

The social role of social work

An experimental teaching model: the Israeli case

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The knowledge revolution and far-reaching technological developments in the post-modern world have resulted in societal changes, notably a decrease in idealism and social commitment, an increase in instrumentalism and effects on human behavior (Kawel and Gechtman, 1995; Knoke, 1996). It has been suggested that individuals protect themselves from accumulated acts of social change by a mechanism of encapsulation. This makes people apathetic and turns them into outside observers of sick and cruel human phenomena, which may at any moment disrupt the ordinary routine of their daily lives (Hopper, 1996). One would expect that the helping professions, plugged into society, could adjust to these changes without losing their basic mission. This is especially relevant to the field of social work; ‘because it is located between individuals and the system’, it often finds itself in a difficult position (Abramovitz, 1998: 518).

Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century, social work has helped to mediate between the conflicting need of the individual and the requirements of the market economy (Abramovitz, 1998). Traditionally, social work’s objective has been to reduce incongruities between the needs of populations and the provision of resources that are more severe or that have been more neglected than others. The aim has been to match resources with need, to increase ‘goodness of fit’ between them, largely by harnessing potential provider

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systems to perform these functions (Rosenfeld, 1983; Rosenfeld and Sykes, 2000). This dual commitment has weakened over the years, as the profession has come under strong pressure to promote individual adjustment and to protect the status quo (Abramovitz, 1993). To a large extent, this shift is the outcome of broader social and economic processes. These include the encouragement of individualism, massive cutbacks in social services and the retreat of governments from their commitment to provide for the social welfare of their citizens (Specht and Courtney, 1994; Besser, 1998). As a result, practitioners find themselves relating to conserving interventions, rather than social reform and change (Rosenfeld, 1983).

At the same time, social work has undergone a parallel process of professionalization. On one axis practitioners avoid the area of social change, while on the other they are developing and improving their psychiatric knowledge and intervention skills. Within the profession, this process has increased the emphasis on casework (Hartman and Lazar, 1990; Lazar et al., 1995) and the clinical focus within the casework approach that emphasizes psychotherapy and psychoanalysis (Abramovitz, 1993, 1998; Goldstein, 1996; Kane, 1980; Spiro et al., 1992). At present social workers spend most of their time on interventions directed at the small target systems of individuals, families and small groups at the expense of efforts to bring about change in organizations, communities and public policy (Butler and Coleman, 1997; Huber and Orlando, 1993). The result is that social work no longer meets the needs of populations at risk for advocacy, empowerment and even services, and has abandoned its primary mission to help the poor and oppressed (Hartman, 1990; Specht and Courtney, 1994; Rosenfeld and Sykes, 2000).

Moreover, in recent years, social workers have come to prefer working with 'choice' populations rather than with poor and stigmatized populations such as the elderly, the developmentally impaired, delinquents, the handicapped and the homeless, who, in the past, were the profession's traditional target populations (Aviram and Katan, 1991; Cloward and Epstein, 1967; Specht and Courtney, 1994; Rosenfeld and Sykes, 2000).

These trends are reflected not only in interventions, but also in the social work curriculum. By assigning social change to community organization, the profession's smallest method numerically, social work has effectively taken the majority of its practitioners aligned with casework off the social reform hook (Abramovitz, 1998: 521).

Israel as a multicultural society

Since its establishment in 1948 the Jewish state has opened its gates to all world Jewry. As a result, the Israeli population is comprised of subgroups marked by substantial cultural and class differences.

This multicultural heterogeneity has led to an atmosphere of social intolerance and prejudice that leans on intracultural discrimination. The Sephardim feel that the Ashkenazim created the model of the Israeli 'Sabra' partially in an attempt to erase the Sephardim's identity. This feeling of alienation and disillusionment is also expressed in the split between religious and secular Jews. This issue becomes even more complicated since many of the religious Jews are identified with a politically right-wing ideology. Thus religious diversity becomes political differentiation as well. Above all these issues hover the ongoing threats to the existence of the state. For years, the threat of the Arab countries has magnified the annihilation anxieties and paranoid feelings of Israeli Jews about Israel facing another holocaust. Each war has augmented the self-image of the Israelis as 'David against Goliath' or 'a small country surrounded by foes'. In addition, Israel has faced terrorist threats for years. This, too, has contributed to shaping attitudes about the Palestinian identity and has affected the process involving the Palestinians as potential partners for peaceful coexistence.

In summary, Israel is characterized by a multicultural, socially and politically polarized country set against the traumatic and tumultuous background of the Holocaust and historical memories of ethnic persecutions, terrorist acts and wars that are ever-present. These elements are reflected in the relationship between society, the social work profession and social work education (Nuttman-Shwartz and Wienberg, 2002).

Social work education

In general, social work education is a reflection of the knowledge revolution and technological developments that characterize the post-modern social work profession. As a result, social work students receive only the most limited exposure to subjects such as economics and social policy, or any formal attention to social problems. In principle, the social work practice theory taught in most schools espouses an ecosystem framework (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). This framework emphasizes reciprocity between individuals' quality of life, social conditions and social environments, assuming that

individual growth is the result of an enriching environment. This emphasizes the importance of a more comprehensive point of view when discussing individual needs. However, in practice, most social work programs focus on casework and family interventions, with community work occupying an inferior and unprestigious place (Abramovitz, 1998; al-Kranawi, 1998; Hartman and Lazar, 1990; Lazar et al., 1995).

Several explanations can be offered. The Council on Social Work, Education's standards for accreditation do not include any requirements that students complete courses in publicly supported social services, community work, or the law (Specht and Courtney, 1994). Moreover, often a good portion of classroom instructors and field-work supervisors are therapists whose practice is based on the psychodynamic approach prevalent in the mental health field (Cnaan and Bergman, 1990; Spiro et al., 1992; Doron, 1982), and these, through their ability to influence course content and in their capacity as role models for their students, emphasize psychotherapy.

Such training reduces the likelihood of students trying to tackle the social problems that underlie the difficulties that many of social work's traditional clients bring to them (Butler and Coleman, 1997). They find it difficult to integrate the structural and organizational factors involved in their clients' problems into their practice, even though they are exposed to these factors in the prevailing ecological model of practice (Vayda and Bogo, 1991).

Similar trends are found in Israel. A survey carried out in the country's five schools of social work (Spiro et al., 1992) revealed a persistent slide since the early 1970s from a social to a clinical approach. By the early 1990s more elective courses dealt with interpersonal matters and the percentage of courses on social issues or policy had declined radically. According to these findings, 41 percent of all the courses had interpersonal or psychodynamic content, and the social work methods courses emphasized consulting and interpersonal processes.

In a study of social work students in Israel, Cnaan and Bergman (1990) found that as their studies progressed, students tended to become less interested and aware of social issues, less optimistic regarding their ability to handle such issues and more inclined to prefer clinical casework intervention to community and social change interventions. These research findings were reinforced almost a decade later by Ben David and Amit (1999), who examined the extent of change in cultural sensitivity among undergraduate social work

students. Their findings indicate that social work education in Israel does not contribute toward the reduction of prejudice among students, nor does it strengthen their cultural sensitivity.

Various approaches are possible in promoting socialization of social work students to adequately carry out their role in a multi-cultural society. In this paper we describe an innovative experimental teaching model added to the undergraduate teaching program at Tel Aviv University School of Social Work. The program was aimed at promoting greater awareness among second-year students of the social worker's social role. Its premise was that although many factors have contributed to the present state of alienation, traditional social work commitment to both individuals and society cannot be realized unless students receive formal training on the social responsibilities of the profession (Abramovitz, 1993), while developing social awareness and sensitivity (Ben-David and Amit, 1999).

The intervention methods course at the School of Social Work

Like other schools of social work in Israel, Tel Aviv University offers a three-year undergraduate program, which qualifies its graduates to work in the profession. Although the school was founded with the declared mission of teaching its students to confront and resolve social problems on both the individual and social levels, its curriculum emphasizes casework.

The Methods of Social Work Intervention course is a three-year basic course which combines classroom and fieldwork. In the second year, the fieldwork requirements consist of between four and six supervised interventions on the individual or family level, and one intervention that is wider in scope and attempts to address the macro level. With the classroom focus on psychologically oriented casework and little attention given to social problems, students have considerable difficulty with the latter type of intervention.

Most clients who are referred to students in their fieldwork placement have not only personal and emotional problems but also many difficulties stemming from their social environments. But since the students are not taught to connect the clients' specific situations to the macro issues, some did not complete the fieldwork requirement at all, while others chose to do group work in which they focused

on the clients' personal problems. To give only one example, two students planned and ran a group for several unemployed persons, in which they taught them job search skills; but they never considered the high unemployment in their communities or looked for ways of increasing the employment opportunities.

The teaching model described below was designed to narrow the gap between what is taught in the Methods of Social Work Intervention course and the demands of the field.

The teaching model

The need for additional teaching of the social role was identified by the instructors of the second year Methods of Social Work Intervention course, during the monthly meetings that were held to coordinate course content and to discuss problems. Because intervention modalities cannot be taught to large numbers of students at once, 10 classes of some 18 students are taught.

The model was designed and implemented by the authors after the other instructors had agreed to cooperate in implementing it in their classes. The goals of the model were to augment the students' social awareness and to teach them to conduct their assessments and interventions with the social dimensions of the clients' problems in mind.

The model was based on the community participation approach (Specht and Courtney, 1994), supported by role modeling. The basic idea was to model macro intervention, much as we model other interventions, in our own teaching program. The difference was that here we would model not to our classes but to 'community representatives' consisting of a small student task force made up of one or two student representatives from each methods class. Most of the representatives were volunteers, though some had to be drafted. These 'representatives' participated with the task force in planning the 'community intervention' and implemented it in their classes, where they would model the macro intervention that they learned from us.

The task force met once every other week. Concurrently, the ten methods instructors took time out of their regular monthly meetings to listen to our reports on the decisions of the task force and to express their own views.

The model was planned to last throughout the school year and was structured in much the same format as the Methods course itself: the first semester devoted to client assessment and the second semester to intervention.

The process

We began by asking the task force to consider how to raise students' awareness of social problems in Israel. To answer this, they began to assess what those problems were. Using brainstorming, they listed such problems as the increasing economic gap between rich and poor, the Jewish-Arab conflict, the conflict between the religious and secular, new immigrants and native-born, discrimination against women and so forth. Putting these issues together, they reached the conclusion that divisions crisscross the Israeli society.

At the end of this initial assessment, they decided on three ways of raising students' awareness. The first was to bring their discussions with us back to their classes so as to involve the other students and to obtain their input. The second way was to give the project a snappy, thought-provoking name. They chose: 'What Splits Israel?'. The third was to have the students learn more about this issue through a lecture. As the speaker, which they selected with our help, they chose a faculty member whose academic background combined psychology with law and political science. To ensure that the talk would be relevant, they briefed the speaker on the project and asked him to focus on how the various splits in the society had developed. The lecture was mandatory for the students, but the task force put up posters and presented each student with a personal invitation to encourage attendance.

The lecture was followed by a discussion in each classroom, conducted by the instructor, aimed at integrating the information provided in the lecture with the main subject matter of the first semester of the Methods course: information gathering for client assessment. This integration was accomplished differently in each class. Several instructors did it by treating Israeli society as the 'client' and applying the same questions to the society that the students are taught to ask when making assessments of individuals and families.

Throughout the entire process, the student representatives not only brought the discussions and decisions of the task force back to their classes, they also brought the responses and suggestions of their classmates' back to the task force.

At the beginning of the second semester, the task force met again to decide how to expedite the knowledge and experience obtained during the first semester. For further emphasis of the macro level of intervention a decision was made to combine two classes and have them select one issue that divided the country and learn about

it from a specialist. In order to ensure a fairly objective presentation they decided to bring in an outside consultant, whether an expert in the field, a social work field worker, a social work client or a public figure. The involvement of an outside expert enabled the students to be exposed to 'real-life' social action, such as empowerment, marketing advocacy, and the use of power and position. This decision was brought back to the classrooms at the beginning of the second semester, where the Methods' subject is intervention planning and implementation.

The 10 classes were divided into five groups of two classes each. These groups met several times. For the first meeting the students were asked to bring newspaper clippings on some problematic social issues. Using the clippings in the class session, they were divided into four subgroups, each of which chose a social problem and presented it to the class either visually (poster) or experientially (role play). Following these presentations, the students selected the issue that most interested them, who they wanted to teach them about it, and by what means (e.g. lecture, workshop, free discussion). The two task force members and two instructors in each group found and mobilized the outside person who would 'teach' the subject.

The social issues chosen were divided between the religious and the secular, women's rights, ethnic conflicts, child abuse and AIDS. As can be seen, they were not all about the fissures in Israeli society. In the joint class activity around each subject, the students were exposed to the issue and discussed the questions of whether it was, in fact, a social problem, whether social work should take a position or in any way act on the issue, and, if so, how.

The group that chose to explore the religious secular divide provides an example. For their outside 'informant,' they invited an orthodox Jew who worked for a non-profit organization giving workshops on religious tolerance to non-religious high-school students. He was about their age and, like them, had served in the Israeli army. For the most part, he spoke of his personal experience, feelings, and worldview as a modern orthodox Jew, which turned out to be quite different from those of the largely non-religious students in the class. These differences brought home to the students the considerable divide in the religious and secular outlook and *modus operandi*, and the personal meeting with the sympathetic speaker reduced some of the students' alienation and hostile feelings. The discussion that followed his presentation raised several issues. One set of issues related to the basic social work value of being

non-judgemental and accepting the client. Another was the question of whether the principles and methods of social work intervention are universal or, conversely, should be modified to suit the client's background and belief system. Perhaps the most important question was the role that social work could and should play in promoting tolerance and bridging the religious-secular divide and other divides in society.

Conclusion

Israeli society as a microcosm of multicultural countries characterized by ethnic, nationalistic and religious conflicting subgroups is just one such example. The social split requires special attention not only in fieldwork, but also in role training and identification. With this rationale in mind we set out with this experimental project.

In summing up the project, a number of natural and somewhat necessary questions come to mind. How successful was the model? Did it augment the students' social awareness? Did it teach them to conduct their assessments and interventions with the social dimensions of the clients' problems in mind? Did it have any effect on the teachers' attitudes or teaching content?

The project exposed the students to their own personal prejudices vis-a-vis the important social problems in Israel. This made them more aware of the effect these problems have on themselves as human beings and on their clients.

At first, there was considerable skepticism among both the students and their instructors as to the value of the project. Although the students cooperated with the task force, most of them were passive. As the year progressed, they became more active and involved.

At the same time, the students did not seem to have fully internalized the social approach. In the class discussions of the social issues that they selected, they tended to focus on themselves and their professional identity rather than on their clients. This can probably be explained by the content orientation stressed in the second year of social work studies, which emphasizes socialization and development of professional identity (Schon, 1991). Therefore it is not surprising that the questions they raised were such as 'Could a secular social worker treat a religious client? How do female social workers relate to wife beaters?' These questions reflect their feelings of uncertainty with regard to the complexities of their role regarding these issues.

The students who benefited most from the project were those in the task force. Even those students who had been drafted into the task force and were among the less committed at the beginning reported a significant change in their perception of the social worker's role, a report that their instructors seconded. Clear indication of the impact of the project for them was also evident in their final fieldwork projects. About a third of them chose to do their final project on the subject of how to combine the individual and social aspects of social work.

One of the students did a quite extraordinary project in a local hospital to help alleviate the stress of parents whose children were in the pediatric intensive care unit. She assessed that to help these parents she had to focus her intervention on the entire unit. By eliciting the cooperation of the doctors and nurses she brought about a policy change in the unit. She formed an open group where the parents of the hospitalized children could meet with the doctors and nurses. A social worker with an individual casework orientation would have probably worked mainly with the distressed parents of the hospitalized children. The student whose horizons had been broadened to encompass the social dimensions of individual distress was able to realize that some of the parents' distress stemmed from their bewilderment and alienation in a large, impersonal modern hospital. By creating this connection between the individual and the environment she succeeded in bringing about change on the micro and macro levels simultaneously.

The impact of the project on the students in the task force seems to have stemmed from several sources. One was probably the direct coaching and encouragement from committed faculty. Equally if not more important, their active participation in the project and the cohesiveness they developed as a group enhanced their social commitment, and the feelings of personal competence and empowerment that their activity promoted strengthened their conviction that they could indeed effect social change.

The least change occurred among the faculty. They all cooperated with the project, allocated the requested class time to it, provided us with ongoing feedback and encouraged the task force volunteers. However, like the faculties of other schools of social work (Specht and Courtney, 1994; Goldstein, 1996), most of them are clinically oriented, and they did not seem to fully internalize the project's social message. As a result, they could not serve the students as convincing role models for the social change orientation.

Recommendations

The project made an impact but its success was not complete. We offer the following recommendations.

1. The faculty. Since the class instructors are the keys to fully integrating the social change orientation into the curriculum, it is vital that they be able to properly present and model it. Ideally, persons trained in an committed to the social perspective should teach the social orientation. This providing the current faculty with further opportunity and encouragement to recognize the need for and identify with the social approach. In order to promote more social awareness on the part of the faculty, involvement in community projects and policy-making should be encouraged.
2. The students. There were two basic problems in trying to use the students as role models. The first related to the fact that the students themselves were not completely crystallized in their professional identity, making it difficult to serve as role models vis-a-vis their peers. The second was that they themselves were involved in the change process, and were thus unable to share or teach their fellow classmates.
3. The learning process. The few hours allotted to teaching social orientation in the Methods course are apparently not enough for the students to fully internalize its value. For the social approach to be internalized, it must be conveyed with much greater intensity.
4. A cross-cultural course. At the last, one full course should be devoted to promoting multicultural sensitivity and social awareness, in which theory, practical knowledge and fieldwork are combined.

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