

# THE VALUE OF JEWISH COMPONENTS IN THE EXPERIENCE OF VOLUNTEER BIG BROTHERS

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*The Jewish family agency has not traditionally been perceived as an instrument of Jewish continuity for volunteers. The extent to which volunteers view their experience in a family agency as an instrument to strengthen their sense of Jewishness was examined in this study of the big brothers of two Jewish agencies. The findings indicate the importance of the agency's Jewish context to big brothers. A change in professionals' approach toward the integration of Jewish components in their work with volunteers is suggested.*

The role of the Jewish family agency in the preservation of Jewish identity has been a topic for ongoing discussion in recent years in the field of Jewish communal service (Bubis, 1987; Miller, 1983; Reisman, 1983). Whether and to what extent Jewish-related issues should be part of service delivery has been at the center of these discussions, which have included such questions as the extent to which the integration of Jewish components is a vital part of service delivery and to what extent those components are significant to service recipients.

Miller (1983) conceptualized the underlying issue in these discussions as a conflict between professionalism and ideology. According to the ideological view, one of the objectives of the Jewish family agency is to serve as an instrument of Jewish continuity. This view supports the integration of Jewish-related issues into the process of service delivery. The nonideological view, in contrast, attempts to avoid unethical situations in which professionals may act upon the agency's ideology and not in response to clients' needs. According to this view, the professional's approach should be limited to the family agency's traditional role of meeting specific individual and family needs.

The focal system of these discussions about the role of Jewish components in the Jewish family agency's function has generally been the client population. However, those issues could also be applied to an interrelated group of people who often operate

within a family agency—the volunteers who provide services to clients and are supervised by professionals.

Family agencies have not generally been perceived as instruments of Jewish continuity for volunteers. As in the discussion about clients, the question is whether there is a place for an ideological stance in the professionals' work with volunteers. To respond to this question there is first a need to understand the meaning to volunteers of this issue. An understanding of the volunteers' perspective may clarify whether an integration of Jewish-related issues into work with volunteers could create any conflict between professionalism and ideology and whether it is appropriate here to view the family agency as an instrument of Jewish continuity for volunteers.

The extent to which volunteers view their experience in a family agency as a means of strengthening their sense of Jewishness is the focus of this article, which reports the findings of a recent study of the experience of volunteer big brothers (Shor, 1992). This study population included the active volunteers of two Jewish big brother agencies: Jewish Big Brothers of Los Angeles and Jewish Big Brother and Big Sister Association of Boston.

Big brothers are men who volunteer to serve as a special friend to a boy or a girl whose father is not involved in their lives. They provide an extrafamilial social support for these children. The attention of service

providers has generally been on the altruistic element of the volunteers' activity, not on what the volunteers receive from their experience. One of the elements of the big brothers' experience, the value to big brothers of the Jewish context, has never been explored before.

Social exchange theory (Schafer, 1980) illuminates the significance of focusing on the self-interest part of the volunteers' experience. It contends that all interactions are based upon an exchange of costs (what one gives, the altruistic aspect of volunteering) and rewards (what one receives, the self-interest aspect). Whereas some volunteers may merely seek the intrinsic satisfaction derived from helping someone, on a less altruistic level others may seek nonmaterialistic rewards.

One of the nonmaterialistic rewards that involvement in a Jewish agency may provide to a volunteer big brother is the opportunity to develop a sense of connection with other Jewish people. London and Frank (1987) suggest that there is a close relationship between a person's affiliation to other Jewish people and his or her Jewish identity. For big brothers, beyond the altruistic act of helping a child, their activity may provide them an opportunity to develop a sense of connection to other Jewish people and thereby to strengthen their sense of Jewishness. This opportunity may be especially important to those men who are not involved in any other Jewish organization and whose experience as big brothers is their only Jewish-related experience. For them, the importance of their experience as big brothers in fulfilling the self-interest value of developing a sense of connection to other Jewish people might be heightened. An examination of this hypothesis can provide an indication of whether the experience of volunteering in a Jewish big brother agency has the potential to contribute to their sense of Jewishness. This finding could support the view that the Jewish family agency is an instrument of Jewish continuity.

## METHODOLOGY

A Jewish community affiliation scale (JCAS) was developed in this study to measure big brothers' perception of the extent to which they felt an increased sense of belonging to the Jewish community. The instrument also included background questions about the big brother and the child. The JCAS is a four-item likert-type scale that includes five possible responses describing the experience of the respondents, ranging from "not at all" to "to a very great extent." The intent of these possible responses was to indicate the extent to which each of the following four statements described the big brothers' experience: "Being a big brother has increased my feeling of connection to the Jewish community," "Being a big brother has given me the opportunity to be connected to other Jewish men," "Being a big brother has increased my sense of Jewish identity," and "Being a big brother has given me the satisfaction of being able to contribute to the Jewish community."

Eighty-two percent of the questionnaires were returned ( $n=202$ ): 129 from the Los Angeles agency and 73 from the Boston agency. Two methods were applied to measure the reliability of the JCAS. An internal consistency test of the scale using Cornbach's Alpha coefficient with the 202 questionnaires indicated high internal consistency results of 0.84. A test-retest method was conducted with 68 big brothers from the Los Angeles group, indicating a high stability of the responses to the JCAS:  $r = 0.77$ .

## RESULTS

The men's responses to the background questions indicated that for the majority (70%,  $n=141$ ) their involvement in a Jewish big brother agency was their only connection to a Jewish organization. London and Frank (1987) pointed out a relationship between being young, single, and childless and a low level of religious involvement.

The demographic characteristics of the big brothers support this observation. Their mean age was 35.9 years ( $SD=10.3$ ), ranging from 20 to 74. The majority of men ( $n=143$ , 71%) were not married or living with anyone when they became big brothers, and only a very small percent—4% ( $n=8$ )—had children living with them when they became big brothers.

These findings indicate that a Jewish big brother agency attracts men who are generally not affiliated with the Jewish community. However, the possibility of drawing implications about the potential of the agency to serve as an instrument of Jewish continuity from this descriptive information could have been limited by not knowing whether the Jewish element had any importance to the volunteers. This question was addressed through an examination of the hypothesis that the importance of Jewish affiliation to big brothers might be heightened by the absence of alternative involvement in other Jewish organizations.

A multiple regression analysis indicated a statistically significant inverse relationship between big brothers' involvement in other Jewish organizations and the JCAS ( $t = 3.155, p < 0.1$ ). Those big brothers who were not involved in other Jewish organizations rated the JCAS higher. They considered the contribution of their experience as big brothers to their sense of connection to other Jewish people as more important than did those who were involved in other Jewish organizations.

This analysis demonstrates that the fact that such a high percentage of "unaffiliated" men were involved in a Jewish agency was not merely a descriptive one but that the Jewish context was important for these volunteers. It provided them an opportunity to fulfill the self-interest value of increasing their sense of connection to Jewish people through their experience as big brothers.

#### IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate the

potential that the Jewish big brother agency has to attract "unaffiliated" Jewish men and to contribute to their sense of Jewishness. Those findings, which reflect the social exchange theory's bidirectional perspective, can serve as a basis for professionals in developing a different approach in their work with volunteers in Jewish big brother agencies. Professionals generally have not focused on what the volunteers receive from their experience, and even if they had, they generally did not relate to the Jewish components in the big brothers' experience. Based on the interest in developing their sense of Jewishness through their experience as big brothers that the volunteers indicated in the study, a different approach can be taken, one that views the integration of Jewish-related issues into the professionals' work with volunteers as legitimate and relevant.

That the integration of Jewish-related issues into service delivery could be in response to the volunteer's self-interest provides a different outlook on the conflict between professionalism and ideology. Integrating Jewish-related issues into work with volunteers then becomes less of an ideological issue and more of a professional responsibility. The volunteers may need help in addressing issues that pertain to their interest in developing a sense of Jewishness. Relating to these issues may be important in understanding and supporting them in their role. For example, by addressing issues related to the Jewish components in the volunteers' experience, professionals may find that the volunteers may feel anxiety about being able to connect with a Jewish child because of their lack of knowledge about Judaism. Helping them develop a sense of comfort within a Jewish environment may be essential at this point to the success of the relationship between a big brother and a child.

There are other ways in which professionals can help volunteers fulfill their self-interest, ways that can increase the nonmaterialistic rewards in the volunteers' experience. For example, those big brothers

who are not involved in other Jewish organizations could be offered the opportunity to become involved in the various committees of the agency. These activities can provide the men with another avenue to increase their sense of connection to the Jewish community. The agency can also organize seminars or special events that will provide big brothers with the knowledge and context for Jewish-oriented activities and help them develop a sense of comfort with the subject. Eisenberg, Gwatkin, and Tracy (1991) reported on a seminar that they developed for Jewish big brothers and sisters. This type of seminar, which can be characterized more as formal Jewish education, should be optional for big brothers, and in this way the agency would maintain its emphasis on the big brothers' self-interests.

Because the study included volunteers from Jewish big brother agencies in two different communities in the United States and because of the high internal consistency and stability results of the JCAS, the implications drawn from the present study can be generalized to other Jewish big brother agencies in the United States. To a certain extent those implications can also be generalized to work with volunteers in other Jewish family agencies; for example, the importance that professionals in their supervisory meetings with volunteers attribute to the Jewish component of the volunteer experience.

Some similarities could be drawn between the volunteer and the client. For clients, especially those who are not affiliated with the Jewish community, association with a Jewish agency could be a way of responding to an interest and need relating to their Jewishness that they may have. Whether and to what extent the Jewish components in service delivery are important to clients is an issue to be explored in future research.

#### SUMMARY

A Jewish family agency, such as a Jewish

big brother agency, fulfills one of the main objectives of Jewish communal service as stated by Miller (1983)—to expose people to Jewish experience of any kind that results in their having more positive feelings about themselves as Jews. Although debate about the role of the Jewish family agency as an instrument of Jewish continuity has been centered mainly around the client population, the present study broadens the debate to include volunteers. The opportunity to establish an affiliation with Jewish people is one of the components that volunteers, especially the "unaffiliated" ones, may value in their experience. Therefore, the focus on Jewish components in the volunteers' experience could be considered an integral and necessary part of the professional's responsibility in helping volunteers fulfill their role.

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