FROM EDUCATION TO PRACTICE
IN SOCIAL GROUP WORK *

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On one occasion when Rabbi Tarfon, Rabbi Yose the Galilean, and Rabbi Akiba were assembled in . . . Lydda, the following question was raised before them: "Which is the more important, is study the more important, or is practice the more important?" Rabbi Tarfon spoke up and said: "Practice is the more important." Rabbi Akiba spoke up and said: "Study is the more important." Whereupon they all spoke up and said: "Study is the more important, for study leads to practice."

(Quoted in Judah Goldin's *THE LIVING TALMUD*)

A REVIEW of developments in social group work indicates that social work educators, practitioners, and social agencies have for years been deeply concerned about the gaps, actual or perceived, between the preparation acquired by trained social group workers through social work education and the preparation required of them for competent professional performance in their first jobs after graduation from schools of social work.

I say actual or perceived gaps because year after year I have heard, in conferences and workshops, echoes of the as-

sumption that group work graduates are not equipped to undertake the agency responsibilities assigned to them after receipt of the social work degree. This assumption has generally been based on the premise that the chief emphasis in social work education for group work majors is on the direct leadership of primary face-to-face groups, but the primary agency expectations of group work graduates are in administration and supervision.

Both the assumption and the premise seemed to deserve testing. This paper reports such a study. Its specific purpose was to examine, from the perspective of practitioners' perceptions, the relevance of social group work education to the first positions obtained by trained group workers upon graduation from schools of social work.

Study Methodology

The methodology of the study consisted of the following:

1. A review of social work literature and the history of social work education for evidence of trends in group work education in the United States.
2. An examination of recent catalogues, bulletins, field work manuals, course syllabi and outlines, administrative memoranda, correspondence and other materials from accredited schools of social work in the

United States for written statements of the educational objectives and academic requirements in group work sequences which were in effect between 1953 and 1955.

3. An inquiry addressed to trained group workers graduated in 1955 from schools of social work in the United States which offer an accredited group work sequence, for the purpose of determining the kinds of responsibilities they assumed in their first full-time agency jobs and for the purpose of ascertaining the relevance they found their social work education had for these jobs.

4. An inquiry addressed to the supervisors of the graduates in their first full-time agency jobs, for the purpose of ascertaining the relevance that they judged the graduates' social work education had for the graduates' agency responsibilities.

Questionnaires addressed to graduates and supervisors were timed so that respondents would have had approximately one year of agency experience upon which to base their responses.

Twenty of twenty-one accredited schools of social work in the United States which offered a concentration in social group work participated in the study. They accounted for 131 group work graduates of whom ninety-five returned completed questionnaires. Since not all of these respondents had supervisors—some were agency executives and others were not in social work employment—eighty-two supervisors were identified and sixty-three participated. On the basis of known characteristics, no significant difference was found between respondents and non-respondents.

Emphasis of Schools in Group Work Sequence

The assumption that schools of social work emphasize primarily the direct leadership of primary face-to-face groups in the curriculum contents of the group work sequence is supported by analysis of their educational objectives. Some schools have, of course, moved toward a generic emphasis in the social work curriculum so that the first year at least includes considerable content which is addressed to all students regardless of their chosen area of interest, and is designed to deal with the field of social work as a whole. Only a few schools, however, have applied this approach to field work practice in the first year, for students generally have field work assignments in their preferred discipline during the first year even though courses during that year are devoted in large measure to effecting understanding of the field of social work as a whole.

In recent years, a number of schools of social work have attempted to help students derive, from particular field experiences and course content, principles of general social work practice and general principles of practice within each social work discipline regardless of the setting in which it is practiced.

In formulating their objectives, schools have realistically acknowledged the common agency practice of assigning administrative responsibilities to newly graduated social group workers. In fact, one school reflects the intention of most schools in its statement that:

During the second year the students consider those aspects of supervision and administration which seem most likely to prepare them for the sub-executive positions that the majority of them will fill when they leave school.

It is generally admitted by the schools that field assignments and instruction during the first year are focused on developing students' "skill in working with groups of various size, degree of organization, composition and program capacity," and that "during the second year there is a continuing emphasis on developing ability in direct group leadership though some attention is given to the supervisory and administrative functions of the group worker."

Settings and Responsibilities of Graduates' First Employment

The assumption also, that trained group workers carry primarily administrative and supervisory responsibilities in their first positions after graduation from schools of social work, is supported by an analysis of graduates' agency responsibilities. Before the responsibilities are examined, however, a look at the settings in which they are carried may be of interest.

Settlements and neighborhood houses employed twenty-seven of the eighty-nine respondents in the study sample who accepted social work employment. Jewish Community Centers employed eighteen. Together these agencies employed more than half of the respondents in social work employment. Both types of agencies were represented by respondents in approximately the same proportion of the sample that they were represented by graduates in the study population.[1]

Eighty graduates were employed in group work agencies, or in group work settings within social agencies not primarily designed, established, or operated to meet needs of clients through group work service. One graduate who was employed in a settlement, however, was employed as a community organization worker rather than as a group worker. Nine participants were employed in social casework or community organization settings. In other words, ten of the eighty-nine group work graduates in social work employment did not hold group work positions.

Of the seventy-nine graduates in group work employment, sixty-two were employed in the so-called traditional settings—i.e. settlements and neighborhood houses, community centers, youth organizations, Y's, Girl Scouts, summer camps, and so on. Seventeen were employed in the so-called "special" settings—i.e. psychiatric hospitals and clinics, residential treatment institutions, and other agencies not primarily, historically or traditionally identified with the use of the group work method or only recently established to render group work service to special groups such as street gangs, physically or emotionally handicapped children, and so on.

Only eleven of twenty-seven graduates employed by settlements and neighborhood houses were males as compared with fifteen of eighteen employed by Jewish Community Centers. Taken together, the "traditional" group work settings employed almost an equal number of male and female graduates, but the "special" group work settings employed more females than males.

Since the position titles of graduates were not always indicative of their major agency responsibility, graduates' estimates of proportion of work-time spent in the different categories of agency responsibility as defined in the job description section of the questionnaire schedules,[2] were taken into account in classifying respondents according to primary agency responsibility. Thus graduates in group work employment were classified as primarily responsible for direct group leadership if they estimated that they spent as much or more time in the direct leadership of primary face-to-face

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[1] All of the settings represented by the study population, as far as could be indicated by schools which participated in the study, were represented by the responding group. Moreover, except for a few of the agencies represented by but one or two responding graduates, all of the settings were represented in the study by responding supervisors.

[2] The categories of responsibility defined in the schedules included direct leadership of primary face-to-face groups, direct leadership of intergroups, administration, supervision and in-service training, work with individuals, relationships with community agencies or groups, recording and research. Provision was made for the inclusion of additional responsibilities.

groups than they spent in any other category of job responsibility. Others were classified as primarily responsible for administration and supervision if in their estimation they spent the bulk of their job time on these two phases of responsibility.

On this basis, thirty-one or thirty-nine per cent of the seventy-nine respondents in group work employment were responsible primarily for the direct leadership of primary face-to-face groups, and forty-eight, or sixty-one per cent, for administration and supervision. The former group, which was surprisingly large, spent an average of forty per cent of their work-time in the direct leadership of primary groups and less than twenty-three per cent in administration and supervision.

Those with primary responsibility for administration and supervision spent altogether an average of fifty-eight per cent of their work-time in these categories of responsibility. Those with primary responsibility for direct group leadership spent proportionately more time in work with individuals and in recording and less time in inter-group work than did those with primary responsibility for administration and supervision. This could be expected since responsibility for leading primary face-to-face groups is usually associated with recording and with counseling, referral and other work with individuals, and responsibility for administration and supervision is usually associated with work with boards, board committees and other representative bodies in the agency.

Forty-eight per cent of female graduates as against only twenty per cent of male graduates estimated that they spent more time in the direct leadership of primary groups than in other agency responsibilities, and conversely, a larger proportion of the male graduates evidently assumed responsibility primarily in administration and supervision.

No graduates with primary responsibility for direct group leadership were over thirty-four years of age.

A larger proportion of graduates with major responsibility in group leadership than of those with administrative and supervisory responsibility had had no full-time social work experience before enrolling for full-time graduate social work study. All but four had fewer than three years of prior experience.

Fifteen of the twenty-six graduates in group work employment in settlements and neighborhood houses were primarily responsible for direct group leadership as compared with only two of the eighteen employed in Jewish Community Centers. Only nine of the seventeen graduates employed in "special" group work settings had primarily administrative and supervisory responsibility as

TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF AVERAGE PROPORTIONS OF ESTIMATED WORK-TIME, SPENT IN ALL AGENCY RESPONSIBILITIES BY RESPONDING GRADUATES IN GROUP WORK EMPLOYMENT, BY PRIMARY TYPE OF AGENCY RESPONSIBILITY

	Average Proportion of Work-Time (in percentages) by Primary Type of Agency Responsibility	
	Direct Group Leadership	Administration and Supervision
All Responsibilities		
Total 100% a	100%	
Group Leadership	39.6	7.2
Work with Individuals	11.5	6.5
Administration	11.3	25.7
Supervision	11.2	31.9
Recording	9.2	5.1
Community Relations	5.4	6.0
Inter-Group Work	4.0	8.4
Research	1.2	1.2
Other and unaccounted for	6.3	8.0

a Column does not total exactly 100 per cent because computations were not carried beyond two decimal places.

TABLE 2

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDING GRADUATES IN SOCIAL WORK EMPLOYMENT BY PRIMARY TYPE OF AGENCY RESPONSIBILITY AND BY YEARS OF FULL-TIME PAID SOCIAL WORK EXPERIENCE PRIOR TO GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDY

Years Of Experience	Total	Number of Graduates by Type of Responsibility		
		Direct Group Leadership	Administration and Supervision	Other Social Work
None	35	14	17	4
Over zero and less than 3	27	13	12	2
3–5.9	16	3	10	3
6–8.9	5	1	4	0
9 and over	6	0	5	1
Total	89	31	48	10

compared with thirty-nine of the sixty-two in "traditional" settings, a difference of ten per cent.

Views on Education in Relation to Practice

Although the emphasis in social work education, as experienced by group work graduates of the class of 1955, was largely on the direct leadership of primary face-to-face groups, most of the graduates felt that their professional education prepared them sufficiently to start on the responsibilities of their first agency positions. Most of the graduates also affirmed this preparation to be a valid responsibility of schools of social work, but they did not feel that they should necessarily be limited only to work assignments and responsibilities which were emphasized in their social work education. Most of the graduates' supervisors were in accord with these views. In fact, in most cases, the views of graduates and supervisors coincided.

The respondents who considered graduates sufficiently prepared by social work education to embark on full-time agency responsibility comprised an impressive majority. Seventy-six of the eighty-nine graduates in social work employment and fifty-three of the sixty-three supervisors who participated in the study were of this view.

No meaningful differences in groupings of respondents resulted when other factors and views were taken into account in tabulating respondents' views about graduates' preparation. There was no meaningful difference in the views of respondents from Jewish Community Centers, Settlement and Neighborhood Houses and so on. Of the respondents from Jewish Community Centers, fourteen of eighteen graduates and thirteen of fourteen supervisors felt that graduates were adequately prepared to start on their agency responsibilities.

There was similar accord among respondents about the appropriateness of the schools' educational goal of preparing group work graduates for beginning practice on a full-time basis, notwithstanding the nature of graduates' current agency responsibilities.

A slightly smaller proportion of Center employees than employees in other major group work settings was of the opinion that social work schools should have trained graduate students with this objective in mind. Perhaps this reflects their feeling that preparation for Center responsibilities is more than can reasonably be expected of schools of social work. However, both the figures and the dis-

crepancy are too small to attach any significance to the difference.

The extent of consensus among supervisors, though it is still a majority view, does dwindle considerably with respect to the question of whether agency responsibilities should be limited to those which are emphasized in the group work curriculum. Whereas only fifteen of the eighty-nine graduates in social work employment felt that their agency

TABLE 3

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDING GRADUATES IN SOCIAL WORK EMPLOYMENT AND SUPERVISORS BY VIEWS AS TO WHETHER THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK SHOULD HAVE PREPARED GRADUATE FOR FIRST JOB

View on School's Responsibility	Number of Respondents	
	Graduates	Supervisors
School should have prepared graduate	67	56
School should not have prepared graduate	22	5
No answer	..	2
Total	89	63

responsibilities in their first jobs should have been limited to coincide with the preparation acquired in social work school, as many as twenty-five of the sixty-three supervisors shared this view. This indicated greater appreciation among supervisors than among graduates of the value of such an approach to the delegation of agency responsibilities.[3]

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[3] The chi square test indicated a significant difference between the two groups at the .01 level. However, no significant difference was found at the .05 level as between professionally trained and untrained supervisors. (Fifty-one supervisors had completed graduate social work training and twelve had not.) Neither was the difference significant as between supervisors in Jewish Community Centers and those in other settings.

Suggestions for Closing Gaps by School and Agency

Graduates and supervisors made a number of suggestions for the improvement of social work education as preparation for group work practice. These related to course, field work, and research content and included the following: greater emphasis on the realities and the conditions of current practice in modern group work settings; additional content and experience in agency administration and staff supervision, particularly the supervision of untrained volunteer and part-time paid group leaders; supplementary material on work with individuals in relation to group work services; expanded content on the interdisciplinary approach in the helping professions; practical research projects.

It may seem rather odd that graduates and supervisors who manifested so much conviction about the adequacy of group work education in relation to the requirements of beginning practice had so many suggestions to make for the improvement of the content of the social work curriculum. However, probing of their replies indicates that the suggestions, and the complaints upon which they were based, were an accumulation of a variety of points contributed by respondents not to cast doubt on the validity of the present emphasis in group work education but rather to introduce considerations which, in view of the graduates' specific experiences, would be helpful in further relating education to practice.

Hardly any respondents questioned the validity of emphasizing, in social group work education, all aspects of knowledge and skill pertaining to the professional leadership of primary face-to-face groups. On the contrary, most respondents argued eloquently for retaining this emphasis, and many did so, fully recognizing the problems faced by graduates

in accepting difficult administrative and supervisory positions.

Most graduates and supervisors agreed that the employing agency, the graduate, and the graduate's supervisor together carry primary responsibility for bridging gaps between the preparation acquired by the graduate in social work school and the preparation required for the competent performance of his agency responsibilities. Recommended as aids in the process were reading of professional publications, well-planned assignments, thorough orientation, careful supervision, adequate staff development opportunities and sound personnel practices.

Additional instrumentalities suggested to help the student make an effective transition from school to practice included the professional associations, community planning bodies, national consulting and coordinating agencies, staff members and board members, and schools of social work. The media proposed for accomplishing this mission included conferences, workshops, discussions, advanced seminars, professional literature, institutes for beginning workers, and counseling.

Implications of the Study

The views of graduates and supervisors are not a sufficient basis for the evaluation of group work school curriculum but they do constitute a pertinent factor in the process. On one hand, the adjustment of graduates to the real-life requirements of agency practice depends on how they perceive their agency responsibilities and the relationship between these responsibilities and the content of their social work education. On the other hand, the evaluation by agency supervisors of the content of social group work education depends on the utility they perceive it to have in relation to the purposes of the agency, for which

they are accountable. Having sacrificed considerable time, energy and money to acquire professional training, the graduate expects to find a positive correlation between the content of that training and his first job description. The supervisor, on the other hand, expects the graduate to come prepared to serve the agency's purposes.

At the same time it must be acknowledged that the judgment of graduates and supervisors is subject to many influences. For graduates these include the problems they face in enrolling for social work education; their motivation for getting professional training; the schools they attend; the types of agencies in which they are placed for supervised field practice and the quality of their field instruction; the kinds and quality of faculty and other resources available in the school; the kinds of agencies in which the graduates obtain their first employment after receipt of the social work degree; the supervisory and staff development opportunities available in the agency. For supervisors the influences include the nature of their own training and their attitudes toward professional social work training; the attitudes of staff and lay leadership in the agency; the supervisors' professional competence and security; their conviction about and their personal experience in supervision and staff development; their personal evaluation of the graduates under their supervision; the pressures in the agency and on the agency.

Nevertheless, the judgments of graduates and supervisors in relation to social work education suggest many areas of analytical study and action, for their responses to the training and agency situations merit both symptom and basic treatment if the best possible use is to be made of the limited training, material and manpower resources currently available.

The study makes abundantly clear the

fact that adequate school preparation for a beginning job does not connote that the graduate has already achieved mature competence. Schools are not preparing students for their first jobs but for beginning professional practice. Preparation for the first job as such is apparently neither a goal of the school of social work nor an expectation of group work graduates or their supervisors.

The variety of positions which were obtained by the group work graduates of the class of 1955, and the preponderance of administrative and supervisory responsibilities in them, indicates that notwithstanding the curriculum emphasis on the direct leadership of primary groups, social group work education is sufficiently comprehensive and sufficiently representative of current agency purposes to give graduates the feeling that they are prepared to undertake full-time professional responsibility in a group work agency or department. However, to insure continued development of the professional competence of trained group workers, and to insure continued development of professional group work practice, much more must be done than is being done now by graduates, supervisors, agencies, schools and others.

This suggests a double-edged program of continued education for group work graduates and continued participation by social group workers in the improvement of professional practice as well as professional education.

The concern, manifested in the study's findings, that graduates be prepared for the realities of practice, does not imply that graduates should be spared the anxiety which results from a profound sense of professional responsibility coupled with a feeling of professional uncertainty. Trained group workers are obliged to feel a permanent responsibility both to know and to achieve.

It is essential for the graduate to know

that his professional education is incomplete, and it is essential for the employing agency to know it. It is also essential for both to know that much remains to be done if the practice of social group work is to reflect the level of conceptualization which has been attained in the last decade or two and perhaps the level to be attained in the decades to come. This applies both to the processes and principles specifically related to the leadership of groups and to the processes and principles applicable to the administration of social agencies and to the improvement of man and society.

Preparation for beginning practice does not nor is it intended to equip group work graduates to cope with the variety of demands peculiar to their particular jobs or agencies. They face serious problems in professional adjustment unless employing agencies, supervisors, schools of social work, professional associations, community organizations, consulting agencies and others come to their timely rescue with appropriate aids, and unless the graduates themselves exercise considerable initiative in effecting their own professional growth.

Employing agencies would seem to have a particular responsibility to help group work graduates make a smooth transition from the school to the agency. Adequate orientation, competent and consistent supervision particularly during the first year or two on the job, well-planned in-service training, and other staff development opportunities suggest themselves as means necessary for accelerating the graduate's professional adjustment and professional productivity, and for hastening his achievement of professional competence and independence. These means do not appear to be widely and consistently employed at the present time. Research into the bearing of these elements, or rather of their omission, on the effectiveness of

professional staff, and perhaps on the movement of trained social group workers into other fields of endeavor, might be quite productive.

Yet, as far as can be determined from the study, most graduates seem equal to the jolts they suffer in agency practice. Perhaps part of the answer lies in the admissions process which is employed in schools of social work, and in the vocational selection process which directs individuals toward social group work education and practice. A very effective screening process may be in operation which affects the perception, on the part of group work graduates, of the adequacy of social work education as preparation for agency responsibilities.

Are social group work students made of such stuff that they are able to withstand the unanticipated difficulties of agency practice? Have social group workers made their vocational choice with the degree of finality which is associated with sufficiently high professional motivation, or with sufficient resignation, to produce a high tolerance level? Are admissions procedures beginning to relent before mounting pressure to swell school enrollments so that future group work students will reveal less optimism about the relevance of education to practice, or less professional strength to cope with the vicissitudes of agency practice than the current crop of students? These questions also suggest subject matter worthy of research.

This would obviously not tell the whole story either, for the rewards in prematurely placed agency responsibility may be high. Thus it is quite conceivable that group work graduates readily accept administrative and supervisory responsibility because it pays better, and affords higher social status, than direct group leadership responsibility, and having accepted such responsibility they may be willing to believe that they are prepared by their social work education to

handle it. Supervisors tend to agree with them, however.

The findings of the study do support the contention that administrative and supervisory positions enjoy higher status than group leadership positions. Younger graduates, female graduates, and inexperienced graduates tend to be assigned primarily to direct group leadership responsibility, and men tend to be assigned primarily administrative and supervisory responsibility. It is generally older women who are responsible primarily for administration and supervision. This becomes especially significant when one remembers that only in recent years have men entered the social work profession in impressive numbers.

Perhaps my bias showed when I was disappointed that graduates were not disappointed about the inclusion of relatively little direct group leadership responsibility in their job descriptions, or about the general delegation of such responsibility to professionally untrained volunteers and part-time workers. It would seem to me that the application of recently acquired education affords the new graduate the kind of security and acclimation which will help to make him a more competent agency staff member.

I should also think that the service rendered by the agency to groups of clients ought to be the best that is available, and that, on the whole, professionally trained group leadership is likely to be superior to untrained group leadership. At least this is my view pending further research.

In the meantime, however, group work graduates have many opportunities within the context of their current agency assignments to apply the basic philosophy, skills, and knowledge derived from their social work education. For example, there is the opportunity to use group leadership skills in administration, in work with agency councils, with boards and board committees, and with

community organizations. Although the focus of attention is different from that in a primary group, I believe most of the basic tools and principles are the same.[4] I believe, moreover, that the graduate's competence as a group leader can grow with this experience and that the graduate can make contributions to the social work profession as a result of it.

There is also the opportunity to use group leadership skills in relation to staff training. The staff meeting, the group conference, and the leaders' training in-

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[4] With the help of group records I made a modest attempt a few years ago to demonstrate the validity of this view in "The Social Inter-Group Work Process: How Is It Similar to the Social Group Work Process" (Washington, D. C.: B'nai B'rith Youth Organization, c. 1951).

stitute are among the media which call for this application. The graduate's training function in current agency practice is especially important since it is often his major avenue for affecting agency clientele in the manner promised by social group work and agency objectives. His weapon is inspiration as much as it is instruction, for untrained part-time paid and volunteer group leaders usually require considerable portions of both in their role as surrogate social group workers.

Both these areas of opportunity, as well as others, require testing for, as things stand now, unless there is some realization of these opportunities and some validation of their effectiveness, the road from professional education to agency practice and is destined to remain discouraging and wearisome.