

A Student Rebutts Bernard Reisman on Social Work Education and Jewish Communal Service*

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AS a participant in the Baltimore Institute for Jewish Communal Service, I have been exposed to social work education and the Jewish communal field. And since my field placement is with the Jewish Community Center, I feel that I am doubly qualified to comment on the quality of social work education and its relevance to the Center field. In reading Bernard Reisman's article, I find myself disagreeing with his approach.

Reisman points out that there has developed a divergence between the program and focus of the Jewish agency and the education one receives in a graduate program in social work. He lists several reasons for this divergence: 1) there has been a movement in the schools of social work towards concern with social dysfunction and a treatment orientation to group work; 2) the curriculum stresses roles in social change and reform, and there is also much status accompanying working in the inner city; 3) the Jewish community center is moving toward being an educational institution—a change in focus from the process orientation of group work. Thus, states Reisman, because of this change in focus of social group work and the change in focus of the Center field, it is no longer practical to look to schools of social work for training of personnel.

* Dr. Reisman's article, "Social Work Education, Jewish Communal Service and Jewish Community Centers: A Time for a Change," was published in the June 1972 issue of this *Journal*.

Treatment versus Group Orientation

In my brief exposure to social work education, I have come across many articles and texts that point in just the opposite direction from Reisman's. I shall cite notes and journal articles as used in my group work seminar.

Gisela Konopka writes:

Overlapping functions with other professions have led to confusion in terminology and have influenced group work practice. The most significant example of this is the confusion around the terms of *group work* and *group therapy*. They need clarification as part of the discussion of the function of social group work . . . Social group work . . . is a method of social work which helps individuals to enhance their social functioning through purposeful group experiences and to cope more effectively with their personal group or community problems.¹

Much emphasis in group methods has been placed upon unification of the field² and upon narrowing its focus.³ The development of a reciprocal model in group methods⁴ reflects an emphasis placed on individual engagement into a

¹ Gisela Konopka, *Social Group Work: A Helping Process*, p. 25.

² Hans S. Falck, "Social Group Work and Planned Change," in *Social Work Practice, 1964*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1964.

³ Emmanuel Tropp, "Group Intent and Group Structure: Essential Criteria For Group Work Practice," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, 41 (Spring, 1965), 229-50.

⁴ Catherine P. Papell and Beulah Rothman, "Social Group Work Models: Possession and Heritage," *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 2,2 (Fall, 1966), pp. 66-77.

group. This model focuses on group relational aspects of an individual's behavior and views the individual in terms of his reciprocity with others. The reciprocal model has no therapeutic ends, nor does it stress political or social change. It does presuppose relationship and interdependence which are the focus of group work. In all, the focus of group methods is on the dynamics of groups rather than on group therapy.

Social Change and Social Work

There is much truth in the assertion that the current focus of the profession is on social change. Rein discusses this recent shift and notes that social work can "contribute greatly to improving the quality of urban life, humanizing institutions and altering the priority of social workers."⁵ The Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy defined the social worker as "advocate" as one who argues for, maintains or recommends a cause or proposal.⁶ This committee called for an "involvement by individual social workers, backstopped by members in policy-making and administrative positions."⁷

Reisman suggests that social work students are socialized into a mode of social reform which in turn is in conflict with the values of the Jewish Center. In 1973, this statement is simply not true. To state that the curriculum is only "distantly related to the needs and interests of an essentially suburban, middle-class Jewish population,"⁸ may be inaccurate. Students have been cautioned not to deny that their neighbors have similar prob-

lems to those found in the urban environs. To do so would only result in guilt for allowing these problems to exist. The problem of drug abuse is one example. There are many more to choose from. The need for effective community organization exists not only in the city but in a Randallstown or Shaker Heights as well. We are learning from "radical" social work not only to open our eyes to the needs of the poor and the disenfranchised, but to those of our own neighbors as well. No longer do we find status in working solely with inner city. The status is found in our effectiveness, not in our selectivity.

It is a side comment that the height of the "change orientation" in schools came at the height of the student movement on our college campuses. Students going from undergraduate to graduate schools carried the movement orientation with them. Now that rationality has returned to the undergraduate campus, students moving into graduate schools are carrying this rationality with them. Change mixed with rationality produces constructive results.

What are the implications that this change orientation has for the Center? For one, there is increased awareness among professionals and their interpretation to lay leaders of relevant programs. It is in this respect that role conflict can diminish and be succeeded by role contentment.

There is also truth that the Center is in part an educational institution. But education is not the only focus. There are many activities featured in the Center, that, for one reason or another, are not found in a program brochure. For example, at the Baltimore Center, special groups are formed at the Center to work with retarded members of the Jewish community. The purpose of these groups is twofold: to help them develop social and emotional strengths to func-

⁵ Martin Rein, "Social Work In Search of a Radical Profession," *Social Work* 14,2 (April 1970), p. 28.

⁶ The Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy, "The Social Worker as Advocate: Champion of Social Victims," *Social Work* 14,2 (April, 1969), p. 17.

⁷ The Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy, p. 22.

⁸ Bernard Reisman, *op. cit.* p. 392.

tion in the community, and to strengthen their Jewish identity. Socially, members are taught to develop confidence in new situations vital to daily living, to learn to relate to others and to authority other than that of their parents, to feel the sense of belonging and to develop friendships. Members are taught to accept and understand their limitations and function in spite of them, the ability to control one's emotions in an atmosphere which fosters emotional maturity and an appreciation for recreational and cultural activities. Members of these groups are treated as Center members.

The Center does not provide programs aimed at physical, vocational or psychiatric therapy. The group functions like any other Center group, however the programs are somewhat more specialized and adjusted to their abilities by the staff person working with them.⁹ The very nature of these programs calls for a person skilled in the techniques of social work. I have found that, through evaluation of program literature and staff evaluation sheets, the small group still remains as the cornerstone of Center work.

The Center, with emphasis placed on ethnic identity, still fits in 1973 the description that Lowy gave it in 1961:

⁹ Outlines for programs described herein were taken from staff evaluation reports and from letters on file at the Baltimore Jewish Community Center. Other programs include a single parent seminar series, adult volunteer workshops, pre-retirement programs as well as other senior adult social groups. Outreach programs such as draft counselling and work with high school fraternities, as well as youth-centered programs, are featured in the Baltimore JCC brochure. At this time, I am currently conducting a needs assessment study on day care and nursery schools in the suburban Baltimore area as a part of my field assignment.

The Jewish Center has a definite function in preventing social breakdown and pathology, in assuring healthy functioning of individuals and groups and helping its members develop a clear self image as Jews . . . the Center has assumed a major function in helping its membership come to grips with (the problem of identity) and to resolve conflicts by acknowledging their identity as Jews.¹⁰

I think the counterculture, with its emphasis on identity has played a significant part in the formation of relevant programs at the Center. There is, among members, an increased amount of awareness of Jewish studies, experimental lifestyles *ei. Havurot*, newspapers and journals, and a calling for increased involvement in the affairs of the Jewish community. It is in this arena that social action can play a constructive effort.

Why then, has there been a debate on social work education's relevance to social work in the first place? In researching this subject, I have noted a lack of communication between the deans of the schools of social work and the Center, and the Center with the National Association of Jewish Communal Workers. I have also noticed that many private and public agencies on a regular basis call the deans' attention to their problems. Perhaps the Center should be doing the same . . . on a regular basis.

Reisman makes note of the current Jewish studies programs that are training students for the Jewish field. As a part of one of these programs, I too feel that they are important. *But Jewish studies taken separately are not an alternative in and of itself.* But when taken together, Jewish and social work studies form an effective combination.

¹⁰ L. Lowy, "New Trends in Social Group Work," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* 37,4 (Summer, 1961) pp. 400-401.