

JEWISH SOCIAL GROUP WORK STUDENTS VIEW THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER FIELD AS A PLACEMENT AND CAREER

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Introduction

FOR years there has been an evident manpower shortage in the Jewish community center field. In December, 1966, the *JWB Circle* reported that the personnel shortage was likely to get worse and that there were then 160 positions unfilled and an additional 100 filled by non-professional workers.¹ Solender states, the ". . . commitment to social work is at the heart of the uniqueness of the Jewish community center."² The severe shortages of personnel in Centers may thus reflect unbalanced attitudes within social work itself.

The authors, three beginning workers committed to the Jewish community center field, having known many social work students from the Metropolitan New York area, have the impression that many of these students held negative feelings toward the Jewish community center after having field placements in them. Our impression was reinforced by a 1966 paper by Rosenfeld who reported his impressions over a number of years as a professor at the New York University School of Social Work.

Students are increasingly negative with regard to the purposes of the Jewish community center. They complain about sectarianism, serving the middle-class, the recreation emphasis, the Jewish culture emphasis and the enhancement, provision and prevention emphasis vis-à-vis the treatment emphasis.

They are negative about the level of professional social work practice and the quality of the field instruction experience. They complain about the lack of professional role models, i.e., practitioners, the lack of direct practice records, the lack of opportunity for individual conferences with members, the lack of instrumental support for home visiting, the lack of interpretation of social work purpose to members and parents by agency . . . the lack of critical thinking in selection of assignments and the resistance of agencies to changes in policies and practices directed toward better membership service.³

While there are reported impressions of students from specific schools or agencies, no one has methodically investigated the opinions of a large sample of social group work students regarding their placement at a Jewish community center. The hypothesis of the pilot study by the authors was that social group

¹ *JWB Circle*, Vol. XXI, No. 7, December, 1966, p. 1.

² Sanford Solender, *The Unique Function of the Jewish Community Center*, New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1955, p. 5.

³ Oscar H. Rosenfeld, "The Student, The School and the Agency: Problems and Opportunities in Field Work Placement in the Jewish Community Center (A Faculty Member's Viewpoint)," a report to the Conference on Field Work in Social Group Work in the Jewish Community Center, May 6, 1966, p. 1-2. (Mimeo.)

work students, in being placed in a Jewish community center, become either less interested or disinterested in choosing this type of work as a career. The purpose of this study was to seek the students' opinions of the Jewish community center.

We recognize that this pilot study has certain limitations: in geography, for one, the sample was restricted to the Metropolitan New York area. Some of the questions were ambiguous and lacking in depth. In any further exploration, a refinement of the questionnaire should be considered.

Procedure

This pilot study assumed that for the most part it is the Jewish social worker who makes a career in Jewish community centers. While there were several non-Jewish students placed at Jewish community centers, the population was limited to those Jewish, second-year, social group work students who had had a placement in a center during their first year. Students who for some reason were no longer in school were obviously excluded.

Six schools of social work in the New York Metropolitan area were represented: Adelphi, Columbia, Hunter, New York University, Rutgers, and Yeshiva. We determined that there were thirty-one students from these schools who met our qualifications.

Surveys in self-addressed, stamped, envelopes were distributed to all the non-Yeshiva students, while the questionnaire was personally handed to and collected from the Yeshiva students. The fact that there was a 100 percent response seems to indicate a high degree of involvement.

The questions elicited students' opinions of the social work aspects of the agency, the Jewish emphasis of the agency, as well as how the students felt

about the career possibilities of the center field, both before and after their placement.⁴ It was also our intention to compare the students of Yeshiva University with the students of the other schools.

Sample Composition

The sample consisted of thirty-one students, fourteen from Yeshiva and seventeen from the other schools.

In the Pins survey of social work students, we see that of the 10 percent or 272 of the students who were in group work,⁵ almost one-third was Jewish.⁶ Our sample would seem to cover almost one-third of all Jewish social group work students in the country.

The Pins survey also showed that 77.57 percent of the students in group work were thirty years of age or under and that group work had the highest proportion of young workers.⁷ This is very close to the age distribution of our sample, 81 percent of whom were under thirty years of age.

The survey by Pins showed the social group work students to comprise 54.40 percent male.⁸ The trend through the years has been that of more males entering the field. Our study population was 45 percent male and 55 percent female. Pins comments further:

The fact that group work students are only a small percentage (10 percent) of all social work students is a serious handicap in the recruitment efforts of Jewish community centers. On the other hand, the fact that the percentage of Jews and male students among

⁴ We gratefully acknowledge the assistance given to us by Dr. Victor D. Sanua, Professor, the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University.

⁵ Arnulf M. Pins, *Who Chooses Social Work and Why?* New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1963, p. 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

group work students is high increases the potential for recruitment of Jewish community center staff.⁹

Students' Views of the Field Agency

In this part of the study the respondents were asked a number of questions designed to uncover the students' opinions of how the goals and purposes of the agency were perceived and accepted by the membership.

The students were asked if the goals and purposes of the agency were made explicit to the staff. One-half of the students indicated that they were and slightly less than half stated that they were available upon request. Where the goals and purposes were available, 12 percent of the students felt that they were "clear and well defined"; 48 percent felt that they were "partially clear"; 38 percent felt that they were either "obscure and vaguely defined" or "unclear and poorly defined."

It is to be assumed that in the intake process, members are made aware of the goals and purposes of the individual agency by the professional staff who are representatives of the agency.

In no way do we claim our pilot study to be conclusive, but we feel that serious doubts are inevitable when almost one-half of the students felt that the goals and purposes of the agency were available to the staff only upon request. One-half of the respondents seem to feel that the agency staff is not adequately oriented to the agency's objectives. If the students are accurate in their observations that many of the staff members of the agency are unsure of the social group service function of the agency, how, then, does the membership perceive

this function? Levin comments on this point:

The view was held by some social work educators that the community does not see the Jewish community center as a social work institution having a social work purpose. The point was made that the agency in its intake policies with individuals and with groups should define to the membership what it will be attempting to do as they are members of the center. It was felt to be essential that if the agency is to attempt to carry our social work purposes that the membership should be aware of this and should affiliate knowing this.¹⁰

When asked specifically about the social group service function of the agency, three-fourths of the students felt that it was recognized by some or all of the members, but one-fourth felt that it was recognized by few or none of the members. Making the goals and purposes of the agency known to the membership is a primary responsibility of the professional staff of the agency. It thus becomes a paramount issue for the social worker to know if those members who are aware of the social group service function of the agency accept it. In accord with this question we asked the students how those members who were aware of the social group service function viewed it. While one-third felt that the members accepted it, slightly more than half of the students felt that the membership, who knew it, were indifferent to the social group service function of the agency. Might social work students then not question how meaningful their services to the Jewish community center were? Vinter suggested:

We believe the socialization services are important and should be strongly supported, and we do not advocate their being deserted

⁹ Arnulf M. Pins, "The Jewish Social Work Student: Some Research Data About Him and Their Implications for the Shortage of Jewish Community Center Workers," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XLI, No. 1 (Fall, 1964), p. 97.

¹⁰ Morris Levin, "Perspectives on Field Work Placements in the Jewish Community Center," Paper read at the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Philadelphia, May 31, 1965.

by professionals. But these agencies should continue to warrant use of trained social workers only if they can design patterns for effective utilization of scarce professional competencies. Similarly, for this segment of the profession and for its individual members, there is a deep responsibility among the several fields of service.¹¹

The respondents' impression of membership indifference to the social group service function of the agency is probably associated with their replies to another question. When asked what part the principles of social group work played in the agency's program planning, 42 percent felt that it played a major part, while 45 percent felt that it played a minor part, and 13 percent felt that it played little or no part in program planning.

If social group work is considered to be a function of the agency, as represented in its goals and purposes, the students' responses pose some questions. Can the student be expected to identify with the Jewish community center as a social group service agency, when over half of them felt that social group work is insignificant in the agency's program? Morris Levin stated:

A frequent comment that was heard in all discussion was the need for the field work student to see the professional actually doing direct leadership practice. . . . So much educational process in field work is charged with the possibilities for learning through identification and from seeing the variety of day-to-day incidents that occur in the agencies. . . .¹²

The student's (and membership's) identification of the center as a group service agency is a direct consequence of the agency's practical exercise of a commitment. This becomes evident from the students' responses to the question

¹¹ Robert Vinter, "New Evidence for Restructuring Group Services," in *New Perspectives on Services to Groups: Theory, Organization, Practice*. New York: NASW, 1961, p. 64-65.

¹² Morris Levin, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

concerning what part they felt social group work played in their field placements. Of the respondents who felt that social group work played a major part in the agency's program planning (42 percent of the total), 84 percent felt that social group work was helpful and essential in their assignments. Of the respondents who felt that social group work did not play a major part in agency programming, however, less than half felt that social group work was helpful and essential to their practice. It would appear from these results that the model of commitment that an agency presents, as a social group service agency, will have a bearing on the worker's ability and desire to relate group work theory to his practice.

Student Reaction to Sectarian Aspects of Placement

The questions concerning Jewish orientation were designed to elicit the students' feelings about Jewish commitment, about compatibility of sectarian purposes with principles of social group work, and about Jewish program content.

We hoped to compare their feelings in this specific area with their feelings toward the Jewish community center in general.

Of the respondents, 32 percent reported an extensive Jewish background, 55 percent reported some Jewish background, and 13 percent reported little or no Jewish background. The majority of the students defined the agency as having Jewish cultural goals.

The students felt, generally, that the members were aware of the agency's sectarian purposes. (In interesting contrast to the students' opinions of membership awareness of the agency's social work purposes). However, the majority of the students felt that the members either rejected, accepted reluctantly, or were indifferent to the programming of Jewish content. Thus, according to the

responses, it would seem that the agency generally makes the terms of the "contract" of sectarian purpose known to the members. Somewhere along the line, however, a gap develops between the setting-up of the contract and fulfilling its requirements.

The majority of the students said that the professional staff in the agency did have some Jewish commitment and, generally, the student was able to see some of the staff as models in this area.

The majority of the students answering the question concerning the compatibility of programming of Jewish content with the group work method felt that it was only partially compatible. Six of the students found it to be incompatible, whereas only five of the students found it to be compatible.

We found that the majority of those respondents who said that the members rejected, were indifferent to, or reluctantly accepted programming of Jewish content, found this programming only partially compatible or incompatible with social group work. Of those who felt that members accepted or desired Jewish programming, all found it partially compatible with social group work.

Programming of Jewish content is thus seen as being not always compatible with social group work. It would seem that an agency's sectarian programs should more closely emerge out of group work process and be more attuned to the member's needs." The worker is not central to individual and group change. The group process is the instrument of change. Only through trust in the process can the worker hope to intervene effectively in order to free the process to effect change."¹³

The fact that the students see the members as tending to be negative to this aspect of programming may indicate

that new approaches to this aspect of programming may be indicated. Further, it is possible that Jewish programming may be an area to be handled by another discipline if it cannot be changed to become more compatible with social group work methods. Should such a change come about, the role of the social worker would be to enable the members to use the Jewish programming in the most meaningful way for them. Vinik emphasizes this point; and so does Smalley:

The professional social worker can be counted on to embody the values, knowledge, and skill necessary to get those services to the clientele whom they are designed to serve through the use of the social work relationship method in such a way that they stand the best possible chance of being used for both individual and social welfare.¹⁴

Students' Views of Career Possibilities of Center Field

The students were asked if they would be interested in working as professionals at a Jewish community center in two questions. One dealt with how the students felt before their placement and the other dealt with how the students felt after their placement. The results show a definite trend from interest to disinterest. The division of 13 respondents who were interested (42 percent), 10 who were undecided (32 percent), and 8 who were uninterested (26 percent) before placement, had changed to 1 who was interested (6 percent), 12 undecided (39 percent), and 17 uninterested (55 percent) after student placement.

Only two students showed positive movement. The fields the students did show interest in, as reported from their comments, were school social work and therapeutically oriented centers.

A question which suggests itself is whether students in other types of place-

¹³ Abe Vinik, "Role of the Group Service Agency," *Social Work*, Albany: NASW, 1964, Vol. IX, No. 3 July, 1964, p. 101.

¹⁴ Ruth E. Smalley, "Discussion of the Social Worker in the Group," *New Perspectives on Services to Groups: Theory, Organization, Practice*, (New York: NASW, 1961), p. 34.

ment experience similar declines of interest in pursuing careers in agencies like their field agencies. A study made by a student committee of the New York University School of Social Work indicates an inclination of many students to accept professional positions in other than sectarian agencies.¹⁵

The N.Y.U. study group consisted of 83 students of which 58 were case workers and 25 were group workers. To the question, "would you accept a position in your agency upon graduation," one-half of the caseworkers answered in the affirmative, whereas only six of the twenty-five group workers answered, "yes." All of the group work students placed in sectarian agencies answered, "no", to the question.

There seems to be a difference between group work students and the case work students in their evaluations of the agencies in which they are placed. The group work students question the standards of many of the agencies and seem to feel that in the Jewish center field, group work is not practiced and therefore this is a poor placement.

The results of our study support the findings of the N.Y.U. study. The implications of these results is that a significant number of potential recruits to the Jewish community center field are discouraged after having a field placement there.

Students with Scholarship Commitments

Nine of the thirty-one students in our study had scholarship commitments in Jewish community centers. This figure checks with that of the National Jewish Welfare Board personnel records.

While all nine students had indicated that they earlier were "interested in working as a professional in a Jewish community center," only one felt the

same way after having a field placement at a center. Seven declared themselves undecided and one was uninterested after the placement.

When responding to the question concerning their primary reason for accepting a scholarship commitment, one-third of the respondents answered that it was for "financial purposes," and two-thirds indicated that it was for both "financial purposes" and a "desire to work in the Jewish community center field."

When the students were asked about their plans after fulfilling their commitment, one indicated he would remain in the field, five stated that they were undecided, and three plan to leave the field.

The results of this section of this pilot study, therefore, indicate that only one out of nine students who have a declared commitment to the center field, and only two students out of a potential thirty-one candidates for group work positions in the center field, intend to enter or make a career out of the center field. One of the recruitment hopes of the Centers is that workers can be realized from increases in number of group work students. Pins states:

The personnel shortage can be overcome if we recruit. Recruitment efforts in the Jewish community center field should have a dual focus: One, to participate in general recruitment for the profession, because if there are more social work students, there will be more group work students, there will be more Jewish group work students and probably more Jewish community center workers.¹⁶

While there has been considerable time, effort, and money expended to recruit students from part-time and summer staff, it would appear from the results of this pilot study that momentary success achieved by these efforts is lost during the student placement at the center. It seems, unfortunately, that the recruitment process that Pins has de-

¹⁵ An unpublished report by a student committee of the Graduate school of Social Work, New York University, Alan Kassin, committee chairman, 1966.

¹⁶ Arnulf M. Pins, *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

scribed is more wishful thinking than reality.

Comparison of Yeshiva University Students with Students of Other Schools

Interestingly enough, the only difference between Yeshiva University students and the students from the other schools of social work was in the number of students who fulfilled our requirements for the study population. Fourteen of the thirty-one students were from Yeshiva. The trends and patterns of the responses from the Yeshiva University students were nearly the same as the students from the other schools of social work in regards to all the questions in this pilot study. The interesting and surprising finding is that students at a school (Yeshiva) dedicated to the enhancement of the Jewish center field responded no differently from students at schools without this commitment.

Summary

The opinions of the students indicate that the goals and purposes of the agency are not made sufficiently clear to either the staff or the membership. The students felt that most of the members were not fully aware of the social group service function of the agency. In the students' opinion even those members who were aware of the social group service function of the agency were indifferent to it. A majority of the students felt that group work did not play a significant part in the agency's program. Those students, however, who did feel that the group work method played a major part in the agency's program, also felt that group work was helpful and essential to the groups to which they were assigned. The importance of a role model is implied here.

The majority of the students reported some Jewish background. The students felt, generally, that the agency was a

cultural institution for carrying out its Jewish purposes. Most of the students felt that the membership was aware of the agency's Jewish orientation. However, they felt the members' reaction to this to be negative. The students seemed to feel that the programming of Jewish content was at best only partially compatible with the social group work method.

There was a definite trend for most of the respondents to become less interested in working as a professional in a Jewish community center after the student placement. This trend was evident in the responses of even those students with scholarship commitments to the Jewish center field. There were no real differences between the responses of the Yeshiva University students and the students from the other schools.

Implications for Further Research

A follow-up study of this pilot study would prove helpful in determining whether or not the students retain the opinions of the Jewish community center field which they presently have. It is important, we feel, that many of the questions raised from the results of this pilot study be further researched, including the development of an attitude scale in the hope of uncovering more answers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Unfortunately, the feeling of the students toward the Jewish community center was unfavorable. There was an obvious negative trend after the student's placement in the center and we wish to begin to analyze what we feel to be some of the reasons for these feelings.

Many of the students had difficulty identifying with the goals and purposes of the agency. While the student feels that his role falls somewhere within agency objectives, he seems confused as to exactly where. We feel that the stu-

dent often cannot see the "contract" between the agency and the clients. "To the extent that the terms of the agreement are specific and unambiguous the participants are free to pursue their tasks within the system. . . . Where the rules are, or become, obscure and vaguely defined, the major energies of both worker and members become diverted to exploring the boundaries and testing the limits of the group situation."¹⁷ It is the role of the professional social worker in the agency to help the members see the kinds of services which the agency offers, one of which is group work. Smalley states:

The professional social worker can be counted on to embody the values, knowledge, and skill necessary to get those services to the clientele whom they are designed to serve through the use of the social work relationship method in such a way that they stand the best possible chance of being used for both individual and social welfare.¹⁸

The responses of the students imply that the role and function of the social worker in the community center are confusing for them.

Another reason for the negative responses by the students was the lack of direct work with groups by the professional social work staff. The student seems to have difficulty in aspiring to the level where administration and supervision become the major task while direct work with groups becomes a minor task. The student is hesitant to enter a field where success is determined by administrative prowess and not work with groups. The Pins study, as well as this study, has shown that the majority of social group work students are under the age of thirty. It is understandable, therefore, that these young, idealistic,

students do not feel themselves ready to be administrators in a community center. As indicated by the responses of the students, they are interested in entering the therapeutic and treatment oriented settings which are becoming increasingly available.

In these other settings the worker can more easily fulfill his need to be needed than in the Jewish community center setting. According to Schwartz, "the demands of society can be understood more clearly as they present themselves to the group member in the immediate situation than in abstract, holistic terms like 'democratic responsibility' or 'social maturity.'"¹⁹ The demands for a student and professional worker to work with such intangible terms seems to be greater in the Jewish community center setting than in other settings. Although the goals and purposes and the social work functions may often be unclear in the therapeutic or treatment setting, the students, generally, see them as less diffuse and more easily translatable than those in the Jewish community center.

Based on his interpretation of the agency's goals and purposes, the student has difficulty in identifying the tasks that he is supposed to perform. "... Any function can be broken down into a number of tasks necessary to carry it out, and that any specific act performed should come under one or another of these headings."²⁰

The results of this pilot study indicate that the Jewish community center has to become a more exciting and dynamic setting if it is to attract professional social workers. While the trend in agencies has been to become more multifunctional, many of the new services which are being offered have tended to move away from the social work orientation of the agency. We are not sug-

¹⁷ William Schwartz, "The Social Worker in the Group," in *New Perspectives on Services to Groups: Theory, Organization, Practice* New York: NASW, 1961, p. 27-28.

¹⁸ Ruth Smalley, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹⁹ William Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 18-19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

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gesting that this is necessarily bad, but concomitant with this, there should also be an expansion of the social services into new and different areas as well as a self-realized limitation on when social work is not needed. In 1961, Vinter stated:

We noted earlier that the view that all these services constitute a unitary field—such as “group work and recreation”—was mainly due to the absence of criteria for differentiating among the diverse services being offered.²¹

Our final recommendation, following the thinking of Schwartz, is that the Jewish community center become more generic in its social work service. “And it would become increasingly clear that any agency should be capable of creating, in each specific instance, that system of client-worker relationships which

²¹ Robert Vinter, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

is most appropriate to its clients' requirements.” Is it necessary to refer all clients with special problems to case work agencies? Why not begin to tap the fund of resources offered by professional social work staff in the center itself? It is our feeling that such changes would not only improve service to the members but also make the agency more attractive to prospective workers.

Social workers educated with a specialty in group work are working with clients on a one-to-one basis in other settings such as psychiatric hospitals. Can this not also be done in the Jewish community center? Schwartz states:

The function of a social agency is determined more realistically by the social problem to which it has been assigned than by the specific relational systems through which the social worker translates this function into concrete services.²²

²² William Schwartz, *op. cit.*, p. 9.