

Individual-Community Strain— A Social Work and Jewish View

Rubin Schindler, D.S.W.

Professor, Bar Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

There are value issues which social workers face in daily practice. The dilemmas are not easily resolved. They often take on greater complexity when the conflicts are not only professional but Jewish and Halachic in nature.

Introduction

One of the most widely held values in social work is concern with and care of the individual. But the profession has also placed equal importance upon the interdependence between the individual and society. Both are given equal weight¹ and tensions often emerge. The revised Code of Ethics states that the professional worker should "serve clients with devotion and loyalty."² Often there are two client systems and questions of client priorities are raised. Lucas has referred to this tension being between "the good of the individual and the good of the the group or community of which he is a part."³ These strains have often focused on questions of policy. For example the question of cure or care is one such dilemma. Gurin elaborates on this subject.

The humanitarian motivations that should underly the human services argue for maximizing the ability of all people to realize their potentialities and to overcome the handicaps that may stand in their way. Other cultural attitudes impede the easy acceptance of a burden for social care unless there is convincing proof that "cure" is not attainable. The

dilemma is hard to resolve but it cannot be avoided.⁴

Another issue deals with the policy question of efficiency and equity. The former refers to the maximum use of resources, reality of costs, and their impact on other sectors of the economy and society as a whole.

Equity refers to the distribution of goods and services. The dilemma is put in the following terms:

The major concern of social policy has been equity, especially for the least advantaged . . .

However there has been growing pressure upon the human services to take account of efficiency as well.⁵

These questions have not been limited to areas of policy. Practice issues have also been raised. For example the question of individual needs vs. group interest or sacrificing the welfare of the individual for the welfare of the group. Self-determination and the client's right to freedom of choice and what the profession or society thinks is good for him are another area of exploration.

There have been various suggestions proposed in dealing with these dilemmas. Some writers argue that such conflicts cannot be solved and any attempts to do so are only "half truths."⁶ The Code of Ethics proposes that the practitioner may want to

¹ National Association of Social Workers, "Working Definition of Social Work Practice," *Social Work* 3, (April 1958), pp 5-9.

² "N.A.S.W. Code of Ethics," Passed by the 1979 Delegate Assembly in Elizabeth Howe, *Public Professions and the Private Model of Professionalism*, *Social Work*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (May 1980), p. 185.

³ Alan Keith-Lucas, "Ethics in Social Work," *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. Washington: National Association of Social Workers 1977, pp 350-355.

⁴ Arnold Gurin, "Conceptual and Technical Issues in the Management of Human Services" In R.C. Sarri & Y. Hasenfeld, *The Management of Human Services*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, pp 292-293.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 294.

⁶ Lucas *op. cit.*, p. 352.

"avoid relationships or commitments that conflict with the interest of clients."⁷ There is a third view which this writer is more inclined to adopt and that is recognizing fully the complexity of the issue, while searching for possible interventive guidelines.

Professional Guidelines for Intervention

At the outset it is wise to clarify the practice issue at hand. There are many issues which do not necessarily present value strain. For example a person in his late 80's who is ill and alone and is determined to remain isolated, against the better judgement of family, should not present the worker with value conflict. Awareness of the issue can mitigate situations whose conflicts are more imaginary than real. But recognition of the problem is only a beginning step. We hope that the worker will attempt to distinguish between his personal and professional values and be certain there is clarity between the two. The worker will also want to share with clients the value premise that directs his decisions. It is what Kalman has referred to as "Labelling of values."⁸

Gordon has also given us direction in coping with value dilemmas by pointing to the need to distinguish between knowledge and value. What is often accepted as values may be knowledge statements. The reverse is likewise true.⁹ To confuse one with the other can easily lead to faulty diagnosis. One should also realize that not all social work values are terminal, some are instrumental, and to keep the two separate is important since it can aid in effective intervention.

For example, if the individual can be

helped through group responsibility via group process, then social work goals are reached. Group responsibility is viewed in the context of instrumental values. If the reverse is true, that is if independence of the individual is sacrificed through group cohesion then the purposes of social work may be questioned.

Levy proposes examining value categories which can act as guides for planning and action in social work. Levy proposes that we view social work values as preferred conceptions of people, preferred outcomes and preferred instrumentalities. These values "would become in their ultimate stage of development . . . a basis for expectation—a basis for predicting or assuming what social workers would do under given circumstances."¹⁰ It is these purposes that would guide the worker in the helping process.

Societal and individual strain should also be viewed from another dimension. Heyman has noted that it is important for the worker to view these strains from a system perspective. It is the recognition that "a person, his subgroup and the larger society are all dynamically interrelated and interdependent, and that most social problems stem from a faulty and unproductive relationship between the individual and society."¹¹ The job of the social worker, as Schwartz points out, "is to represent the symbiotic strivings, even where their essential features are obscured from the individual, from society or from both."¹² Intervention is thus a function of client or

⁷ Elizabeth Howe, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁸ Herbert C. Kelman, "Manipulation of Human Behavior: An Ethical Dilemma for the Social Scientist," *Journal of Social Issues*, XXI, No. 2 (1965), pp 31-46.

⁹ William E. Gordon, "A Critique of the Working Definition," *Social Work* 7 (October 1962), pp 3-13.

¹⁰ Charles S. Levy, "The Value Base of Social Work," *Journal of Education of Social Work*, Vol. 9 (Winter 1973), p. 38.

¹¹ David Heymann, "A Function for the Social Worker in the Antipoverty Program" in William Schwartz and Serapio R. Zaba, (ed.) *The Practice of Group Work*. New York: Columbia University Press 1971, p. 163.

¹² William Schwartz, "The Social Worker in the Group" in *New Perspectives on Services to Groups: Theory, Organization, Practice*. New York: National Association of Social Workers 1961, p. 7.

group needs.

The various positions put forth thus far have attempted to seek some resolution to value and ethical tension. It places responsibility upon the worker to consider his own value position, that of the clients and group, and that of the profession. The knowledge and value distinction are important elements in resolution of conflict. The strains mentioned above are often exacerbated however when the Jewish social worker is faced with individual community preferences. This will be our focus of inquiry in the next section.

Individual-Community Tension: A Jewish View

When issues of individual and community choice are raised, the Jewish social worker is often confronted with a dual conflict. Not only is his attention focused on seeking solutions within the purview of social work, but he is likewise seeking answers within the Jewish Halachic framework.

One should observe at the outset that within the Jewish Halachic framework communal obligations and individual responsibility have been finely balanced. This position is best reflected in the Talmudic dictum, *Kol Yisroel Arevin Zeh Lazeh*,¹³—"All of Israel is responsible one for another." The Rambam is very specific about this point when he states that the community is obligated to support, clothe and care for the destitute.¹⁴ It is even required to fulfil the obligation of finding a spouse for a single non-married person.

The individual's obligation to the community is characterized by giving charity to his brethren if he is in residence thirty days. By six months he is required to participate in clothing his fellow citizens. By nine months his obligations extend to participation in expenditure for burial. The Rambam notes that if the individual

refuses to contribute, the community can force him to fulfil his obligations.¹⁵

In regard to support and preferential treatment for members within Jewish society the Rambam presents us with some insightful directions. The indigent who is one's relative is preferred above any other persons seeking aid.¹⁶ Furthermore the poor who visits frequently with a family is preferred over the poor of his city. Finally the indigent who established residency in a city is preferred over inhabitants of another city.¹⁷ The accepted source for this ruling is found in the book of Deuteronomy. The *Torah* states "If there be among you a needy man, one of thy brethren within any of thy gates . . ." Rashi interprets this verse in the following manner. A needy man: "who is most needy comes first." One of thy brethren: "the brother of your father over the brother of your mother." Thy gates: "the poor of your own city have precedence over the poor of another city."¹⁸ Jewish law thus provided us with a framework of action when question of preferential treatment emerges.

The rabbis however have not only given us insight into communal obligation and precedence. They also deal with the complex issue of individual and group survival. Within this context the Talmud raises the following question. If a group of women were threatened by heathens with physical violation such as rape unless they were ready to volunteer one of their members, what action should they take? The Talmudic response indicates that they should all submit since the sanctity of one life is of equal importance to another.¹⁹ Should the heathens single out an individual for execution then the group is likewise prohibited from informing. The only reservation is the person who himself com-

¹⁵ Bavli *Baba Kama* 119:a.

¹⁶ *Matnot Aniym* Op. Cit. 9:12.

¹⁷ Bavli *Baba Metzia* 71:a.

¹⁸ *Deuteronomy* 15:7.

¹⁹ *Yerushalmi Terumot* 8:4.

¹³ Bavli *Schevuot* 39; *Sotah* 37.

¹⁴ Rambam *Hilchot Matnot Aniym* Ch. 7:3.

mitted a major crime such as *Sheba the son of Bichri*.²⁰ But even then the rabbis look with disfavor on sacrificing the individual for group continuity.

The excerpts above put into serious question the propriety of subordinating the welfare of the individual to that of the group. Jewish normative thinking, as crystallized in the Halacha, never assumed the primacy of the group or community as such. One human life has infinite value; it is the equivalent of the entire world. This view has wide implications for policy and in particular for Jewish community centers both in Israel and abroad. As Wurzbarger noted a number of years ago.

Judaism revolves around the rights and duties the needs and wants of the individual Jew rather than such abstract notions as "communal needs" or "group values" . . . the function of the Jewish social agency would be to help the individual Jew meet his total existential needs as a Jew which include the need for a meaningful Jewish experience and commitment.²¹

The decision about individual and community survival appears sufficiently explicit in Talmudic writings. The individual is sanctified and not to be subordinated to the group. The issue however can become more complex when the dilemma centers on limited resources and individual survival. The Tract of *Baba Menzia* addresses itself to this issue.

If two are travelling on a journey (far from civilization) and one has a pitcher of water, if both drink they will both die, but if one only drinks he can reach civilization . . . the son of Patura taught: it is better that both should drink and die, rather than that one should behold his companion's death. Until R. Akiba came and taught that thy brother may live with thee: thy life takes precedence over his life.²²

²⁰ Samuel Chapter 2:20. Sheba rebelled against David thus committing a major crime.

²¹ Walter S. Wurzbarger, "The Meaning and Significance of Jewish Survival," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. XL, No. 3 (1964), pp 307-315.

²² *Baba Mezia* 62:a.

When survival is at stake who is mortal man to suggest who shall survive? In addition, for Petura it is best to die than witness suffering of fellow man. But the more accepted view is that of Rabbi Akiba who places sanctity of life above all, even if man must sacrifice life of others. "He shall live by them"²³ and thus perpetuate the glory of God.

While early Rabbinic writings provide direction for individual and communal responsibility it is to one of the most prolific contemporary scholars that we turn to gain insight into this ancient dilemma. Rabbi Soloveitchik examines the problem from a somewhat different dimension. He does not focus on the complex issue of choice and who is to live and die. In his seminal paper on the "community," Rav Soloveitchik turns to the fundamental issue of community or individual precedence. Is it the "community, the pair or man (or woman) alone who takes precedence?"²⁴

His response —

The answer to the problem is rather a dialectical one, namely, man is both. His is a single lonely being, not belonging to any structured collectivity . . . He is also a thou-related being, who co-exists in companionship with somebody else . . . In fact the greatness of man, manifests itself in his being single and unrelated to anyone, as well as in his being thou-related and belonging to a community structure.²⁵

To talk in terms of individual or community precedence is perhaps a contradiction in terms. They are both separate and equal, a metaphysical entity complementing one another existentially. The Rav proceeds to expand upon their complementary relationships and their mutuality. He points to the critical stance taken in Jewish thought of valuing both entities.

For the practitioner who may be faced

²³ Leviticus 18:5.

²⁴ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "The Community," *Tradition* Vol. 17, No. 2 Spring 1978, pp 8-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp 9-10.

with the manifold dilemmas of individual—community tension both the *Rav*'s observations and the Talmudic insights presented are provocative. It points on the one hand to the difficulty of the issue but also to some directions that are offered from

Rabbinic teachings. It is the Jewish social worker's obligation to consider both the professional and the Halachic factors that enter into these complex issues. Through engaging with the problem some directions for intervention can be arrived at.