

THE EFFECT OF COMMUNITY FACTORS ON THE FAMILY CASE WORK PROCESS

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THE suggestion to schedule a discussion about communal factors in case work within the section of family case work was met with skepticism by some of the committee members. Those who were skeptical felt that the concern with communal factors which may affect case work deserve attention in a session devoted to community interpretation but not in a case work session as such. Some of the affirmative responses referred to the compelling problems of community interpretation as the basis of their interest in such a discussion.

These preliminary deliberations reflect our inclination to exile communal aspects of our job to the area of community interpretation. We accept the necessity to examine community factors as we define the agency's position in the community or possibly as we attempt to determine the agency's responsibility toward the community in offering specific services, but we tend to turn away from a consideration of communal effects on the case work process itself. We are inclined to think of communal effects on the case work process as disturbing interferences which perhaps would not occur if we were to do a better job of community interpretation and education.

Working in a small Jewish community where lay leaders frequently evidence

immediate interest in the agency's actions in specific cases, and where many administrative positions in Jewish social agencies were held by lay leaders up until not many years ago, I fully appreciate the imposing need for a community education job which will aid in bridging the gap between professional social work and the community's thinking about it. Yet, in the short time I have been in Buffalo, I have been impressed with the equally imperative need to consider communal factors not merely as a problem posed by ambivalent feelings of the community as it moves toward absorption of professional standards but often as an essential element of the case work situation and process itself.

Without elaborating further on this statement at this time, I wish to present a case situation which was recently referred to the Jewish Community Service Society in Buffalo and which illustrates the issue under consideration.

It may help to clarify its significance for the subject of this discussion, if I note some of the background data about agency and community. The Jewish Community Service Society was formed by a merger of four small "Aid Societies" in 1930. Functioning under the name of Jewish Welfare Society until two years ago, it took over the "Relief Department" of the Federation, which had existed since 1902. The agency defined

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its purpose in its latest constitution as that of "Maintaining and Strengthening Jewish Family Life." It is a multiple function agency and offers in addition to family case work services, child care, vocational guidance, and refugee migration services.

The community is well aware of the existence of the agency and takes intensive interest in it, though it closely identifies it with the Federation. This undifferentiated understanding and interest may account for frequent requests to meet needs regardless of the agency's functional responsibility. Buffalo has a Jewish population of 18,000. It is a closely knit and intensively organized community. Perhaps partly in reaction to the active religious identification of the Gentile community—with a Catholic majority—Buffalo Jews seem to be acutely aware of Jewish interests and problems both of local and national scope. Many of our cases come to us upon referral by interested people rather than through direct application.

The case I wish to describe came to our attention through such a referral. A well known member of the community phoned to inform us of the inadequacy of Rabbi Lieberman's income. Rabbi Lieberman had been known to the agency since his arrival in Buffalo in 1941. He was a refugee who had come to this country in 1940. Attempts to secure employment with various orthodox organizations had failed and the Union of Orthodox Rabbis had finally procured a job for him in Buffalo as supervising Rabbi of a meat packing company. Rabbi Lieberman wears the traditional orthodox clothing and is of strictly orthodox orientation. He is married and has one child. The Lieberman family received relief from USNA during their stay in New York City and

had been helped with supplementary allowances by our agency at various times during periods of insufficient income and on two occasions during illness.

Rabbi Lieberman was described to us in the latest referral as a Jewish scholar of great distinction and as a man of pride who would find it intolerable to accept relief. The agency's reference to its policy of engaging in case work relationships with clients only upon their request, resulted in a great number of presentations by leading members of the community which urged the agency to give exceptional treatment to this situation and to institute allowances to Rabbi Lieberman in a form which would conceal the source of the allowance as well as its relief character. The indefatigable efforts of some of the interested persons to which we had responded, with the repeated declaration of our readiness to meet with the Rabbi, resulted in the establishment of direct contact with him. He came to the office and expressed his interest in a job as head of a centralized Kashruth agency, if such an agency could be established, or as Rabbi of a strictly orthodox congregation, if such a congregation could be organized for him, or in other positions which would permit him to use his particular skill and knowledge and would make due allowance for his dignity and integrity as a sincerely orthodox person. He had, however, no concrete suggestion about such a position and seemed to believe that it was the worker's job to recommend one. He declared without doubt that he was disinterested in any discussion about his eligibility for a relief allowance in whatever form it would be offered. We were impressed by the sincerity of this man and we had no reason to question his

scholarliness which was attested to by other Rabbis in the community.

Discussing and handling this situation as a question of relief-giving both in response to the client and to the continued efforts of the interested community group, would have been unsatisfactory and inadequate. Rabbi Lieberman had been a recipient of relief allowances for several years. What he called his pride which now prevented him from accepting relief at this time, was actually a matter of status in the community. He had been able to gain the respect and the esteem of a considerable portion of the community for his scholarliness and his sincerity. He strove to find a concrete expression for this achievement.

If we view the client's aim at the time when he contemplates the use of an agency's services as that of a re-definition of his role in his life situation, we have to go beyond the customary boundaries of family or immediate personal relationship roles to understand Rabbi Lieberman's aims. Rabbi Lieberman aspired to a new position in the community.

The position he wished to attain for himself seems to be well in line with his personal qualifications, but he approached his goal by an attempt to assign the responsibility for the creation of this position to the community, while electing to keep himself aloof from the ensuing pressure-interplay between the interested community group and the agency. He was not fully unaware of his friends' activities in his behalf, but he did not know the total extent and the exact direction of their efforts. He certainly felt that he had no obligation to do anything about them.

A letter was written to Rabbi Lieberman informing him of the continued

exertion of pressure on the agency. He was told that efforts were being made to persuade the agency to arrange relief for him and his family in disregard of his declared wish not to consider relief. We expressed the agency's decision to respect his own wishes, but we asked him to come to the agency for a discussion about the situation in view of the unceasing efforts of his friends in the community. At the same time, several of the interested community members were notified of our thinking about the situation resulting in a relaxation of their pressure. Rabbi Lieberman responded to the letter and agreed to arrangements about further contacts.

This case situation served the agency as a challenge to examine the effects of communal factors on the case work process. We cannot claim to have arrived at final answers, but I believe that we have begun to understand some of the basic factors which operate in the constructive use of communal elements in a case work process.

As was pointed out earlier, the interested community group thought of this situation as one of financial need. Though the client's income indeed is a marginal one, he has clearly decided that his financial need is to be met through a change of his position in the community and not through relief. Having started to move toward a different use of himself, a use that excludes relief and employs his ability and knowledge, he seeks integration and recognition in the community. He has been able to activate response to his aspirations, but the response mismatched his goal. The discrepancy between his friends' efforts to procure relief for him and his own goal reflects his undifferentiated use of community structure. He seems to see the community as an amorphous whole,

to which he has to relate in toto, rather than as a structuralized society, within which he has to use himself in adaptation to its specific expressions and resources.

Perhaps because of his different cultural background, which may foster such concepts, or because of some measure of fear of exposing and risking himself, Rabbi Lieberman related his aspirations to the "community at large". The group of community leaders who reacted to his requests translated the general tenor of his views into an equally undifferentiated concept of community by attempting to fit the Rabbi's needs into the functions of the agency without regard for either the Rabbi's actual goal and wishes or for the agency's distinct responsibilities.

The agency can help Rabbi Lieberman to advance toward his goal only by defining its own role as a functionally distinct and identifiable part of the total community. It could not be helpful to him if it were to assume the undefined and undifferentiated role of a representative of the community in all its interests and expressions, or if it were to limit its considerations and understanding of the client's needs to the issue of relief, or if it were to disregard the fact that the question of the extent of the agency's participation in communal living had become part of the Rabbi's problems. Only if the client learns to interact with the community as a functioning society with an organization that is expressive of the manifold facets of its living, can he proceed toward the goal of using himself differently within the community. The agency can provide such an experience for him through engaging with him in terms of its defined services as a distinct and functionally limited part of the total com-

munal organization. In doing so it enables the client to face the problems he has to work through if he desires to move on to a new and more satisfying position for himself.

It was the agency's responsibility to ask Rabbi Lieberman to come in for a discussion about the agency's role in the community as questions about it had arisen in connection with the Rabbi's problem of using community resources. The agency had this responsibility both in the interest of its community relations and in the interest of service to the client. It had to be concerned with the disturbance the Rabbi's use of community had meant to its functioning and it also had to be concerned with the Rabbi's interest as it was affected by his unreal expectation from the agency, which he had projected upon it first directly with incomplete clarification and subsequently indirectly through the medium of his friends in the community. He had ventured a step into community living and whether planfully or without planning he had re-engaged himself with the agency. The agency had the responsibility to react to his venture by clarifying its role both in relation to him and within the total community structure.

We have attempted to understand and to concern ourselves with the ties and roles of clients in the family setting and we have learned to understand that the client grows through his experience in defining and integrating his own role in response to the family's differentiated roles of father, mother, and child. I believe that the client's role in relation to the community, though vaguely defined and understood as it may be, is similarly important for a helpful process in case work situations. The agency's helpfulness in such situations depends

on the definition of its own distinct role and on its readiness to realize that, though distinct in its functions, it is part of the community. The agency's use of itself in such a way will enable the client to discover and assert his own difference and will aid him in a process toward his integration into the community in accordance with his own desire and goal, and may aid him to adjust to a community as it is, with its problems and structural needs which it may or may not be willing to meet.

I believe that the situation I have described forcibly illustrates that people relate to us not merely as individuals or as members of their immediate families, but often also as persons with established ties and relations within the community, and that it is sometimes through the medium of their communal activities that they begin to engage with us. It is in such cases that the effects of communal factors on the case work process need to be understood and handled with acceptance of their proper significance. It is in such cases that we need to see and understand the client

as he strives to function in the community in a position he has chosen or aspired to fill, and that we need to be aware of our own participation in this process as a part of the total community structure with our own and distinct area of functions. Considering communal factors in such situations merely as a disturbing encroachment on the case work process would disregard the component of the client's situation, which his communal aspirations constitute, and would fail to recognize the relation of his communal activities to the agency as part of the total community.

As unexplored as this area of case work thinking appears to be, it holds fascination and it may perhaps be one of the features which make case work in a Jewish agency distinct from case work in a non-sectarian agency, not through difference of technique nor through specific ideological content, but by consciously including into the scope of our concern the expressions of a Jewish community as a living social organism.

THE COMMUNITY'S PART IN THE CASE WORK OF A FAMILY AGENCY

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HARTFORD has a Jewish population of about 25,000. There is a well-established well-to-do middle class. The working class element amongst the Jewish groups is proportionately small. Housing is fairly good and we have no really bad slum areas. The community is not well organized as far as social services are concerned; the Jewish Welfare Fund was started about six years ago. It was only a little over a year ago that the Hartford Jewish Federation was formed. While the Jewish Federation should like to concern itself with the total social services of the Jewish community, it has at best made only a beginning in this direction. There is a Community Chest and a good Council of Social Agencies. The United Jewish Social Service Agency has been a member of the Community Chest and Council of Social Agencies since its inception 25-30 years ago.

As with other agencies in small communities, the Hartford Agency did not always have a professionally trained executive director and staff. The relationship between the agency and the community at one time was very strained. The agency was thought of as the "charities" in the worst connotation of the term.

Until about seven years ago Hartford had a large congregate institution for the care of children. When the Home

was closed, a separate Children's Agency was set up with a foster home program. Undoubtedly, a major factor in deciding to form a separate agency for children's services was the wish to separate the children's work from the "charities".

Likewise when the Refugee Service of Hartford was formed in 1938, it also was organized as a separate agency; and again for the same reason the existence of the strained relationship between the agency and the community.

About eight years ago the agency engaged a professional director, and many long needed changes were instituted as a result of a survey made by the Council of Jewish Federations and Welfare Funds.

In 1942 the Refugee Service of Hartford merged its services with the United Jewish Social Service Agency. Negotiations are now under way to merge the Jewish Children's Agency with the United Jewish Social Service Agency.

At best a small agency works under a handicap. A large agency can evaluate its professional work much more effectively. It has a larger number of cases. The larger agency can make studies of intake, of treatment processes, can assign cases to specialized workers, has more resources for study and evaluation of its work. Our case sampling is not large enough for this. The small agency must look to these larger agen-