Transcultural Social Work:
On Serving as a Fulbright Scholar in Israel

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The University of Haifa is one of Israel's youngest institutions of higher education. A product of the sixties, it began as a municipal college monitored and operated as an extension of the University of Jerusalem. It soon achieved autonomy and expanded its geographic scope into Israel's northern regions.

Haifa has a unique campus, perched on the breathtaking top of Carmel Mountain and ensconced amidst the evergreens of the Carmel National Park. It was designed by Oscar Neimeyer, the darling Brazilian architect who built Brazilia. Its major tower is the highest structure in the Middle East and it commands a view of South Lebanon and the snowcapped Hermon range to the north and Netania to the south.

Academically speaking, Haifa University aims to become a center for the applied social sciences, with social work as one of its chief priorities. The School of Social Work grants a professional degree at the Bachelor's level after three years of study. The curriculum is rather tight concentrating almost exclusively on social work-related subjects with only a sprinkling of liberal arts courses. There is almost no room for electives. The School has recently developed a Master's program, to which many seasoned social workers, most of them agency directors and field supervisors, and a few of the School's own instructors have been admitted as students. The faculty consist mainly of part-timers and graduates from allied disciplines. Social workers on the faculty are few and their absence is particularly noticeable in the senior ranks. Workloads are heavy: four courses a semester, plus student regular advisement, thesis supervision, com-

mittee duties, and the usual "publish or perish" expectation as the dominant criterion for promotions and tenure.

I was notified in February 1975 that I was the recipient of a Fulbright-Hays Senior Scholar Award.† Upon my arrival in Haifa at the end of the summer of that year, I found that the School of Social Work had already unequivocally spelled out my duties and assignments. There was a multifaceted package including: teaching required foundation courses for the Undergraduate Division, such as Formal Organizations, Advanced Community Organization Practice and Social Gerontology, and graduate courses for the Master's program, such as Social Planning, Administration, and Sociology of Social Service Organizations; curriculum development in the Master's program; supervision of Master's theses; chairing the Committee on Appointments and Promotions; faculty recruitment; and membership on the School's Executive Committee. There was an implicit expectation to strengthen the senior ranks, since there were only two senior faculty members with social work degrees at that time. In a country where social workers are in great demand but their professional status remains anachronistically low, I was expected to contribute to raising the image of scholarship. Whether consciously or not, I became part of an upgrading, image-building strategy for the profession at large.

My teaching assignments had an inherent problematic quality: [social work methods,

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and macro-interventions more specifically, are anchored in the policies of the societies in which they evolve. Because these methods are culture-bound, the extent of their universal applicability is never a clear given; it needs to be tested.] Even when they have the potential for transcending cultural idiosyncracies and particularisms, the question still remains: how well will they be received and assimilated or, conversely, how much resistance will they generate? The answers were not readily at hand. I soon realized that in addition to teaching social work, I was participating in the reshaping of the profession, at least in its search for new definitions of its domain and competence. The following two cases from rural community organization and social planning are illustrative of the challenges encountered during my ten-months' experience, teaching social work.

Rural Community Organization

The agricultural settlements, usually of the *moshav* or cooperative type, are established according to a governmental master plan for rural development. They are dependent on official agencies for initial operating funds, equipment and maintenance credits until they reach economic self-sufficiency. Some will probably never attain economic viability, but their existence is assured because of strategic considerations of land occupancy and population distribution.

These settlements are linked in regional networks and their corresponding administrative councils operate as the ultimate geographic units in the organizational charts of the State ministries. Their offices are a sort of ministations for agricultural assistance, banking and credit, cooperative marketing, training, public education and cultural extension. They receive inputs from either permanent or itinerant consultants from the central government and implement their program directives in a coordinated fashion. It is a high-pressure and centrally guided form of planning, although Councils do gradually achieve a greater latitude of autonomous decision-making.

Haifa's School of Social Work was embarked on the development of a "rural community organization" tract that aimed to respond to the administrative manpower needs of the regional councils and their affiliated villages. Students are largely recruited from those very populations and governmental grants are rather generous. At the time of my arrival there was little consensus on what would the rural macro or community organization worker be expected to do. Advocates of a "public administration model" had in mind a sort of executive secretary for the villages and regional councils. The corresponding role definition included the handling of intergovernmental relations, municipal services, and such specific agrarian tasks as husbandry, marketing of produce, scheduling of plowing, harvesting, etc.

I was drawn into this methodological debate. A series of meetings was organized and position papers drafted in support of alternative models of rural community organization practice. My seminar on Advanced Community Organization became a laboratory for testing the basic premises and skills related to new role formulations. Questions were constantly brought to the fore: Is the social worker the ecological coordinator of intervention systems? Is he the mediator between organized human services and natural support systems? Is he a social change agent acting at different levels of societal organization? How does he negotiate relationships and make jurisdictional claims *vis-a-vis* other helping professions? Students began to apply in the field what they learned the day before in class, and feedback was promptly received the following week. We first aimed at overcoming the impending atomization of community organization practice. Rather than evolving into a separate tract, rural community organization was reintegrated into a unified professional orientation which made allowance for the rich variety of contexts offered by the Israeli social landscape including: development towns, traditional neighborhoods, large municipalities, immigrant transitional hostels, regional rural councils, cooperative settle-

ments, and even the collective communes of which the kibbutz is the prototype. We ultimately counterbalanced the "public administration" model with a more genuine social orientation which made allowance for self-initiated social action, grass roots leadership development, community self-awareness, and wider social participation.

Our model had more of a "voluntaristic" bent, as it included such role components as: facilitation of local integration and community participation; encouragement of effective community communication and establishment of interaction channels leading toward agreement on how to improve their common environment; facilitation of the translation of community basic understandings into specific action programs; promotion of self-help through the identification of common interests and a sense of social voluntarism; linkage of human resources to a variety of community alternatives for growth and development, etc.

The emphasis was on such task-parameters as: need analysis and provision, problem-solving, conflict resolution and systems change. There was no conflict at the end with a "management" orientation but rather an incorporation of the two models into a social development perspective.

The Limits of Social Planning

The second illustration is drawn from my graduate course in Social Planning. In considering it, the reader must bear in mind that the Bachelor's degree has been—and to a large extent remains—the terminal degree in Israeli social work. The Master's degree was instituted very recently as optional and is regarded as contributing to professional advancement.

This graduate class included a sizeable number of experienced old-timers. They were the very generation who took part in the development of Israel's human services. In the 29 years since the declaration of independence, there has been a 400 percent population increase, largely achieved through ingathering of the most disparate streams of immigration; the country has withstood four wars; and dozens of new cities as well as hundreds of villages

have sprung up almost overnight. Support systems and human services had to be improvised at a dizzy pace, crises popped up relentlessly, and just catching up with them was pragmatically regarded as a criterion of success. Rational analytic planning was a luxury the country could ill afford. There simply wasn't time for it. What good would it do, given the almost cataclysmic structural and social transformations no one could properly anticipate?

Social workers manning human services were present-oriented and basically content with putting out one fire at a time. With no empirical indicators or reliable forecasts at hand to guide their service development enterprises they, like everybody else in positions of leadership, followed their instincts and their own normative assumptions or ideological images of what "ought to be."

In recent years however a growing disenchantment with intuitive expedience and improvisation has become more manifest in all realms of life. Some schools of social work have joined the ranks of the advocates of accountability, cost benefit analysis, and long-range planning. Haifa's School included a two-semester course on the subject in 1974. I was the second Fulbright scholar to tackle the assignment.* It soon became obvious to me that the students, the very old-timers formerly alluded to, could not easily overcome a deep-seated ambivalence: While recognizing that the time had arrived for adopting a more rational planning philosophy, they remained defensive and apologetic about the "old ways."

Rationalizations about the "uniqueness" of the Israeli experience were often voiced in opposing proposed standardized innovations in planning. Such statements as, "This is a very interesting way of doing it, but it would not work in Israel," and, "This country is not ready for it yet," were frequently-voiced expressions of resistance. As the scholar from another country, I was a change agent, a

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* Professor Armand Lauffer, from the University of Michigan, was the first Fulbright Professor at the University of Haifa.

provider of new skills and knowledge. At the same time I had to remain sensitive to the potential risks of cultural "imperialism." As social workers we are particularly aware that the boundary between a client's resistance to change and his/her undisputed right for self-determination is often a fine line. A situation of "creative tension" thus evolved which I sought to resolve through a paradigm of bargaining: "I am presenting some of the skills and practice instruments that we are using in our communities. They have been empirically tested. We have found them to be strong in some respects and weaker in others. You will have to ascertain whether they could work for you, but how will you find out unless you try them?" This was my line of reasoning.

A good deal of their resistance was justified, given the country's political makeup. Israel is a parliamentary democracy, and no political party has ever captured the simple majority necessary for establishing a Cabinet encompassed solely of its own members. Coalitions of three and even four parties are negotiated in order to insure a vote of confidence. These coalition partners divide among themselves the Cabinet portfolios and often run ministries as their private fiefdoms. The Prime Minister is basically concerned with the survival of his government; he traditionally reserves for his party the strategic Ministries of Defense, Finance and Foreign Affairs. He avoids being too controlling with the participating parties

lest he lose their support. The Health Ministry was in 1976 in the hands of the left-wing socialist and "dovish" branch of the Labor Party, while the Ministry of Welfare "belonged" to the "hawkish" wing of the conservative Religious Party. Some of their programs and departments overlapped and duplicated each other, but it was utopian to expect them to coordinate or make mutual concessions. Thus deeply ingrained political interests took precedence over rational planning. If allocative planning does not work at the top, some of my students argued, how can we expect it to work at the middle and lower levels of public administration?

The students themselves worked out the pertinent answer in the context of our often passionate and heated class debates: Before social planning becomes an actual operational modality, there is need for a planning mentality, an "awareness of planning" set down amidst interest and advocacy groups and among the public at large. This is the immediate task for social work. Policy makers will then have no alternative but to gradually begin to pay more than lip service to a rational planning philosophy.

It was precisely this quality of persistent and almost obstinate optimism shown by students that made my ten months in Israel a unique, positive experience. They kept me on my toes with their challenging questions, but they also gave me a wonderful lesson in unfailing faith.