

ON PROBLEMS OF LOYALTY: WHO OWNS SOCIAL WORK?

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THE issue of "loyalty" in social work has been debated in the profession for nearly two decades. Whether referred to as problems of "allegiance", "responsibility", or "accountability" social workers sense a need to grapple with the problem now more than ever before and are trying to define the issues involved.

Who, for example, should we be loyal to? Four possible targets seem likely: to the agency, to clients, to the "profession" and its "ethics", however unclearly defined, or to one's self? "Loyalty" seems to become an issue and causes discomfort when our behaviour cannot satisfy the norms of one or more of the above targets. At that point we have to take a stand, unless the dissonance situation is weathered by rationalization or other crisis prevention mechanisms. Those who seek guidance from the professional literature on this question will find widely different views, and global Biblical injunctions such as "justice, justice you shall pursue"¹ are pointedly not helpful because they do not define "justice" nor even the directions for pursuing it.

Differing Views on Allegiance

Several social work scholars have come down clearly on the side of the client as

the principal target of social workers' allegiance. Scott Briar² noted in 1968 that "the social worker's primary allegiance should be to his client, and not to the agency that employs him". George Brager³ agreed and wrote that "the social worker sees as his primary responsibility the tough-minded and partisan representation of his clients' interests, and this supercedes his falty to others". He believed that this role inevitably requires that the practitioner function as a "political tactician".

But William Schwartz, writing a year later, disagreed with Briar and Brager. He wrote that "an agency is not a static organization, with no play of internal forces, and those who insist that it is must cut themselves off from the most progressive elements within it, and take their clients with them. The basic relationship between an institution and its people is symbiotic, each needs the other for his own survival... It is a form of social contract, and when the arrangement goes wrong... those who claim that the contract is broken do no service to the people, or to the agency".⁴ Moreover, Schwartz was convinced that by focussing solely on the client "we are developing a literature of guile, with Machiavelli as the new culture hero".

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None of this debate has been settled. The American National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics tried to satisfy both camps by pronouncing in 1960⁵ and in 1967⁶ that a social workers' primary obligation is to the welfare of his clients, but that workers are responsible for modifying agency practices which are unethical or prevent workers from behaving according to the Code of Ethics.

In 1976, Gilbert and Specht⁷ spotlighted a new aspect of the issue, namely, that in their opinion, use of advocacy to obtain better services requires that the clients' desires be determined and his permission be obtained to act on his behalf. These authors stressed that social workers cannot abandon the principle of client self-determination, even regarding strategies for solving clients' problems. One difficulty with this line of thought, however, is just how client consent is to be secured on issues affecting large classes of people, many of whom are potential or *de-facto* clients. Another difficulty is the fact that discontented social workers struggling daily with social inequality, also are "clients", seeking social reform through advocacy as relief for their own frustration. In that case, when acting in concert, they do practice self-determination for what ails them.

Allegiance Strain: A Clash Between Social Work Ethos and Work Realities

Any attempt to determine a personal conceptualization about one's allegiance requires that each of us think through the principles and truths that guide us. Despite much wishful thinking, there is a wide range of different behaviours and personal solutions that social workers under pressure do select. I have seen social workers in the same agencies, under identical stress around loyalty, choose totally different strategies to alleviate that stress, some very commendable, and some thoroughly disreputable. The differen-

ces in these approaches stems not only from personality, but from each individuals' ethos or guiding principles as well as his economic and social status considerations.

Those who experience problems of allegiance are confronted with a clash between the social work ethos and employment realities which may undermine that ethos. The social work ethos believes that the basic purpose of social work is to help people attain their maximum potential in society and to share in its benefits, its obligations and its institutions. It reflects the consensus that one's loyalty is essentially to clients and, conditionally, to any agency whose practices can help clients achieve these goals, so long as the agency does indeed fulfil that helping role. The ethos acknowledges that at times bureaucracies and other social institutions may be in conflict or even opposed to social work goals, and may perpetuate social ills, or move too slowly in creating change. It recognizes that social institutions are usually products of political and social forces long preceding the contemporary 'actors' who implement the policies and programmes that resulted from those forces, and therefore, social services institutions, just as all social institutions, and their policies, practices, and values are all legitimate targets for change when they operate counter to the social work ethos. Social workers also believe that one of their cardinal duties is to serve as mouthpiece for those disadvantaged who have "lost their own voices" while working to help them speak for themselves.

Ironically, many agencies and institutions which employ social workers are bound to a work and management ethos that often runs counter to the social work ethos. For example, much of the considerations involved in the employers' work ethos are geared to fiscal and organizational "comfort" of the employing agency, usually local or national

government bodies. Daily work procedures, work norms, and allocation of budget by employers have, over the years, resulted in a situation where much of social work practice is *de-facto* dictated by managerial considerations not professional considerations.⁸ In a subtle, but relentless way, management and legislators have determined "professional" social work practice and behaviour simply by determining the organizational arrangements for implementing the work. For example, budgetary policy in public welfare services dictate that less home visits than needed be made to families and to children in placement; that more and more "professional judgment" be used to stretch meagre supplementary assistance services, that case-loads are too large for personalized service; that overcrowded work conditions endanger privacy and confidentiality; that working hours conform to civil service regulations rather than to client comfort; and that "too much over-identification" and involvement with client advocacy can be dangerous to the stability of the organization and to the workers' career.

The overwhelming influence of management on social work practice has led, in my opinion, to a conditioning syndrome for many social workers, whereby administrative and fiscal constraints become rationalized as *bona fide* professional practice and subsequently defended by social workers as current practice. Economic determinism has changed social work practice in many areas, for good or bad. But we rarely ask ourselves how much of this change was consciously professional or subsequent rationalization for economic and political dictates. One can see professional rationalization of changing practice in adoption work and in much of child welfare work,⁹ in public welfare programmes, in corrections, and in many other areas of social work practice.

The degree of conditioning and the rationalization of non-professionally determined

changes in our practice is so alarming and widespread, that I would seriously ask: "Who owns social work?". In all sincerity, I am not convinced that the social workers "own" their own profession.

To make things more complicated, management, particularly civil service, has imposed rules which do not facilitate (to put it mildly), employee participation in change activities. Change activities include helping shape public opinion and the use of the mass media, utilization of courts, protest and demonstration, and even disruptive tactics, to name a few. Employees are bound, under penalty of sanctions, including discharge, to maintain silence in matters affecting their practice and employer agency. The following are regulations from the *Manual of Work Regulations* for employees of the Jerusalem Municipality which illustrate my point:

"Regulation 50 — No employee will divulge to anyone who is not a city employee information which has not been published publicly that became known to him in the course of his work. . . Regulation 51 — No employee can publish anything related to his tasks or matters which he deals with in the municipality, without obtaining permission from the city spokesman. Regulation 52 — An employee is permitted to declare his opinion in public, written or verbal, regarding general social issues, which are not related to his work on the condition that. . . no matter what his rank, he will not criticize the policies of his department, of other departments, or of the municipality, in a news conference, and newspaper interview, a speech, a broadcast, a newspaper article, a book or any other publication, unless he received specific written permission to do so from the mayor".¹⁰

In view of those restrictions how can the concerned social worker express himself on issues he becomes aware of through his

daily work? How can he solve his dilemma of loyalty to client and agency, and to himself? A number of channels are available to him, but unfortunately most of them, in my view are inadequately prepared for the task.

Social Worker Refuges

Ideally, the Association of Social Workers, the professional organization should be an effective spokesman for both social workers and their clients. In fact, only rough beginnings have been made for obtaining a voice in determining national and local social policy. Work conditions and salaries are still under par with most other academic professions, and social work turnover is catastrophic with workers leaving the profession in large numbers. In Israel, 50% of all social workers are employed in the two lowest salary ranks out of the nine possible ranks; about 80% are employed under the fifth rank!¹¹ Even in the United States, the NASW has barely scratched the surface regarding its potential role both as a trade union negotiator and its legal and advocacy roles on behalf of social workers and their clients.

Another potential "refuge" for social workers are the schools of social work. Here too, the role expectation is unfulfilled as yet. Schools of social work are reluctant to pressure agencies too hard for changing malpractices or for terminating them as student placement centres. They need placements more than ever and keep sending students to them rather than face confrontation and sanctions on both sides. Some faculty members are open about their reluctance to endanger access to agencies for research and other projects that are essential for their own work and advancement in academia and elsewhere. Moreover, in the final analysis, universities, and schools of social work in tow, do not recognize public service and social action by faculty as criteria for

promotion. Some Israeli schools even "punish" faculty people involved in these areas for having "lost time outside the university". It is a rare school that has done otherwise, and while deans award prizes to outstanding alumni for public service, they rarely award their own faculty for similar activity. Here too, not a small amount of conditioning and inferiority may be operating. Ironically, the academic freedom of the university has not been utilized enough to speak up on behalf of the thousands of social workers gagged in civil service and private agencies.

Another refuge in many organizations is the "Workers' Committee", or the union. These are not easy waters to navigate, as they invariably are political bodies demanding political loyalty from those they represent. But the unions do have power, and perhaps we social workers have not utilized them nearly enough as vehicles for change and for winning back more ownership of our profession.¹²

Quitting the agency is yet another form of refuge and not a few social workers have solved the allegiance problem in this way.¹³ Those who stay on often bitterly castigate the "deserters", but I wonder whether perhaps those who protest with their feet may be the real heroes, and that perhaps too many workers stay on when they really shouldn't. Perhaps staying on enables perpetuation of bad situations and even rationalized defense of it? There is no doubt too, that both economic and personal reasons dictate who leaves and who does not. My own evaluation regarding those who leave depends upon what they did after they left; did they find another vehicle for changing things or did they give it up altogether?

Allegiance in the next Decade

The issue of allegiance, I believe, will sharpen for most of us in the years ahead.

Social workers are more attuned to policy and advocacy, and escalated confrontation than ever before. Social norms in this regard are also changing. All of the potential "refuges" mentioned above have to be honed in the next decade so as to give strength to social workers for "recapturing" their profession.

Loyalty and allegiance is not the problem of a few brave or pathetic souls; it is the

dilemma of every social worker, both as a professional and as a citizen. Silence on social issues as a professional, for us, also means silence as citizens. In the long run all of us are faced with Shakespeare's dictum "...but above all, to thine own self be true". But what is "truth", how much "truth" can we bear, and what price for "truth"? All these are the questions we must deal with, collectively as a profession, and individually as searching human beings.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Deuteronomy*. Chapter 16, Verse 20.
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4. William Schwartz. "Private Troubles and Public Issues: One Social Work Job or Two?" *The Social Welfare Forum*, 1969, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 34-38.
5. Code of Ethics. National Association of Social Work Policy Statements, No. 1 (New York: NASW, 1967).
6. The Ad Hoc Committee on Advocacy, "The Social Worker as Advocate: Champion of Social Victims", *Social Work*, 14 (April, 1969), pp. 16-22.
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12. Everett Kassalow. "Trade Unionism Goes Public", *The Public Interest*, 14, (Winter, 1969), pp. 118-130; L. Carpenter. "Getting the Unions Into Planning", *Dissent*, 22, (1975), pp. 217-219; Milton Tambor. "Unions and Voluntary Agencies", *Social Work*, 18 (July, 1973), pp. 41-47.
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