

INTERPRETING AGENCY PROGRAM

science and history of art or fruitless repetition.

Practicing your science, it would be impossible not to realize that though civilization's discontents are profound and challenging, there are better ways to meet these troubles, and better ways to rig up our society to meet its shifting, never easy burdens. No philosophy is worth a toothpick if it does not rationalize decently the life one leads. Conversely, it is not possible to live and work without working out such a rationalization, such a philosophy. And those who live and work with some zest will find zesty philosophies that fit the muscular movements of the history of our time.

Now what has this to do with interpretation? I think that it means that we must quit the quiet purlieus and get into the main stream, and I know no better way than by intensifying our action on that flank. There is no other way for a dusty, hermit-like agency to widen its effect except by coming out and using words and public deeds to bring itself into the thick of community life.

If case work is effective, prove it by evaluative studies. Do research and experiment with groups, with short term, with long term, with consultative applications of its principles. Make it difficult or impossible for anyone who deals directly with individuals to be unaware of your best findings.

If group work is any good, widen its reach. Make it hard for any person or institution which deals with groups to ignore what you have proved to be correct. I mean schools, group homes,

prisons, chronic hospitals, industry, for a few examples.

Courts, prosecutors' offices, probation departments, parole officers, public officials, receptionists in thousands of public and private offices need to be made aware of what you have discovered.

If vocational guidance can be done both well and ill, and if you are doing it well, why should thousands of our people be denied such help? What about the worker of 45 and older? What can be done to help the automatically retired 65-year-old who is sitting mumbling into his beer glass at his corner tavern?

And homes! What a preventive job you could do if you could convince the public as your sister sciences have! Tillie Smith may give her children too much cod liver oil, but she does take them to the clinic for whooping cough shots, and she does feed them citrus juices. She would feel stupid if she did not. Why can we not give her just the same guilt feelings over providing a tense atmosphere for her young?

It is sure we cannot do this timidly, nor by keeping to our narrow spheres. We cannot get good principles of human association taught in the schools alongside the hygiene of clean teeth unless we fight to have it done. We cannot do any of this without uncorking our more aggressive, more confident selves in a program of persistent, enthusiastic interpretation. Without such a program, social work may become old before it is fully tried, or be used, at best, as a sort of winter tonic for a sick society.

DISCUSSION OF TODD SIMON'S PAPER

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THE plea for an aggressive spirit and program of interpretation as voiced by Mr. Simon should move every thinking and conscientious social worker. Let it be said at the outset that though there are several reservations and qualifications one would care to append to his ringing statement, we have to acknowledge the validity of the basic theses advanced in it that social work interpretation is a function of social work practice; that it is an *ongoing* process, not merely a job done for dress-up affairs; that it is the responsibility of *all* who participate in the various phases of the program; that it must be *dynamically* conceived and *dynamically* operated; that it must be related to *social change*, and throughout, be *purposive* in method and content.

What are some of the questions or objections to Mr. Simon's basic criticism which he has cast so refreshingly in a trenchant and a dramatic style? To begin with, is the matter of extending service, a question of "either or," that is, either a mild, moderate effort, or an all out fighting crusade; or is it usually the steady interpretation of need based on new extrinsic factors, e.g. the influx of large numbers of DP's; or the demands of an articulate segment of the populace, such as parents in new sections of the city, or intrinsic factors such as sharpened awareness by staff and board of

the need to experiment, as in Jewish education, or to coordinate effort, as in youth work.

Next, what do our clients say? For a fact, they do speak exactly as Mr. Simon quotes them. How often has a Center worker writhed to hear the superior young things say with eyebrows arched, "Center dances aren't for me. They draw such a rough crowd"? On the other hand, only last Thursday, the wife of a university professor phoned to ask if the Center could possibly consider a request from the Girl Scout Brownie Troop of the Congregational Church to swim as guests after their meeting.

Board members and volunteers may sometimes hesitate for precise words or terms in defining group work or Jewish Center work. Usually when they know or can use the words, they dislike doing so. They seem to have a pet aversion for our technical language. They do seem to prefer to translate our idioms and concepts into lay terms. Some speak of it derisively as "social workese." Sometimes aren't they justified? However, do not those who stumble and falter, generally experience difficulty with words, oral or written?

Again, the speech of some group workers probably sounds like the staff member imagined by Mr. Simon. It is devoutly to be hoped he exaggerates, to score his point. But at worst, when a professional

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lets himself go on as quoted, it is bound to be within the private precincts of a professional meeting. For don't we hear them just as often, or more commonly, say, "Here is a place where your boy (or your children, or yourselves) has (have) fun, makes and meets friends, and enjoys making things, plays, learns to act for himself and to help others grow and develop."

The callow cub reporter unfortunately is not a figment of Mr. Simon's imagination; unfortunately, too, because even an experienced journalist assigned to do a series on youth problems prefers, or his editor so prefers, to wallow in the sensational aspects of juvenile delinquency, while both eyes are cocked toward circulation figures. I'm speaking of course of only my own city.

On the merits of the small open house, or board tea, this speaker respectfully counsels not to minimize their possible worth. Often, such a gathering, or maybe its modern counterpart, a cocktail party, may alone offer just the right setting for getting over just the right point to just the right persons. One never knows—so long as resorting to this method isn't left to chance, and that an agency naturally does not depend on such means alone for its interpretation.

May a word be said about the emphasis in appeals on the sentimental, since this represents a danger confronting the group worker, too. Some laymen in group work still talk, after all these decades, of "taking the boy off the streets." Here a point must be chalked up in favor of Mr. Simon. Yet even Welfare Funds, which, being set up to aid overseas relief agencies, to succor the victims of Hitler and wars, to resettle Palestine, have to open their emotional stops full way, still did a magnificent job of

education and interpretation, for example to think of one medium, with films like "House in the Desert," "Assignment in Tel Aviv," and others.

Community Chests, too, have penetrated the conventional stereotyped images of social work with radio programs and films showing a professional touch in material, treatment, editing, voices, and above all, from a group work point of view, in highlighting in recent years the constructive uses of leisure time afforded by nursery groups, camps, settlement houses, community centers, youth centers, and youth councils.

The average citizen does seem to be content with the status quo in the financing of social work, possibly more so in the general than in the Jewish field. And a group work administrator with continuously expanding budgetary requirements is indeed sensitive to, and apprehensive over, this condition. He would wonder, though, whether this is a reflection of poor or inadequate social work interpretation alone, or a function of our culture and the monolithic influence of big business.

A more serious criticism is contained in the charge that we concentrate on the remedial, rather than the preventive. Group workers, in the spirit of the very teacher cited contrariwise, Dewey, seek to multiply interests, to extend horizons, to share contacts, to embrace ever larger universes within their focus. Hence arise interests in extension work, in variegated patterns of decentralized activity, in aspirations toward coordinated and integrated efforts, in developing relations with other groups, of other lands for social ends of cooperation, amity and peace.

We have been speaking of interpretation, of public relations, summarized by

one writer¹ as "the total relationship of the agency to the community," wherein "the public relations program is the means by which that relationship purposefully is directed in behalf of the agency."

Oddly enough, another authority writing somewhat earlier² is of the opinion that "many social work programs to not need so much interpretation as their sponsors think they do." He further advises that "the responsibility residing in the leadership" of movements, such as of social work, "is to permit the work done to speak for itself."

Perhaps it is in that spirit that this discussant was reminded of these varied experiences in a Center illustrating: (1) The common stake in interpretation of all the participants, such as constituent members, volunteers, committee members, boards, staff, and (2) How the story speaks for itself.

This Center, in Detroit, recognizing a popular demand, organized a varsity softball team. The players did well, phenomenally well, for a new outfit. Maybe it was "beginner's luck." They won almost every game in every league they entered. Their friends came out to watch them at practice and stayed to cheer them at play. A steady minimum following of 100 appeared at each local game. The father of one player attached himself to the squad, aided in arrangements for travel on out of town playing trips, and generally was helpful to the young man of the staff who did the professional coaching.

Next, are recalled the women volunteers, recruited from a national agency.

¹ Ellwood Street, "A Handbook for Social Agency Administration," New York, Harper 1947, p. 389.

² Pierce Atwater, "Problems of Administration in Social Work," Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1940, p. 216.

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They, in a sense were obliged to serve because their organization was a co-sponsor of the agency's branch. Their mates, however, who came along with them, probably were actuated at first by only husbandly motives. Yet they continued, some of these men, to come on their own.

One such man thus started as a supervisor of the game room. His enthusiasm for all he observed—in the satisfactions afforded the participating children and youth—grew steadily with the months. Soon he was invited to represent the branch in the Central youth activity committee. Then he was promoted to its chairmanship and from that post he was selected as a board member. That his enthusiasm never had remained a private enjoyment but was infectiously communicated through his wide social circles may be seen from these developments. First, when an opportunity was presented the Center to take on two out of town students for field work placement, at a cost of several hundred dollars, he made the first subscription and raised the balance from friends. Secondly, he stimulated several friends who had never before participated in the program of the Center, to join different committees, to attend functions arranged by the Youth Division, to participate as hosts, patrons, critics, and judges. Incidentally, he also obtained an apartment for a new staff member.

Or else consider the Committee Chairman who stimulated 31 leading Jewish artists to sufficient appreciation of the significance and status, too, of the Center's Art Department to enter their best work in an exhibition for which cash awards are furnished by leading families, including one, who, if a swank note may be injected, without my rating any value scales, attended, as old friends from

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Hollywood, the Rita Hayworth-Aly Khan wedding.

Fitting, too, is it to remark in passing on the perennially faithful and reassuring support given by a president, a treasurer, and a budget and finance chairman to the presentation of a constantly growing budget before the Council of Social Agencies Budget Hearing Committee, where interpretation is of the essence in the critical evaluation of agency services.

Similarly, there is the Federation executive, superb at every critical and developmental turn in the history of the agency in his support of its needs; forceful and brilliant over the years in his interpretation of the Center to Chest and Council, an interpretation often daringly conceived and original in formulation, particularly in the areas of the Center's distinctive Jewish philosophy, its changing needs, expanding requirements, and even where it hurts—its special criteria of higher standards, as in personnel.

Finally, the role of the staff, including the full time group and the part time complement, comes to mind. They are always attracting new and more members, although it is equally true that their combined efforts cannot manage to hold on to all the old ones. But of course, this would be both impossible, considering the multifarious, centrifugal forces at work in urban society; and undesirable in light of the development of the new interests which is one of the tests of successful group practice.

Staff also attract resource people, consultants, club leaders—the last whose service even when paid, and reasonably well, is at a premium. The more gratifying, therefore, to the observer of the interpretation process that for the Center's 1949 season of Home Camps, the

oldest unit of which now enters on its 20th season, with a staff of 30 counselors to be engaged, 120 worthy and qualified candidates actually applied.

It isn't the personality of the staff that lures these busy students, supervisors, teachers, professors, artists, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, etc., to the Center. Nor can it be the personal ties which they may exploit unabashedly for the Center. It surely must be, at least in part, the intrinsic work of the agency program—largely the product of staff thought and effort—which these specialists and experts have observed, and which they are willing, pleased or eager to assist.

That there is anything remarkable in the foregoing set of experiences is not being suggested here. Rather are they cited as typical, selected instances of the daily grist of any well-established group work agency. And the moral—simply that none of this would come to pass if it were not for a good program, carefully and earnestly planned, skillfully and democratically planned, too, which did its best to meet the constituents' needs as well as gratify their interests.

Having paid our respect to the contribution of all the workers, it might now be in order to cast an eye at the techniques of publicity and public relations a group work agency deliberately employs.

Public relations work is not conducted systematically. Mr. Simon is correct in his indictment. In fact, except for splurging for special events, observes Mrs. Routzahn, "It tends to be an intermittent activity, neglected under pressure of other work."³

³ Mary Swain Routzahn, "Social Work Yearbook," New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 1949, p. 401.

Yet somebody does the publicity. Usually the executive keeps in close touch with it, if he does not do it himself. Sometimes a staff member combines it with other duties as in Detroit. Within the group work field, metropolitan programs will frequently employ full time specialists, as do national agencies.

In any case, a Center uses photography, radio, lobby displays, and exhibits. It holds annual meetings around a definite theme, often requiring the participation of 100 or more members in the planning and presentation thereof. Its major concerts or art exhibits are reviewed by the first string critics of the metropolitan press. Multi-page spreads are published in gravure sections of Sunday editions. Under well-known by-lines the press reports its outstanding lectures or public events.

But perhaps most meaningful of all the techniques is the involvement of the constituents themselves with their unglamorous but potent word of mouth advertising as recorded by Mr. Simon, and the more recent emphasis on the involvement of the parents. An entire session could be devoted profitably to the numerous, direct uses of parents in interpretation. Let us suffice for this occasion to allude to a few modes currently in vogue in Detroit.

First of all, parents are consulted in the planning, where those concerned would not object, i.e., in children's activities. Secondly, they participate as far as possible in the program. The frying of latkes on Chanukah and the serving of Hamantaschen on Purim are real, but only superficial illustrations. Thirdly, they attend study groups to consider the socio-psychological factors of their children's behavior. They then present, perhaps by telephone poll, their spontaneous

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reactions to certain programs or proposed plans. Last, they vigorously share in the evaluation of past programs. In these several relations, methods of organization employed include parents' committees, councils, advisory boards, and associations.

In all of this process, parents come to appreciate the role of the Center in the psycho-social and Jewish developmental needs of their children, and in the better parent-child relations they should achieve to effect more understanding, more permissiveness, and happier patterns of integrated family living.

To conclude, it is perfectly true as Mrs. Routzahn put it, that "The social agency, faced as it is . . . with complex problems of personal and group adjustment does not lend itself easily to presentation to the public,"⁴ except by persons with a deep and wide familiarity with its program.

Furthermore, the group work agency is additionally handicapped since it rarely turns up a sensational story, being occupied for the most part with the "normal," who, while having a good, if not always a "wonderful" time ostensibly produce nothing dramatic.

There certainly is no call for social work, and group work specifically, to rest on its laurels, so long as there remain the incompletely served areas mentioned by Mr. Simon.

It nevertheless is encouraging to note that group work is aware of its responsibility eloquently underscored by Mr. Simon, to exploit to the hilt all the opportunities inherent in its makeup to reveal that under its impact, people grow in understanding and awareness; in the number, range and refinements of their

⁴ *Ibid.*