

The Impact of Soviet Jewish Culture on the Problem-Solving Process

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The day I sat down to begin to work on this presentation was really quite a day! I had spent the morning with a family that was going through a slow and difficult resettlement. Neither the mother nor the father had the energy to learn English or look for work. They and their teen-aged daughter were having continual problems getting along with each other. When I pointed this out all three began to cry and blame the problems on each other, rolling up their sleeves to show me the bruises from their last battle.

Following that interview, I saw a new client, a single man. He talked at length about his desire to settle down and get to work immediately—if only he wasn't having these chest pains that kept him from going to English classes.

I spoke to a landlord, installed several telephones, and hospitalized an elderly woman for a medical evaluation, but the afternoon was topped off by a call from a client who screamed at me hysterically in Russian that her family was getting no help at all in America and that I was the worst social worker in the world.

In this presentation, we will look at some of the aspects of casework practice that are significant by virtue of the people we work with and their culture. There is a vast range of problems presented by the immigrants, some rooted deep in their psychological makeup, some reactive to the immigration. While the people we see are very different in the problems they present, and different in the ways the immigration has affected them, they all bring with them a deeply-ingrained culture, born out of Jewish parentage, Russian background, and a Communist society. This clearly is not like the culture in which the practice of social work developed. It would be helpful to look at some of the basic concepts and methods in social work practice, pieces

that we may take for granted to see the interplay between them and this immigrant culture.

One of the most basic concepts in the practice of social work is that of the helping relationship. Helen Harris Perlman, in *Social Casework*, says that some of the components offered in a good worker-client relationship are warmth, acceptance, trust, and authority. She defines authority as a sense of knowing how to help. This relationship is both a milieu for ongoing work and, for some clients, a goal in and of itself. Of course, we attempt to engage every client in this kind of relationship. But to a newly-arrived Russian family, this offer of an understanding, helpful authority figure you can trust, arouses a lot of skepticism. Sometimes even laughter. Given the fact that they come from a society where the emphasis is on how much each person can get at the expense of others, and a society that is saturated with informers and police, these clients do not trust or believe us easily. In this kind of situation, our awareness of our own feelings about not being trusted is crucial. At the same time, we have to work in a way that lets families know that we are trustworthy, but that we know for them that this trust will be slow to come. I recently spent two hours with a family trying to explain to them why they needed to sign a release form in order to be given a hospital report on their son. At the end of a frustrating discussion for all of us, I said, "Of course you are afraid to sign the paper. You don't understand what it says or what will happen as a result." Then they sat down and signed the papers.

Trust comes very slowly, but with it comes a new concept of authority. At the beginning, when we offer ourselves as knowledgeable people who can help, we are seen as authority figures—not in any American sense of the word, but as Russian bureaucrats. We are

bribed, avoided and treated as police (and many of the workers resent this!). To understand why this happens, we need to look at the Russian view of authority. There is a line from *Fiddler on the Roof* in which a Rabbi is asked to say a prayer for the Czar. He says "May God bless and keep the Czar—far away from us." The Czar has a substitute now, but the concept is the same. Authority and governmental officials are not to be challenged or disagreed with. It's too dangerous. Authorities can be avoided, manipulated or ignored. We need to expect such responses and understand them, but we also need to say that it does not have to be that way here, to teach them that it is not dangerous here to talk things over with a person in authority. When we are authorities who can be warm, helpful, trusted and talked with, we are doing one of the biggest parts of the resettlement job; we are teaching a new concept of authority. For the Soviet immigrant, the involvement in a helping relationship is not only a milieu, but a part of the goal itself.

As the relationship grows, we are busy solving problems together; this happens in any casework relationship. The first step in problem solving is helping the client talk about his situation. In relation to the Russians, there are several interesting aspects to this. First of all, the thought of getting help by talking over a problem is a strange concept to most Soviets; only recently and in large Soviet cities have out-patient psychiatric programs been started. Also, as we mentioned earlier, talking itself can be frightening. How will the information be used? To deal with this, we must explain the ideas and values behind the work our agency does, and we must say it again and again. At first our clients laugh, but gradually many of them begin to discuss issues with us.

Interestingly, the worker's use of language has a strong effect on the way clients talk with us. This really became clear to me as I used my text-book Russian. Understanding what people meant was sometimes a struggle. I would need to say, "Is this what you are saying?" or "Wait a minute, tell me again, because I need to understand exactly what you

mean." Where I might have assumed I knew what people meant if we were both speaking English, I couldn't do that here. And, in fact, the struggle for meaning led to further clarification of what people wanted to say. It is absolutely necessary, in helping these particular clients begin to talk about their problems, to ask for clarification, to ask all the very basic questions. By asking these questions, and talking about what social workers do, we show the Russians how to use a new system of help for their problems—be they chronic or reactive to the immigration.

We help them further by interpreting to them what we see happening to them, and educating them about what they can expect from the experience of immigration. This interpretation and education is important, too, in helping people to get in touch with problems they brought with them from Russia. An elderly man, who had lost his only daughter to cancer just before emigrating, had been asking me for an unusual amount of advice. When he offered me a painting as a gift, I explained that this was not a necessary custom in America. He was insistent, though, and we struggled with the words for a minute, so that I could understand what he wanted. He said that I was the most special person in his life right now, and that he wanted to give me this gift. I said that I was very touched and that it was my pleasure to help him, but that I could never be his daughter, and that nothing would bring her back. He began to cry and I hugged him . . . in these kinds of situations it is the back and forth struggle to clarify, to question and to educate, that helps our clients tell us about their problems and the significance they have for them.

Talking about problems is all very well and good, but for most of us the goal is to get these families resettled as quickly and smoothly as possible. For that reason, we have found that ongoing evaluation, between the worker and the family, is extremely useful. By evaluation I mean looking together at each unique family situation as it touches on the resettlement issues. We begin this kind of evaluation immediately with the family, and, later, may

involve the vocational counselor, a doctor, or another social agency. By doing an ongoing evaluation, we have found that a resettlement plan can be laid out that both the family and the worker are comfortable with. A one-sided plan, made only by the worker, or only by the family, leads only to misunderstanding. Learning to talk things over is helpful in itself, but using the discussion to evaluate the family's situation and plan with them, substantially eases the misunderstandings and problems that can take place in the process of resettlement.

Part of working out a resettlement plan involves making decisions. Decisions need to be made about many aspects of this new life. What color telephone should we get? Should I take this job? Coming from a society that makes many decisions for its members, Russians often find the freedom and responsibility of making decisions confusing and overwhelming ("What color telephone do I want? How should I know? Whatever you say.") If we, as workers, make decisions for people, they learn nothing new. We need to teach how to make decisions by clarifying the

options and limits. Sometimes there are no choices, and then that needs to be made clear. Often there are several options, and we can help best by leaving the responsibility with the client, but clarifying with him the choices that exist. For example, we might discuss the advantages and disadvantages of various child care plans for a particular family, leaving the decision to the family. An increasing ability to take responsibility and sort through decisions is an indication of a family's beginning adaptation to American life. Learning to make decisions is one link in a chain of resettlement processes—building a relationship, learning to vocalize problems, evaluation, and decision-making. The cultural elements brought by the immigrants influence greatly the way the processes develop, but it is important to note that the basic elements of casework practice hold true for resettlement work in the same way that they hold true for casework practice in general. More than that, social work postulates allowing people to experience the values of a new society, and in that way, a large segment of the real resettlement is carried out.