THE ROLE OF THE JEWISH CENTER WORKER IN A CHANGING COMMUNITY *

by EMANUEL FISHER, PH.D.

Dept. of Psychiatry and Neurology, New York University College of Medicine

New York, N. Y.

IT is my intention to identify some of the changes in our community which have impact upon the current role of the Jewish center worker and, to suggest lines of inquiry which might lead to an adjustment of role, the achievement of a more fruitful balance between our professional program and the changes in our communities.

Two Basic Changes

In reviewing all the changes that seem to me to have relevance to the issue at hand, I find that, basically, they may all be subsumed under two major headings: the socio-economic mobility of the American-Jewish community and the current national issue of integration in education and housing. Whatever changes one may put his finger on, it seems to me, may be identified as belonging in the one category or another; or, alternatively, in both simultaneously.

Socio-Economic Mobility

With respect to the first basic factor we find that within the past generation, and even more so since the war, there has been a movement of the American-Jewish community from a predominantly

lower to a predominantly middle class status. This has had very material consequences in changing the nature of the Jewish community. Some of the changes which appear to have relevance to the Jewish center worker's role might be identified as follows:

1. The transformation of the Jewish population from one characterized by needs for social services as traditionally conceived (as services designed to aid the under-privileged and to facilitate upward social and educational mobility) to a relatively privileged population which is quite successfully dealing with its problems of mobility.

2. The emergence of a highly self-conscious Jewish community life sustained by the economic capacity to give this self-consciousness structure and flesh in the form of concrete community organizations and institutions.

3. A flow of Jewish population geographically from lower socio-economic areas to upper socio-economic areas—within urban areas and from urban areas.

These changes have posed a series of very real theoretical and technical problems to the Jewish center worker. Some of these problems revolve around the change in his function because of the change in the nature of the population he is serving. Others emerge from the

change in the setting in which his services are provided. Still others are the product of social forces affecting social work generally, Jewish social work specifically, and Jewish center work directly.

Mobility

A major problem facing the Jewish center worker is the contradiction in American life between the fluidity of vertical mobility and the relative rigidity of horizontal mobility. One of the characteristic features of American life generally would seem to be the fact that it has permitted the newly arrived groups to move, in time, from a lower to a higher socio-economic status. This mobility has been more rapid for the Jewish population than it has been for any other newly arrived group in American life. As against this trend, however, American life does not provide for a great many of its sub-cultural groups the same kind of fluid and rapid social mobility, that is, movement across group lines in the direction of social integration.

We thus have the situation where the loosening of ethnic, racial, and religious group barriers (horizontal mobility) is significantly slower than the loosening of socio-economic barriers (vertical mobility). Having attained middle class status and the economic wherewithal to exercise the normal middle-class drives for status and achievement, the Jew has found that the avenues for expressing these drives are relatively unavailable to him at this point outside of his own ethnic or religious community. As a consequence, he has been driven back onto himself to gratify these needs and has erected and has sustained a communal-institutional structure within which these needs can be met. He has been encapsulated, as it were, within the impermeable group barriers of the society and has had to act out the logic

and necessities of his new social status and capacities within the limits permitted him by these barriers. This encapsulation has been rendered even more impermeable by political, social, and economic developments on the international scene during the past generation, developments in which the identity of Jews as a unique community has been strongly reinforced.

Some of the consequences of this situation for the Jewish center workers are its effects on Jewish social work as an institution, the geographical mobility of the Jewish population and the change in status and needs of the population he is called upon to serve.

Jewish Social Services: Origins

Jewish social welfare is essentially a sectarian-structured-and-financed institution. This particular property of Jewish social welfare is not a fact to be belittled on the grounds that sectarian welfare services in a democratic society which is ideologically committed to social integration are, basically, a negation of this democracy. This, I believe, is not an accurate evaluation of the issue. American social reality is such that the American people are divided along ethnic, religious, caste, and class lines. In other words, America is, contrary to the popular American *mythos*, a highly stratified society. This fact does not negate the parallel fact that, along with this, our society is one of the most mobile of all historical societies. We have here the operation of two social processes, each ostensibly negating the other, yet both together undergoing profound modifications in time. The parallel existence of these two contradictory phenomena is reflected in the disparity in flexibility and fluidity of vertical and horizontal mobility in American life. It is against these essential characteristics of American society that the sectarian nature of Jew-

ish social welfare must be perceived and explained. In this sense the sectarian structure of Jewish social welfare services is not simply and primarily a consequence of an ideological consensus of the American Jewish community but a reflection of the social context in which the American Jewish community has its existence. If the American Jew is to meet those of his social welfare needs which are not met through public welfare services, he has no alternative whatsoever but to do so on the only terms the society makes available to him: through sectarian, Jewish welfare services.

The professional, therefore, who decides against functioning in a Jewish setting on the ground that it is somehow less democratic to operate within a sectarian framework is really providing himself with a theoretical rationalization for what is, and may properly be, a purely personal preference. Whatever defect we may find in a sectarian social welfare structure resides not in the structure itself but in the limitations of a democracy which make it mandatory.

Conceptualized in these terms, the conflict Jewish center workers may experience when their agencies are called upon to leave old neighborhoods for new ones may be seen in a different context. The decision to move or not to move is not one that is, in the last analysis, made *by* a central financing agency, a board, or a staff. It is a decision made *for* them; or, perhaps more accurately, the conditions which make such a decision inevitable are provided for them by social forces external to their immediate wishes or preferences.

Role of the Professional

If this is indeed the nature of the social process, what then may be the role of the professional worker? On the surface it might appear that the only alternative available to him is to bow fatalistically and to accept the inevitable. I believe,

however, that this passive position is neither necessary nor realistic. More appropriately, the role of the professional worker is threefold. First, he must accept the responsibility of serving his clientele as it moves socio-economically and geographically. Second, he must understand that he has an immediate responsibility not only to his clientele but to American democracy. An essential part of his professional posture is a concern with and an activity on behalf of the social welfare needs of all Americans. This would mean that while he is serving his clientele within the given social context, he is simultaneously related to and involved with changing this context through the instrumentalities of social planning and social action in concert with all other social workers. Finally, he has the immediately technical problem of how to effectuate the uprooting of a social agency with a minimum of trauma to the old community. It is within this three-dimensional framework that the center worker may cope with, define, and articulate his role in this situation.

In summary, my thesis here is that when an agency is compelled to relocate, with all the pain that such relocation involves, it is altogether inappropriate to brand the sectarian nature of social welfare services as the villain of the piece or to rail against more immediate targets such as central financing agencies, boards, executives or staffs. The fault, if we are to use a judgmental term, lies in this case not in ourselves but in the social structure which imposes a sectarian stratification in matters involving welfare needs, which in themselves transcend group membership. In this situation, the role of the Jewish center worker would appear to be clear. On the one hand, he must serve his population in its new setting. On the other, he must, as a professional social worker address himself to the issue behind the issue, the

rigidity of the barriers between groups which makes sectarian welfare necessary.

Status of the Professional

Another area of problem generated for the Jewish center worker by the rapid upward mobility of the Jewish population is the change in this population *vis-a-vis* the center worker as a professional. In an earlier period, the center worker was in a great many cases an individual who had arrived at his position as a result of a process of personal upward mobility. He was serving a population which was still on the socio-economic level of the group in which he had originated and from which he had moved. His status in relation to his clientele was basically a superordinate one as a consequence of his development on the one hand, and his function as a professional person on the other. General social work theory and practice, which had developed historically in the context of this superordinate-subordinate dimension, supported and defined his operations in the relational context in which he found himself. Becoming and being a social worker or a center worker was both intrinsically and extrinsically rewarding. It was extrinsically rewarding because it offered a status which confirmed the upwardly mobile aspect of the professional's position. It was intrinsically rewarding because in worker-client relations there was constant confirmation of the status values accruing to this position. With a change in the status of clientele of the Jewish center, this set of conditions underwent a radical transformation. For one thing, there was a change in the status relations of worker and client. From a superordinate-subordinate relationship, it moved to a co-ordinate or subordinate relation as the clientele reached and/or surpassed the status level achieved by the worker. One consequence of this shift in relative status

was a confusion of role. A great part of the social work orientation predicated on the notion that the role of the social worker and center worker was to "improve" the lot of the clientele no longer corresponded to the necessities of the social situation. The implications of this shift in relative role was not only technical but psychological as well. I would venture the opinion that the social worker or center worker was reluctant to surrender the psychological advantage inherent in the superordinate-subordinate relationship. The consequence was that both social workers and center workers "psychiatrized"—to coin a word—their profession and, along with this, minimized the service component in social welfare work and enhanced its technical components.

By becoming "psychiatrists" and by stressing "technique" they accomplished two things. They replaced their previous social-status advantage over their clientele with a psychological advantage. They "knew better" and "understood more deeply" than their clientele, such knowledge and understanding serving as a compensation for a decline in relative social status. They became technique-conscious because the enhancement of technique compensated for a decline in status by demarcating a realm of esoteric expertness from which the lay clientele, no matter what its social status, was excluded.

Why the Shift to Technique

Now this preoccupation with the psychological and the technical was not something that simply grew out of the subjective needs of workers to shore up a declining social status. It reflected a tendency in American life to look into the psychological for the sources of, and the changes in, the social reality. Also, there existed a parallel tendency to reduce all problems to the level of "know-

how," to a naive pragmatism. During the thirties, the immediate press of the socio-economic and social reorganization of society made this twofold orientation rather remote. With the apparent resolution of the most pressing of our problems during the 1940's and 1950's, there were both time and opportunity for these rather optimistic American tendencies to reassert themselves. Consequently, the shift in social work function due to the general amelioration of socio-economic conditions led to the development of psychiatry and psychology as the lodestones of the profession and established technique as a primary component in social work. For the Jewish social worker and center worker this change was even more greatly reinforced because of the even greater upward socio-economic mobility of the specific clientele. His motives for moving in the direction of psychiatry and technique were not simply in response to a *zeitgeist*, but were responses to the change in the actual status of his population.

Another factor which may have contributed to this shift in the direction of psychiatry and technique was the actual change in the social status of the American Jewish community and of the Jewish social worker. As members of a privileged middle class, the broad social welfare and social action components of social work became not only less immediate and relevant but less respectable as well. When to this trend was added the anti-democratic hysteria of the forties and early fifties, this withdrawal into respectability and conformity behind the noncommittal ramparts of technique was even further reinforced.

Now this increase in psychological and technical sophistication was by and large a very positive and fruitful development reflecting a change in professional function in response to a change in the nature and needs of the clientele. What is important to recognize, however,

is that though this need for role change in response to change in community was put to many valuable uses, it also became fraught with questions of status, prestige, and conformity. I would suggest that until and unless social workers and center workers recognize these strivings in the definition of their role in the contemporary situation, they will not be free to solve the problem of their role in a changing community *on the basis of the issues.* Even more to the point, they will be depriving the community of the full measure of their professional contribution.

There may be still another type of response to this shift in relative worker-client status. In this response, the worker is impelled to blur his professional uniqueness and difference and to assimilate to himself the higher social status of his clientele by identifying himself with them. I would imagine that this has been observed to occur with greater frequency on the worker-board level. This type of negation of the worker's professional identity also occurs when there is a marked disparity in the relative status of the worker and his clientele and where clientele is quite clearly, by all the criteria valued by our society, of a superior social status.

The implications for the center worker in this shift in relative worker-client status are several. At this point, I would say that there is a need to define, identify, and examine this shift to see if it has indeed occurred. Beyond this, I would suggest a series of hypotheses which might merit further exploration and testing. To what extent is the problem of recruitment to social work generally, and center work specifically, the result of the fact that our young people now come from the social level of our clientele and do not, therefore, find in this field an opportunity to move beyond the status position they begin with? To what extent are people who reject work-

ing in the Jewish center field doing so on the basis that they find it more gratifying to work with a clientele with whom the superordinate-subordinate relationship still prevails? What might be the psychological factors operating within and between center workers and agency clientele when their respective relationships to each other are superordinate, cooordinate, or subordinate? What might be the nature of professional function, role, and technique when there is a shift along this relational continuum? To ask these questions is, of course, not to answer them. They are, it seems to me, questions which are properly asked and deserve and require serious and very careful consideration.

Integration

We now come to the issue which appears to me to be most intimately related to Jewish center work: the issue of integration in education and housing. As I understand it, the Supreme Court decision on desegregation was not simply the initiation of a new trend in American life. It was, rather, a confirmation and a strengthening of an essential American phenomenon, the ongoing struggle for and realization of the social equality which is implicit in the American democratic tradition. This decision simply served formal notice that this movement toward equality was entering a new stage in its historical development in America. For the Jew, this development has both moral and material implications. The moral implications of this issue for the Jew stretch back in time to the *Book of Leviticus* (19:34): "The stranger that so journeth with you shall be unto you as the native among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord." This earliest of formulations of the position of the Jew on the issue of social equality has received and continues to

receive emphasis and confirmation throughout history and throughout the world. It would seem, therefore, that the American Jew is morally committed by history and identification to the support of integration in education and housing.

Apart from its moral implications, however, integration may be assumed to have material consequences for the status of the American Jew. Such material consequences may be divided into two types: the remote and the proximal. The remote consequences consist of such changes in intergroup relations that the conditions which I earlier described as encapsulating the Jew within relatively impermeable group barriers would be considerably modified. At that point, America will provide a wholly new set of social conditions and intergroup relations within which will be resolved the issues of Jewish group identification and American-Jewish institutional and communal life. These, however, will be issues which will be faced and resolved by the American Jew of the future. For our purposes, the proximal effects and implications of integration are much more to the point. These would seem to be as follows:

1. The effect of integration on the ethnic and racial composition and structure of our local neighborhoods.

2. The effect of this change in neighborhood on the structure and composition of our center membership and program.

3. The role of the center as a social agency and of the center worker as a social worker in the advancement of integration.

Of all social agencies, it is the community center which is most immediately involved in the issues of integration. Whereas other social services serve people essentially in terms of their individual needs (in separation from each other) and are free of the operation of any significant geographical factor, the

community center serves people largely in their neighborhoods, in terms of their social group needs, and in the context of their group membership. This places the community center on the front-lines of the issue of integration. I would expect that in the foreseeable if not immediate future there will emerge a tendency in the direction of more highly integrated neighborhoods. If this occurs, or if it occurs with greater frequency than it has in the past, what will be the effects on our community centers? Will there be an acceleration in the mobility of the centers as their communities change under them? Will they modify their membership policies in line with a change in neighborhood? Or, finally, will they find themselves in the position of segregated enclaves within the broader, integrated community?

Dilemma of the Professional

If there is this to-be-expected and to-be-hoped-for movement of the community in the direction of social integration, what will be its effects on the internal structure of the center and on its position as a social agency in a democratic society? It is at this point that the question of professional role becomes crucial. Here it is, I believe, that the Jewish center worker is caught in a very complex dilemma. On the one hand, the Jewish community center is an instrumentality of the Jewish people designed to meet its needs and to express its identity as a sub-cultural group within the broader American context. On the other hand, as an American institution, it must, at the same time, relate itself and play some constructive role in the extension of American democracy in the direction of social integration. If it takes the second role, however, it is modifying many of the social conditions which make necessary its existence as a distinct institution. This is certainly not an easy problem to

solve inasmuch as the rights and responsibilities upon which either position rests are in themselves, despite their apparently contradictory nature, quite valid.

Is this dilemma simply logical or semantic in nature or does it correctly reflect the conditions that obtain in the actual practice of the profession of Jewish center work? It is my opinion that the latter is the case. Here are some of the ways in which it seems to me to manifest itself in practice. In the area of membership policy in mixed neighborhoods some decision must be taken as to ratios of Jewish and non-Jewish membership. This is a delicate question not only because of the Jewish sensitivity to anything resembling a *numerus clausus*, but for several other, more material, reasons. First, there is the problem of maintaining the Jewish identity of the agency in terms of its place in the social welfare fabric of Jewish communal life, or in relation to its central planning and financing institution. Second, there is the problem of determining and articulating a program which meets the needs of its clientele as Jews—the issue of Jewish content. Finally, there is the operation of a sociological Gresham's law to the effect that as a certain ratio of non-Jewish to Jewish membership is surpassed the nature of the agency, membership, and program is transformed in the direction of the socially or numerically dominant group.

The conflict between the two assertions about the nature of the Jewish community center, as primarily a *Jewish* institution or primarily a *social agency*, is a real one, not simply a semantic difference, because the exclusive adoption of either position would provide a ready answer to each of these questions. The fact that in practice we are unable to answer these questions readily is simply an indication of the extent of our conflict between these two alternatives. In the last analysis, the decision one is impelled

to make with respect to these questions, among many others, is determined by the relative weight in one's theory of either of these two formulations. I would venture the opinion that a great deal of the professional controversy that animates the Jewish center field is a reflection of the difference between these two orientations. However, I would modify this by saying that in practice there is less of a division along either-or lines than along more-or-less lines. I would suspect that the theoretical dichotomy cuts across, rather than between, the lines suggested by my formulation.

Is, then, this dilemma soluble? I believe that it is but that its solution is not to be achieved by what might be described as the Gordian-knot approach. By this approach, one arbitrarily makes a basic assumption, to wit, that either *Jewish* or *social agency* is the regulating term in the definition of the Jewish community center, and then proceeds to operate as if the other term in the formula had a purely subsidiary, non-regulatory function. This is a position which people have a right to take and that many have indeed taken. I doubt, however, that it is the most fruitful. I would suggest that the most fruitful position is one that recognizes the dynamic relativity of the two terms in the phrase *Jewish social agency*, or *Jewish community center*. By this I mean a recognition of the fact that "Jewish" and "community center" are both terms which are undergoing transformation in time and in relation to each other. This suggests that the Jewish center worker must perceive the Jewish function of his center as something which is set in a social-historical matrix and that it is changing and will continue to change as the position of the Jew in the larger community changes. As, therefore, social integration in its broadest sense evolves in America, the needs and aspirations of American Jews will change. On the other hand, it also means that the Jewish community center must play a role on the broader social scene as a social work agency in the direction of further integration. In short, the assumptions that I am making here are that social change is inevitable, that social integration is both desirable and inevitable, that the American Jew can only gain from such a development, and that the Jewish center worker has a responsibility as Jew and as social worker to participate in effectuating such a development.

The role of the Jewish center worker in a changing community is, in terms of this orientation, one in which he serves the Jewish community in the light of its ever continuing transformations within the changing American scene. This precludes taking any exclusive or final dogmatic position as to what the American Jew *ought to be* and focusses on what he *has been, is and will be* as he responds to changes in American life. *Ought to be* and *should be* as applied to the American Jew are criteria which are appropriate to ideologically committed Jewish institutions and organizations. The Jewish community center, it appears to me, has a function which transcends all specific and exclusive ideologies other than a basic commitment to serve the American Jew in the context of his simultaneous membership in the Jewish and American groups.

I do not believe that the social changes that I have suggested as significant for Jewish center work are definitively stated nor that I have done all that could be done by way of indicating all their implications. The answers to the questions I have raised may not be easily or quickly answered. Among the many elements which go to make up the role of the Jewish center worker would be the responsibility to examine these issues more fully and to explore the answers to the problems that they pose. I would suggest that this search is not to be conducted in the

armchair nor in professional meetings alone. I think that it is necessary to tap the rich resources of contemporary research in social psychology and sociology as well as to engage in some research of our own. The research activities of the Jewish center worker should be directed not simply at enhancing his technical proficiency but also at the exploration of some of the broader issues which I have touched upon.

Summary

I have done no more than touch upon three of the many changes that have affected or characterized American Jewish life: the change in the social status of the Jewish community, the change in the professional status and function of the Jewish center worker, and the possible effects of integration on the Jewish community center's function and role as a communal institution. I have also done no more than touch upon a few of the many implications that I perceive in these changes. I would like to think that the assumptions upon which I have proceeded and the assertions I have advanced are valid ones, that they are accurate, and that they correctly reflect the facts. Even more important than their validity, I would hope that they have sufficient relevance to the issues that animate Jewish center workers to serve as a stimulating and worthwhile beginning for the discussions that will follow.