

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF JEWISH CASEWORK AGENCIES *

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Recurrent Crisis of Choice

FAMILY agencies offering casework services are once again faced with the periodically recurrent prospect of having to make decisions about the direction in which they are going to move. Such choices demand a critical analysis of practice and objectives. That we find ourselves in this situation should be neither surprising, nor disquieting. On the contrary, it would be most disturbing if our pattern were set once and for all, if our practice had been crystallized to a point where change was no longer possible. Social work, after all, is a living, changing phenomenon, responding to the trends and movements of society, of which it is an agent and an institution, and influenced by developments in philosophy and theory which shape and mold the community.

There are many factors which have bearing on the final choice. The nature of our practice, clientele, needs and available resources are among them. This paper will outline some of these factors, trace their development and background, and indicate their implications. Obviously, prognostication would not only be dangerous, but presumptuous and inappropriate. Rather, an attempt will be

made to clarify the alternatives and identify the factors which will have to influence and guide the choice and decision.

The situation in which we find ourselves today is in many ways similar to that faced by social work 25 years ago. And in many respects, our dilemma is the logical consequence of the direction chosen at that time. In June 1937, *The Family*, the predecessor of today's *Social Casework* published an article by George Rabinoff in which he posed a number of questions and set down some speculative conclusions. One of these questions is of particular interest today:

"Many of us who are not within the family field are questioning whether the further developments in that field, aside from the relationship to the public agencies, lie primarily in the direction of the personality or psychiatric service, or toward more attention to the economic adjustment of the marginal group. Both these fields need exploration, and we can expect experimenting and different developments in different communities. . . . It is quite likely that the caseworkers are finding something, and we have to be helpful and patient with them for their product is likely to be invaluable to us in our social life irrespective of our economic level. On the other hand, the burden of proof as to the extent to which casework services are demonstrably val-

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Boston, Mass., May 28, 1961.

uable to the community rests on the agency. The proportion of Jewish philanthropic funds being expanded for casework services is high, compared with other programs, either actual or potential. Within a reasonable period, they must justify their performance in terms intelligible to all of us, or accept the challenge to shift their emphasis to some other direction—possibly more economic than psychiatric."¹

This, let us remember, was written barely two years after the enactment of the Social Security Laws, with both the Social Insurances and Public Assistance in their infancy. It highlights with admirable clarity and remarkable foresight the origin of the alternatives among which we have to choose today and which are the result of the far-reaching changes stemming from the introduction of the Social Security Act. The provision of economic maintenance, which had represented the major activity of the family agency, had become a public responsibility, discharged by public agencies. Obviously, this necessitated a major, often painful, reorientation of function and also of practice.

Casework Development Articulated with Social and Economic History

Until that time, our clientele had consisted primarily of people in need of financial help. The prevailing economic climate of society, particularly as far as the great masses of workmen were concerned, was still pretty much like that of the late 19th century, characterized by sharp contrasts between large, rapidly growing numbers of the poor, and a small, very slowly increasing group of the very rich. The early social surveys of Charles Booth in London, of Hull House in Chicago, and of Robert Woods

¹ George W. Rabinoff, "The Prospects for the Jewish Agency," *The Family*, Vol. XVIII, No. 4 (1937), p. 120.

in Boston, paint a vivid and appalling picture of squalor and misery, far surpassing anything we encounter in this country today. The rich grew richer and the poor poorer, the gap between them constantly and alarmingly widening. Relief of poverty was the primary impetus for social reformers and wealthy benefactors alike. Mass poverty was the pervasive climate in which society evolved its institutions and in which social casework as a method was first formulated.

Justification for the existence of great wealth, accumulated at any cost, was conveniently found in the doctrine of Social Darwinism, preaching the survival of the fittest. Just as Social Darwinism was not an economic theory, so poverty was not conceived in economic but in moral terms. Poverty became equated with pauperism which was a state of mind, the result of personal inadequacies. No longer was poverty seen as something God-given, as an inevitable necessity. Viciousness, intemperance, laziness, and weakness of character were the true causes of dependency.

Thus if these character deficiencies could be eradicated, poverty and distress would vanish. Character reform was the key to the solution of the problem, friendly visiting the method through which the job could be accomplished. The nature, and with it the role, of the clientele was clearly defined: they were the "poor and unfortunate" classes. That the services which the social agency had to offer could perhaps be of use to other groups in the community was hardly ever considered. The family agency was designed solely for the lower classes. Not until 1918 did the National Conference hear a paper on "Casework above the Poverty Line."

The theory for a practical approach to problems of poverty was similarly oriented. "Through kindness, wisdom and friendship it was believed that the

weak moral fiber of the poor could be strengthened."² Even at the succeeding stage of casework development, the era of social reform, "there was an implicit assumption that something was wrong with an individual's or a family's relationships. It became the social workers' task to set these matters right."³ Still later, Freudian psychoanalysis introduced new theories which were avidly adopted by social workers. Once more, overemphasis on personal (psychological) inadequacies characterizes this even later phase of casework development.

Admittedly, these are rather sweeping generalizations. I believe, however, that they reflect the major tendencies. They highlight the emergence of social work in the framework of a society characterized by a pervasive scarcity and poverty, made all the more visible against the contrast of ever-increasing and conspicuously displayed wealth of a small segment of society.

In the aftermath of World War I, this society was beginning to undergo some fundamental changes in outlook and structure. The upheaval of the twenties, the depression of the thirties, and the New Deal, which established a new concept of public and social responsibility, affected the climate of social work deeply. While the poor still constituted the bulk of private agency clientele, the relief of poverty had become the task of the public agency. Problems of a different order were presented by the increasing influx of the refugees from Germany and Central Europe, requiring in addition to financial assistance a wide range of adjustment and interpersonal services. Victims of the depression and of the Central European upheaval became the majority of the family agency clientele, undermining the validity of theories and

practice which saw the basis of social problem in character weakness and moral inadequacy, thus completing a reorientation which had been in process for considerable time.

The rapid economic and technological advances following the recovery from the depression and the World War II effort transformed our economy into the "affluent society," to use Professor Galbraith's famous term. Notwithstanding evidence of some serious continued poverty, unemployment and misery, we have to admit that, as a society, we Americans of today are very much better off than our forefathers, even of as recently as 50 years ago. "Better" refers in this context to material and social, rather than to the moral and spiritual, aspects.

As always, with shifts in function such as those that were necessitated by the Social Security Act, and with changes in the social structure, there was an accompanying reorientation of theory and practice. Concepts which were primarily based on and oriented to weaknesses in the individual, his aberrations and inadequacies, could no longer furnish a sufficiently firm foundation for building a theory designed to meet the new demands. Already 30 years ago, Virginia Robinson noted that we had become too accustomed to thinking of the application for help as indicating the breakdown of the ego forces and that we had ignored the constructive possibility that it may also represent the reaching-out to a new relationship through which more of the individual's ego capacity may be realized.⁴ Thus, in the 1940's, the focus of psychological interest in casework moved from the unconscious forces in the individual's personality and from his psy-

⁴ Virginia P. Robinson, *A Changing Psychology in Social Case Work*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1930, p. 136.

² Helen L. Witmer, *Social Work*, Rinehart and Co., New York, 1942, p. 161.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

chosexual development to his "ego psychology" and his current operations.⁵

The implications of this shift for the organization of social services are manifold and far-reaching. The new economic level had made it possible, probably for the first time, to devote increased attention to the meeting of emotional needs. The assumption of responsibility for income maintenance by the public agencies under the Social Security Act had freed the voluntary family agency to develop services designed to meet these emotional needs, regardless of class and status of clients. New relationship patterns among agency, worker and client emerged, which we can mention here only in the briefest way. The paying of fees, for example, necessitated a reconsideration of the traditional client and worker roles. Increased professionalization was in part associated with these role changes. This affected, in turn, the traditional pattern of supervision and administration in the agencies. Only gradually are we becoming aware of the impact of these shifts on agency financing and on community support in general.

Selected Clientele and Services in Today's Family Agency

In the context of this discussion, however, we have to ask ourselves: What are the implications for the service emphasis that the family agency should make in order to meet needs in this changed situation? What are some of the other factors which can help us to arrive at a sound basis for appropriate choice? Obviously, it would be most important to *know*, not just speculate or guess, who our clients are at the present time. Only on the basis of firm knowledge could we then decide: (1) whether these are the clients we want

⁵ Helen H. Perlman, "Social Casework," *Social Work Yearbook*, 1960, N.A.S.W., New York, p. 538.

to serve; (2) Whether or not our services are appropriate to meet their needs; and (3) What, if any, changes may be indicated either in the clientele or in the services. Unfortunately, we cannot answer questions about the *social* dimensions of our clientele in very satisfactory terms, which may well be a reflection on the way we have understood and carried out our jobs. However, some general observations are possible.

The January issue of *Highlights* contains a preliminary report on the first nationwide census of applicants to member agencies of FSAA which was undertaken in April, 1960. The findings reveal that middle and upper class groups use family agencies to an unexpected degree. Family heads with high school or some college education are found in the client group in much greater numbers proportionately than in the general population. Even college graduates are "over-represented." The occupational distribution shows a similar pattern. Applicants to family agencies include a higher proportion of professional and technical workers than is found in the general population, more clerical and sales workers, and about the same proportion of managers, proprietors and officials. Amazingly little use is made of family service by skilled blue-collar workers, particularly craftsmen and foremen. Semi-skilled and unskilled workers were moderately heavily represented. The income curve of applicants shows a close correspondence with that of the total population. Agency clients came from a broad range of income levels and include a normal percentage of families with comfortable incomes. Unfortunately, these figures have, as yet, not been broken down by regions or size of community. Nor are comparable data available for the Jewish agencies which are members of FSAA. I hope that a separate tabulation may be arranged.

The findings indicate, in general, a

concentration of family agency clientele in the urban, fairly well educated, middle class population, pretty much corresponding to the income distribution of the general population. We know that, by and large, the Jewish population has experienced an even more pronounced concentration in the middle and upper classes. "Occupationally, educationally, residentially, culturally—they have been jet-propelled to the very forefront of a dynamic society."⁶ We can reasonably expect, therefore, an equal if not greater proportion of clients who are representative of the affluent society in today's Jewish family agency.

We have already referred to the fact that the nature of the clientele influences the relationship between client and agency. Are there factors which operate in the reverse, as it were, and which influence from within the agency the kinds of clients who are served? Does our practice have any bearing on the selection of our clientele? Again, direct, conclusive answers are not possible at this stage in our professional development. But some circumstantial evidence can be gathered from studies in related fields of practice, such as the investigations of Hollingshead and Redlich into the relations between social class and mental illness.⁷ Some information can also be drawn from a study recently completed at Hillside Hospital Outpatient Department in New York City.⁸

While it would be inappropriate and unsound to apply these findings which

⁶ Joshua Fishman, "The Emerging Picture of Modern American Jewry," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 1 (1960), p. 24.

⁷ August D. Hollingshead and Frederick C. Redlich, *Social Class and Mental Illness*, John Wiley, New York, 1958; see also Alfred Kadushin, "Opposition in Referral for Psychiatric Treatment," *Social Work*, April, 1957, p. 78.

⁸ Nathaniel Siegel, *Characteristics of the Hillside Hospital Outpatient Dept. Population*, 1961. (Mimeo.).

are derived from psychiatrists and psychiatric patients to social workers and their clientele, certain approximations and conclusions seem feasible and justifiable. It is not possible here to go into the methodological details of the thought-provoking and challenging New Haven study. By dividing the population into five classes, ranging from one (upper) to five (lower) and testing out a number of hypotheses, the authors conclude that there is a relation between the kind of therapy and the social class of the patient. Neurotic patients of the two higher classes receive more psychoanalysis and analytic psychotherapy than those of the lower classes.⁹

Patients in general, with few exceptions in class one and two, know very little about psychiatric theory and practice. Even those whose knowledge might be rated as "fair" usually know little more than that psychiatry deals with mental illness and that psychiatrists heal their patients not only with drugs and surgery, but also by "mental methods." How these mental methods work and how emotional stresses and problems are related to emotional and physical symptoms is not understood even after months of psychotherapy. This may be attributed to resistance or opposition¹⁰ and, in part, to the difficulty psychiatrists have in communicating simple, clear and meaningful explanations to their patients.¹¹

Class four persons, in treatment for some time, with the exception of a few "who got the idea," gain little from the kind of treatment they receive. Practically all class five neurotics drop out of treatment.¹²

On the other hand, psychiatrists "like" class one through three neurotic patients in ambulatory treatment, while

⁹ Hollingshead, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

¹⁰ Kadushin, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Hollingshead, *op. cit.*, p. 339.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 340.

they "dislike" those in classes four and five. The therapists were irritated by the patients' inability to think in their terms.¹³

The authors conclude that modern psychotherapy is most likely to succeed when communication is relatively easy between the therapist and the patient. They point out that experience and knowledge of social and cultural differences make communication with members of classes other than their own, less difficult, but in no instance was the difficulty overcome completely. The most frequent source of difficulty between the lower status patient in psychotherapy and the therapist is the tacit or overt demand of the patient for an authoritarian role to be assumed by the psychiatrist and the psychiatrist's unwillingness to assume it because it runs counter to certain therapeutic principles. The essential principles underlying insight therapy are shared most frequently by therapists and patients in class one and two; they are less likely to be grasped by lower class patients. Patients in the higher classes are inclined more than the lower classes to seek and follow professional advice because of their education. Their capacity to think in abstract terms, to view interpersonal relations with some interest, and their desire to reach their potential in efficiency leads them to be disposed more favorably toward psychotherapy.¹⁴

I indicated earlier that one cannot apply these findings immediately to social work. They suggest, however, some conclusions which are relevant to our field. We have perhaps made greater strides than many of the older helping professions in incorporating into our day-by-day practice an understanding of social and cultural differences. Yet, I believe it is fair to say that our general

direction has led us to a rather strong preference for psychological and psychoanalytic approaches in casework. In many instances, these techniques require a certain degree of sophistication on the part of our clients in order to be most effective. These influences are very subtle, extremely complex, and in most cases entirely unplanned and surely undesired. It is difficult, if not almost impossible with our present knowledge, to gauge the effect of these factors on client selection and retention. Too little is known about these dimensions of our caseload, another serious weakness of our caseload statistics.

It is equally difficult to assess the influence of these factors on the relation between needs and services. Some light was thrown on this phase of our problem in a paper by Dr. Robert Morris in 1953.¹⁵ In this article, reference is made to the opposing arguments which underlie current family service trends. Obviously, it is not possible here to do justice to the positions set forth in the paper. Let me, however, at the risk of oversimplification and generalization, select a few questions which Dr. Morris raises, and which are pertinent to our discussion. He refers to the uncertainties that confront family agencies as they are faced with policy questions, such as: What services are needed? In what areas shall the private casework agency concentrate? What is the casework agency's responsibility for meeting social and environmental needs which do not require that primary attention be given either to income maintenance or to psychological adjustment.

Two major divisions of opinion have emerged. One holds that the voluntary family agency has developed special skill in dealing with problems of interpersonal

¹⁵ Robert Morris, "The Significance of Client Applications in Family Agency Planning," *Social Service Review*, December, 1953, p. 399.

relationships of a psychological nature. The primary function, according to this position, lies in helping people with these problems. An opposing position, however, maintains that despite the assumption for meeting environmental and social needs by the public agency, the necessary social and environmental services (other than basic maintenance relief) have not yet developed adequately. You will note that these positions are in a sense extensions of the Rabinoff article.

Dr. Morris bases his analysis on a number of individual reports and studies, unrelated to one another. One of the findings seems of particular interest in our discussion here. Cases referred to one very large family agency by other agencies contained a much higher proportion of diagnosed family relationship problems than economic problems. Among personal applications, however, the proportion of economic problems was significantly higher. This is often interpreted to mean that applicants have not yet learned the proper function of the agency. There may be a much more serious inference. Clients who are referred have already been screened by other agencies which believed the family agency was concerned primarily with relationship problems. We do not know whether the screened-out cases had their needs met or not, but the finding suggests, according to the article, that the intake data of this family agency provide a narrowing perspective about community needs—a major shift from previous years when the intake of the private family agency was used as one valid guide to the types of family need.¹⁶

This is also borne out by some of the findings reported by Margaret Blenkner in her study of prediction factors in the initial interview. Clients who asked for help with problems which were primarily of a psychological or interpersonal na-

ture were much more likely to return for further interviews than were those who asked for help in other areas. This may be a reflection of the function of the agency. It may also be indicative of a certain preference on the part of the worker. In similar fashion, continuation of treatment was related to the client's conception of the worker's role as a counsellor and to his acceptance of this role.¹⁷

When we come to the crucial question whether extension of casework service to middle-class families necessarily involves reduced attention to environmental needs, the evidence which Dr. Morris presents indicates that, in the daily operation of family agencies, cases involving problems of relationship are dominant. But it is noteworthy that, in order of relative frequency, problems of economic need and physical illness rank second and fourth. This seems to indicate that despite the change in intake policy over the past 20 years, and the selective screening that occurs in referral between agencies and—we may add—probably also in direct intake, the concrete social as well as the psychological needs of people persist in large volume. It can be further concluded that our existing network of public services does not yet meet these needs adequately. Whether or not these combinations of need occur among all families alike or whether varying combinations are found according to economic status is not clear. Better organization of our caseload statistics could well yield this kind of information. We must not forget, however, that psychological and economic needs are associated, frequently in a causative way.

For the Jewish casework agencies, however, we do have some firmer evi-

¹⁷ Margaret Blenkner, "Predictive Factors in the Initial Interview in Family Casework," *Social Service Review*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (1954), p. 65.

dence, if not of needs, than at least of services. A 1957 study of patterns of service¹⁸ shows that while in the large communities—those with over 150,000 estimated Jewish population—the number of cases receiving *counseling only* exceeds those receiving *concrete* services, the reverse picture is found in communities with small Jewish populations. The proportion of cases receiving *concrete* services increases with decreasing community size from less than one-fourth in the largest to about two-thirds in the smaller communities. On the other hand, *counseling only* shows an exactly opposite trend: in the largest population group almost three-fourths of all cases receive counseling, as against less than one-third in the smaller communities.

The Problem of Choice in Family Casework Services

I am very much aware of the fact that I have presented a great variety of data and theories which, at first sight, hang together on a rather thin thread and which, in the aggregate, are probably more confusing than enlightening. Are there any unifying conclusions which we can draw to help us throw some light on our initial problem, to identify some of the elements on which decisions for future developments can be based?

Casework methods and practices have undergone far reaching changes in the wake of societal developments. The meeting of basic financial needs has become the responsibility of governmental agencies. The advent of the affluent society has brought groups of clients "above the poverty line" to the voluntary agencies and concomitantly introduced new relationship patterns among clients, worker and agency. At the same

¹⁸ Peter Melvyn, *Patterns of Services in Jewish Family Agencies*, Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds, New York, no date (Mimeo.).

time, the rise in the level of the economy has made possible a greater attention to needs of a psychological nature. Correspondingly, our methods to deal with these needs have been refined and reformulated. This seems to have some bearing on the selection of clients who are motivated and ready to benefit from and engage in the kind of counseling services we prefer to offer, and of problems which are amenable to treatment by these methods.

On the other hand, there is evidence that social and environmental needs continue to exist for a large proportion of family agency clients. Jewish family agencies have continued to offer *concrete services* as well as *counseling only*. However, the distribution of these services is different for various sizes of Jewish communities. The larger the community, the more preponderant are *counseling only* cases. It may be permissible to interpret this by deducing that perhaps in the larger communities more and different resources are available to meet the whole range of needs and that consequently the family agencies in these communities have been able to concentrate more on counseling in regard to psychological needs.

No simple, definitive answer seems possible to our initial question. The factors which will influence future directions are as complex as the elements of which the problem is composed. Indeed, Mr. Rabinoff put his finger on one of the key considerations when he said that different communities will evolve different patterns. How could it be otherwise if social work and the social agencies are to remain true to their obligation to discharge the community's responsibility for the meeting of needs? Each community will have to decide for itself which needs it wants to be met and how. And who can say that one decision is "better" than another, provided—and this is a rather formidable proviso—that

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

needs are met. This must include consideration of the needs of the poorly motivated client who has received hardly any attention in this presentation.

There remains, however, one final argument that inevitably is thrown into the battle as the last line of defense. If you give priority to the interpersonal, the emotional, and the psychological needs—so it goes—are you not abandoning the basic role of social work? And the rousing battle cry is heard: let us put “the social” back into social work! I must confess that I have lately become slightly suspicious of this slogan which at times almost carries the connotation of “putting the clock back.” It all depends, it seems to me, on what one interprets “social” to mean.

The main goals of *social reform* have been achieved in principle. Public standards are very much in need of improvement but their existence does not need to be argued any longer. Primary emphasis must be focused on economic and political measures, in which social work, together with many other groups in society, has a vital stake. We do have our specific competence and, therefore, primary, non-expendable responsibility in one aspect of this matter. Inadequate social and economic conditions cause social stress. To alleviate, to work toward the elimination of, social stress must remain our task. The kind of services we offer seems to make little difference in this respect, as long as we do not lose this focus of our job.

Equally important, as has been pointed out repeatedly, is that social work and social welfare organizations have a continued intrinsic responsibility to assure the meeting of all kinds of needs. This principle, too, has received an increasing degree of general acceptance. I submit that any decision as to the kind of services we offer has to be based on an assessment of needs and how they can be met most adequately. To admonish

social work to “put back” these emphases into its values and objectives and into its operations, strikes me as almost gratuitous. It carries the implications, which I hesitate to admit, that we have ever given them up.

These attacks on the alleged “lack of social conscience” are directed against that segment of the field which has concerned itself to an ever increasing extent with the psychological needs of people and which has concentrated its efforts on developing the method of counseling and treatment to the exclusion of some of the broader social concerns. Some of the material included in this paper confirms to a certain limited extent the validity of these critical comments. But to assume that they apply with equal validity to the whole of social work and its practitioners seems a little unfair and, I am afraid, indicative of a certain lack of objectivity.

There is, however, a third interpretation of “social.” We deal by definition with human beings. In the shifts that have occurred in our general theories of the human personality, we have at times lost sight of man as a social being. Progress in the social and behavioral sciences has led to a new understanding of man in society, has given new focus to our concern with man’s social functioning, his personality characteristics, attitudes, strengths and weaknesses, as well as his social needs. If we want the judgments and the assessments which we as professionals are constantly required to make to be based on more than “common sense” criteria alone, or on our own particular life experience, a grounding in the relevant sciences dealing with human behavior is essential.¹⁹ They can help us to clarify and expand our understanding of the social environ-

¹⁹ Herman D. Stein, “Issues in the Relationship of Social Sciences to Social Work Education,” *International Social Work*, January, 1961, p. 10.

ment which inevitably affects the individual’s values and aspirations, his behavior and his needs. They add the third dimension without which our understanding must remain shallow and incomplete. In this sense, we do have a responsibility to put the “social” back into social work, on a different level of understanding, however, from the way the term was used 50 years ago. In this sense, “social” applies to every service we give, counseling only or concrete,

dealing with interpersonal or with environmental needs.

Which type of service the Jewish agency chooses as its priority will have to be decided community by community, based on a responsible assessment of needs and resources. Regardless of this decision, however, if we want to remain true to our commitment as social workers, we must render a service that aims truly at the fullest social functioning of every human being whom we serve.