THE JCC TEEN WORKER:
A Model for Professional Practice

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One reason why many JCCs are failing to serve adolescents effectively is the decline in the number of social workers employed as teen workers. Social work practice is based on several key values—self-determination, group work, the professional self, and diagnostic skills—that are crucial to successful engagement with adolescents. By using social work as a method and Jewish identity building as a function, strengthening Jewish identity becomes a natural byproduct.

The majority of JCC teen programs in the United States are unsuccessful. Very few teens are involved, programs are fragmented, and there is a continual failure to address the Jewish mission of the agency. JCC directors, lay people, and national consultants have identified and accepted this reality as a problem. In response, a number of task force committees have been formed to address the critical concern of losing our Jewish youth.

Speculation as to why Jewish teens are generally apathetic focus on several possible causes. In an environment dominated by AIDS, drugs, parental complacency, divorce, and intermarriage, it is not surprising that Jewish activities remain a low priority for Jewish teenagers.

This article puts forth another reason for the lack of involvement of Jewish youth in Jewish activities, particularly those offered by JCCs—the decline in the number of social work professionals employed by JCCs to work with this population.

Until recently, social work training was the most prevalent and accepted academic credential in the JCC field (Altman, 1988). Today, new types of personnel are being hired to work with adolescents, as social workers are no longer seen as the most effective professionals for molding the Jewish adolescent identity. Such disciplines as education, health and wellness, and Jewish studies have for the most part replaced social work.

This article presents elements of JCC MetroWest's teen department as a model for effectively addressing adolescent non-involve-ment. The department's activities are guided by a philosophy that integrates social work with Judaism, whereby social work is the method and Jewish identity building is part of the social work function. Norman Linzer (1996, p. 118) states, in a comment on the code of ethics of the Association of Jewish Center Professionals:

> The welfare of the people being served, the development of their fullest capacities, and the improvement of social conditions attest to the social work goals of the Center field. The promotion of Jewish values and the assurance of Jewish continuity attest to its Jewish goals. The Jewish goals have been receiving greater attention because of the erosion of Jewish life due to assimilation and intermarriage.

The JCC MetroWest boasts a nationally recognized teen program, including over 35 active groups and committees, in addition to those in health and wellness. On any given night, 75 to 100 teens are engaged in a multitude of groups: leadership, social action, cultural, social, therapeutic, and educational. Close to 7,000 of a possible 12,000 Jewish teens are involved in JCC MetroWest's teen programs each year. The program's popularity and reputation in the community have attached new meaning to the customary teen worker position, adding the self- and community-ascribed characterizations of confidant, role model, and caregiver. JCC teen workers also serve as consultants, writers, and speakers on how to create a successful

teen program.

In examining my habitual ways of working and thinking as well as those of my social work colleagues, I found extraordinary differences between social work methodology and that of other disciplines. Coincidentally or not, there also appears to exist a profound difference between social worker success compared with that of non-social workers.

Because teens today live in such a challenging environment, Boeko (1996, p. 1) asserts, "It is not possible to create a youth program within our JCCs that does not deal with discussing sex, drugs, AIDS, substance abuse, and intermarriage." Those workers who do not have skills in dealing with relationships, referrals, group work, personality, developmental stages, separation of personal and professional issues, assessment, programming, Jewish education, and services to individuals and families will not be able to work effectively with teens.

Many JCC's have chosen to hire Jewish educators as their teen workers, in the belief that these professionals could *best* fulfill the Jewish continuity mission. Despite these educators' good intent, adolescents have not been receptive to their techniques. In contrast, social workers have the capacity to use their professional skills to build a program that brings adolescents into the building while concomitantly fulfilling the agency's *Jewish* function. The Jewish educational directive alone does not appear to be sufficient.

Dubin (1983, p. 13) points out that the lack of self-awareness and self discipline among young people entering the field results in behaviors that are counter-productive in meeting minimally accepted standards of practice. In discussing these new workers, Dubin observed that "workers now entering the field of Jewish communal service, particularly those with a generic orientation, do not appear to have struggled enough with reconciling personal needs with the development of the professional self."

THE CASE FOR JEWISH EDUCATORS AS TEEN WORKERS

At first glance, the case for a non-social work, ideologically directive approach to work with adolescents seems an appropriate way to actualize *Jewish* goals. Without an increase in Torah study and the repetitive practice of uniquely Jewish behaviors, the formation of strong Jewish identities is unlikely (Levitz, 1995). For identity "involves a complex integration of specific values, attitudes, knowledge content, skills, and beliefs that inform specific behaviors" (Levitz, 1995, p. 78).

Without attention to Jewish values and knowledge, Jewish communal agencies as Judaizing instruments may continue to fail. Bubis (1980) asserts that the only way to meet the needs and future of Jewish life may be to employ an ideologically directed approach. He questions why self-determination, which remains a high priority for social workers, deserves to be the supreme value: "In my opinion, it is not the option of the Jewish social worker, paid with Jewish dollars for work in Jewish agencies, to be parties to the destruction of Jewish life. There must be, then, an articulation of Jewish expectation and concern transmitted to a client" (Bubis, 1980, p. 234).

Reisman (1981) asserts that Jewish professionals should be role models for their communities and clients. They therefore require a comprehensive knowledge of Jewish history, ideology, geography, and sociology, as well as religious practice. The claim that this type of worker and approach is best in order to ensure Jewish continuity may have veracity.

ADVANTAGES OF THE SOCIAL WORK MODEL

Yet, the task of ensuring a Jewish future is a complex one, and a background in Jewish education is insufficient. David Dubin, who was a leading professional in the JCC field, wrote that the development of the Jewish self is "inextricably related to other personal factors which can best be handled with diagnostic and professionally interventive skill" (1980, p. 251).

For example, Jewish adolescents of the 1990s typically have lives devoid of any Jewish experience, remaining resistant, unwill-

ing, and even hostile toward Jewish sensitization. When this reality is juxtaposed with sexuality, drugs, HIV/AIDS, low self-esteem, and other adolescent issues, a case can be made that those workers able to conceptualize this current reality, while concomitantly having the skill to deal with its manifestations, are best suited to meet needs. Social workers thus have the most comprehensive package of skills necessary to both attract large numbers of teens and respond to the vision of the JCC movement.

To be effective and purposeful when working with adolescents at a JCC, one must practice with a commitment to the agency's *Jewish* function. A practice framework in which the Jewish component is integrated within a social work philosophy is most likely to result in effective engagement.

Smalley (1967) observed, "The use of agency function and function in professional role gives focus, content and direction to social work processes, assures accountability to society and to agency, and provides the partialization, the concreteness, the 'difference,' the 'given' which further productive engagement" (p. 151).

The JCC is guided by a mission statement that defines its function: the strengthening of Jewish identity. As this is the agency function, the social worker, who understands the theoretical components of identity, can be comfortable accepting this as a goal and can facilitate its implementation.

As long as the social worker is deeply rooted in the values of the profession, the charge of carrying out agency function can be incorporated through a balancing of the values of each. Linzer (1979, p. 317) explains,

> The Jewish social worker who shares commitments to authentic Jewish life and to the values and ethics of his profession is afforded the opportunity to develop a philosophy of practice that accords with Judaic and social work principles. The possibility for integration of the religion and the profession is ripe. Such integration can only enrich professional practice in the service of the client.

Social work professionals can formulate their own philosophy of working with people through incorporating both Jewish and social work values into their values system. The JCC's mission statement is based on values that are dear to both social work and Judaism. At times, when conflicts do arise, the worker will need to employ a method of resolving value conflicts.

Social work practice is based on several key values that are crucial to successful engagement with adolescents.

Self-Determination

In its most absolute form, self-determination is respect for the client's ultimate right to make his or her own decisions. The social worker understands, however, that this highly valued attribute cannot be applied indiscriminately. It is unreasonable to think that any one person can always do exactly what he or she wants.

The social worker's objective is to increase the client's ability to make decisions, not to make them for him or her, unless there is real danger or harm to the client or others. The client's acceptance of help is based on a perception that a problem exists and his or her desire to be helped. All of this is predicated on the agency's capability of providing the service.

The principle of self-determination is not meant to be used passively. The social worker attempts to facilitate change in the client's functioning, enhancing the ability to meet his or her needs more effectively. This change must be consistent with the goal of increasing the client's capacity for self-direction, taking into consideration options and consequences.

Group Work

The bulk of teen workers' practice is group work and outreach. The JCC teen worker must be able to deal with groups that range in composition, duration, purpose, and role. Teens can originate goals, ideas, and programs. The worker need not be proficient about the best ski slopes, but rather how to facilitate a group decision concerning whether

members even *want* to go skiing. The worker should always keep in mind that the program should reflect the needs of the adolescents as well as staying within the purview of the agency's function.

For the social worker, group work practice *has* a significant theoretical base, and as a result, *produces* significant results.

> The group work method includes the worker forming purposeful relationships to group members and the group. This includes a conscious focusing on the needs of the members, on the purpose of the group as expressed by the members, as expected by the sponsoring agency, and as implied in the members' behavior. It is differentiated from a casual unfocused relationship (Alissi, 1980, p. 232).

As a group worker, my role is to help members create what they have the ability to create, within limits. This entails encouraging people to be real in the group, to take risks, and to be spontaneous.

Group members' needs are conceptualized by the social worker by developing a prescription for each group member, predicated on observations and the member's expressed needs. With this prescription in mind, goals are formulated, creating a purposeful process that helps members become more aware, take responsibility for their actions, and to then use their group experience for growth. In this context, Klein (1972, p. 24) observed, "Cooley's concept of the 'looking-glass self' is a very basic idea because it establishes the tremendous influence the group has on individual growth and development since a person thinks of himself as he imagines he appears in the eyes of others judged by their reactions and behavior to him."

The non-social worker may not understand group self-determination. Dubin (1980, p. 248) asserts that "their technique in working with groups is largely intuitive rather than purposeful and there is a distinct lack of goal setting in determining desirable change." Consequently, the non-social worker builds a program predicated on their *own* self-determination, and typically fails.

The Professional Self

Becoming a social worker entails more than book knowledge; one is charged with developing a professional self as part of one's disposition. Although an ongoing process, once even a hint of a 'professional self' is developed, an idea emanates of how to use this self in a purposeful way. Rosenthal (1971, p. 2) has observed

> Some people seem more helpful than others; something they do or something about them gives them greater success in helping clients. When we study them we observe particularities about their attitudes, behavior, skills, and the way they engage that seem uniquely effective and worthy of replication. Such emulation calls for effort on our part and awareness of shaping ourselves to be in some measure like these helpful others. To do so entails a vision of what we are like and how we need to change. We hold ourselves in view so to speak as we act and measure ourselves against this more effective helper.

In keeping with the theme of an integrated framework, the conscious use of self must include agency function. The worker needs to integrate social work and Judaic principles to form a "Jewish conscious use of self" (Levine, 1985).

Part of developing a professional self entails a recognition of one's other self—the personal self. This recognition is not a casual feeling of "Yes, I know myself;" rather it is a deep awareness of the uniqueness of one's core self and identifying aspects that make one unique. It is my contention that very few of us intimately know our personal self. Without this knowing, there is no solid foundation from which to grow and develop into a professional.

In order to become professional one needs to examine one's self, see what one is like, and discover how one needs to change in order to be more effective. Through process

recordings, self-reflection, and purposeful confrontation by my supervisor, I realized that I originally acted on my own personal needs rather than those of the adolescents. The process of change was something that I desired, took responsibility for, and acknowledged as a need. The social work educational process facilitated these changes.

The typical non-social worker may not have had this opportunity to struggle to identify his or her self, which therefore may explain in part his or her inability to be effective. Without having been affected by the *process* in a purposeful way, as an instrument of helping, one may unknowingly contain significant flaws.

Dubin (1983, p. 14) identifies behaviors that typify the non-social worker; he observed that:

> Young professionals show too much evidence they circumvent process to gain personal recognition rather than enabling others to gain recognition by helping them execute for themselves. A worker's expedience in taking unilateral action, side-stepping the process of involvement of self and others not only forecloses on opportunities for self-growth within the client but indicates both a lack of faith in people and a greater absorption with self than with others.

Diagnostic Skills

The term "diagnostic" is not borrowed from medicine; rather it connotes a process of engagement that stimulates opportunities of choice and growth.

The typical Jewish communal worker brings to each aspect of his or her work a particular understanding, based on past experiences of what to expect and how to carry out professional responsibilities. The social worker uses diagnostic skills, and focus is given to each particular situation in its uniqueness. Smalley (1967, p. 136) explains,

> Such a view of diagnosis recognizes that people, groups, and communities do not stay put in categories and that any attempt to place and keep them there and to plan service or help on

> the basis of a "firm diagnosis" made denies potential for growth and change, and can actually be stultifying and inhibiting of growth through too arbitrary an expectation of what can be expected from "this kind" of individual, group, or community.

Smalley's use of the words "stultifying" and "inhibiting" illuminates the negative impact that those who are not trained in social work can have on individuals, groups, or a community. I recently attended a seminar on how to market to teens, and it soon became apparent that the non-social workers in attendance were enamored with the prospect of finding out who today's teens really are, and how to program for them. The teen marketing specialist carefully discussed the way adolescents dress, the television shows they watch, and the video games they play. There was a complete disregard for the uniqueness of each community and the uniqueness of the local teens. To an audience of non-social workers, unable to go through the process of diagnosis, this seminar and other similar experiences offer a quick fix, but they seem to generate "stultifying" and "inhibiting" practice skills. In other words,

> The capacity for meaningful professional activity hinges on the worker's ability to formulate notions based on a conceptual understanding of behavior of the community and the goals of the agency. The key is the worker's ability to relate his professional activity to a targeted need, identified through observation and definition (Dubin, 1983, p. 14).

The JCC MetroWest's course catalogue of six years ago was filled with listings of programs, trips, and clubs. Yet, the total number of teens that were attracted to these activities was minuscule. The non-social worker who orchestrated the program did not have the diagnostic skills to formulate a vision that could meet the needs of the adolescents.

CONCLUSION

The particular type of relationship that a social worker facilitates for individuals,

groups, and communities is at the very essence of whether or not his or her work will be effective and purposeful. All aspects of the social work process are used in establishing and maintaining this relationship. The social worker-client relationship is complex, involving the worker's finely tuned ability to understand interrelationships of people and society's interrelationship with individuals and groups.

Before accomplishing the goal of strengthening Jewish identity, the ability to engage adolescents must be present. The lofty goal of ensuring Jewish continuity cannot be achieved without people in the building. The social worker engages adolescents and brings them through the doors; the relationship is further enhanced using finely tuned skills and technique. The Jewish mission as the agency's function is integrated, predicated on where the client or group is at.

Those workers who can effectively integrate social work and Jewish components into their practice will find that their philosophy is most congruent with the needs of the Jewish community. Using social work as a method and Jewish identity building as a function, enhancing Jewish identity becomes a byproduct.

For JCC MetroWest, success has been measured by the high percentage of adolescents who, after being involved in JCC activities, seek out other opportunities to strengthen their Jewish identity. These include membership in Jewish youth groups, Jewish camp experiences, Israel trips, Hillel involvement on their college campus, and the tendency to in-date.

The Jewish community is beginning to realize the urgency of investing in its adolescents. Just as one invests planfully in stocks, bonds, or commodities, a well thought-out strategy must be forged. Too many JCCs have wasted resources and lost opportunities in their effort to attract the attention of their adolescent constituents. It is my hope that the ideas discussed generate some thought about developing a framework for practice that may help to bring teens back to *your* JCC.

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