required a distinctive Jewish competence.

Conclusions and Implications

"What is Jewish about the Jewish family agency" is a question that has presented itself to professionals and the community almost since the inception of Jewish social agencies in America. This study has empirically examined the Jewish content which appears in the casework process, and has drawn from this implications about the uniqueness of the Jewish family agency.

We would suggest that the Jewish family agency has a unique mandate from several vantage points related to (a) client needs, (b) Jewish community needs and (c) broader societal needs.

(a) Client Needs

The Jewish family agency serves the Jewish client in various critical ways. We would suggest four distinct contributions vis-a-vis the client. First, one can identify the *contextual* element in that for the Jewish client, the Jewish family agency is a natural part of his community; clients feel a sense of ownership of the agency; they feel they belong there. This finding is supported by an unpublished demographic survey (April, 1975) of the client population of the Main Line branch of the Philadelphia JFS. The survey found that over three-quarters of clients identified their referral source as "general knowledge," "self-referred," "relative" or "friend." (A much smaller percentage had been referred to JFS by another social agency, or by a doctor, lawyer, rabbi, or other professional.) The existence of the Jewish agency was found to have special meaning for the Jewish com-

munity member experiencing problems. Most clients came to the agency simply because "this was the place in the community to turn." The parents of juvenile offenders in the PAB caseload consistently expressed gratitude that someone in the community was concerned with them.

A second contribution to the client concerns the actual casework process. It is important to note that in a sizeable minority of cases (28 percent) Jewish issues are inextricably linked to the broader presenting problem. While these may or may not be the central precipitating factor or concern, nevertheless special expertise is required both in the diagnosis and treatment of the case as it involves the Jewish dimension. Consequently we would suggest that there may indeed be an entity called Jewish casework practice that is distinguishable from casework practice as a treatment modality. This position disagrees with the conclusions of the Springfield Study,^{13, 18} and other less formal inquiries on this question.⁵ While the major part of casework practice in the Jewish family agency may not differ essentially from practice in a non-sectarian agency, a special competence must be available for the portion of clients with special problems linked to Jewish content.

A third important contribution relates to the special needs of special Jewish sub-groups. The Jewish family agency had a firm rationale in the era of mass immigration: acculturation services for a special population that could not be well-served by non-sectarian agencies. Despite vast changes in the nature of client populations served, this rationale still remains valid. Smaller but still important special populations are serviced by the agency, such as new immigrants and Black Jews. The elderly, though not touched in our study, should also be included in this group. These populations, with their special service needs, are uniquely served by the Jewish family agency, whether these needs are for hard services, information and referral, or counseling.

And finally, the client who needs specific

technical information concerning Jewish law or communal practice can find a source here.

(b) Jewish Community Needs

The Jewish family agency is part of a broader Jewish communal system. It is closely involved with the community, it is active in organizational outreach, it sends speakers to synagogues and Jewish clubs and it is regarded as a natural constituent of the network of organizations that comprise the Jewish community. This supports the view of the organizational and communal importance of the Jewish family agency as an affirmation of Jewish identity for clients and community, and its role in meeting unique Jewish community social service and community maintenance needs.

(c) Societal Needs

Within the context of social services in the broader, non-Jewish community, the Jewish family agency serves a unique function. It is recognized by non-sectarian and public services as the appropriate source from which to meet many of the needs of Jewish clients. Thus the agency holds a unique place in the broader community social service structure. In this study this was illustrated by the PAB cases; court officers refer Jewish offenders to PAB as a matter of course, and judges often include PAB service as a condition of probation.

We are living in a critical time when extreme pressures are experienced by the Jewish community both as a result of domestic reality (both social and economic) as well as foreign problems related to the perpetual crisis in Israel. Consequently every organization will have to justify its existence as it seeks support in a more highly competitive environment. This study suggests that the Jewish family agency, as a Jewish community service of help for Jewish individuals with problems, contributes to Jewish survival in three distinct and important ways: it meets unique and special needs of its client populations, enhances Jewish community solidarity, and complements the broader community social service structure.

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Brief Communication

Editor's Note:

With the report that follows, the *Journal* is inaugurating the practice of encouraging the submission for publication of "brief communications" on technical process, innovative projects, interesting sidelights on practice in any of the specialized fields of Jewish communal service. 1,000—2,000 word "communications" are invited.

Project: Student Lay Advocacy on Behalf of Aged Persons

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and

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What do I do? I need help to pay my doctor. I'm old and sick, I'm afraid to go alone to the welfare office downtown in the subway. If I do go, I'm treated badly by the workers. If only somebody would help me fill out the forms and maybe take me downtown.

An Elderly Client

To mitigate the problems many older adults face, the Jewish Association for College Youth (JACY) organized a legal assistance project for the elderly in 1976. Besides providing a much needed advocacy service, three additional goals were decided upon, these were:

1) to attract Jewish college students who are not involved in Jewish activities to become involved in the Jewish community,

2) to provide a Jewish experience for them,

3) to provide insight and experience in community service, especially poverty law.

The Student Legal Assistance Program, as it was originally called, would expose the young men and women directly to the elderly and their problems, in their own neighborhoods, by helping them with their social security, welfare, medicaid, medicare, food stamps, consumer and housing problems.

Since the service provided by the project would be semi-legal JACY felt it was necessary to obtain the input of the legal profession. This was done by setting up a legal advisory board composed of lawyers from the poverty law community, the private sector and law

students. While the board itself is purely advisory, to date, all of the board's recommendations have been accepted by JACY.

The first problem that the board tackled was the size of the program. After deliberating on this issue, it was decided to keep the program very small and confined to one neighborhood. As this type of program had never been tried before, the board wanted to see what type of problems would evolve. The program could always be expanded in the future.

Secondly, what was to be its structure? Again, because of its newness and the nature of the work the program participants would be engaged in, the board felt the need for ongoing, direct legal supervision. Since there was not enough money in the budget to hire a lawyer, the board decided to hire a law school student as the project coordinator.

The project coordinator worked full time during the summer of 1976 and part-time during the school year. During the summer the project coordinator and the professional staff of JACY recruited participants to the program. The board had decided on a maximum