Between tradition and modernity: Social work-related change processes in the Jewish ultra-orthodox society in Israel

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ABSTRACT

The present research attempts to present the experience of the encounter between Jewish ultra-orthodox society – a closed and isolated group – and social work – with its cultural, western, secular and professional characteristics. The study explores this topic by describing the work and experience of the social workers who treat this population, and the encounter's meaning for them. This experiential and challenging encounter is exemplified through different social work contents such as: child sex abuse, miscarriage, adolescent girls in distress, mental health, divorce, etc. A qualitative-phenomenological approach was adopted in this study. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 social workers with different religious identities in daily contact with ultra-orthodox Jewish clients across the country. Participants included 6 men and 27 women. A total of 9 participants defined themselves as ultra-orthodox, 13 were national religious, and 11 were secular, with 1–20 years' experience. Three major themes emerged: 1. Community and social change processes in the ultra-orthodox society. 2. Treatment content-related change processes in the ultra-orthodox society. 3. Change processes in the ultra-orthodox society and the role of social work in the ultra-orthodox-public environment. Multicultural sensitivity is the starting point when relating to the encounter between an ultra-orthodox client and a social worker. An awareness of the social worker's personal values, acquaintance with the client's personal and community values, and the encounter between them are crucial factors for treatment success.

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The purpose of this article is to explore and describe the experience of the encounter between the cultural, western, secular and professional characteristics of social work and those of a closed and isolated group, such as the Jewish ultra-orthodox society, from the social worker's point of view. This encounter reflects a multicultural reality and ideology. Multicultural ideology is based on the assumption that there is no one, single perfect culture, ideology or way of life for society. Accordingly, intercultural integration, openness and dialog should be ensured (Parekh, 2000; Sowell, 2010).

The encounter between the respective values might create a conflict between the values of the different cultural groups, while all those values are crucial factors for treatment success (Sodowsky, Kuo-Jackson, Richardson, & Corey, 1998). Thus, the actual encounter between social work, anchored in western professional intervention tools, and the traditional and closed ultra-orthodox Jewish community, represents a challenging experience.

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1. Characteristics of the Jewish ultra-orthodox society

The Jewish ultra-orthodox society is a differentiated group within Jewish society in Israel and worldwide, character-ized by extreme views regarding faith and religious practice. This group developed in counter-reaction to the Jewish emancipation, Jewish Enlightment, nationality and secularism at the end of the 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, many ultra-orthodox communities already existed in Europe, North America and Israel and at the beginning of the 20th century – in North Africa as well. This group is ruled by its faith in God (Smith, 2003), and is determined to isolate itself from secular society as much as possible (Coleman-Brueckheimer, Spitzer, & Koffman, 2009). This differen-tiation is expressed by religious norms, behavioral modes, approaches, education and external appearances (Goodman & Witztum, 2002). Accordingly, the strict preservation of *Halacha* (Jewish Law) is the main element which approxi-mates man to God, spiritually speaking (Ribner, 2003; Roer-Strier & Sands, 2004). Unlike other religious communities, this group is mainly committed to the Halacha, as opposed to the larger society, community and state (Friedman, 1992).

In addition, this society is characterized by cultural conservatism, a central mechanism aimed at preserving ancient tradition through survival efforts and continuation, followed by fear of not being able to overcome the cultural "assault" of modern secular society (Goodman & Witztum, 2002; Hakak, 2011; Heilman, 1992). These factors explain its reluctance to take part in institutional socialization mechanisms (Dehan & Aviram, 2010). This group is characterized by community discipline stemming from its subordination to rabbinical authority, which encourages strong loyalty to the community, while dictating strict behavioral codes. Rabbinical authority and the community encourage unconditional following of the Halacha at all costs. As a result of this religious commitment, a large part of the ultra-orthodox population is ruled by seclusion: an isolated community life, often in separate areas or concentrations of religious groups, guided by isolated educational frameworks founded on the study of the Torah for males only (Coleman-Brueckheimer, Spitzer, & Koffman, 2009), reflected in the Biblical verse: "and you shall study it (Torah) day and night" (Joshua 1:8). The ultra-orthodox society is further characterized by a developed and diversified system of mutual assistance based on philanthropy (Kagitcibaci, 1996).

Contrary to existing stereotypes, the ultra-orthodox society is not a homogeneous and unified group of people in black, but a complex, diversified and multifaceted community of differentiated groups with their own particular dynamics. Hasidic groups and "Opponents", Sephardi and Ashkenazim, are divided into several sub-groups (Heilman & Friedman, 1991). For example, some ultra-orthodox groups, such as Chabad, do not believe in separation from the secular community. However, unlike secular society, until today, differences among the groups and sectors in the ultra-orthodox population have remained intact (Goodman & Witztum, 2002). However, scholars agree that a clearly defined set of values characterizes all groups, such as common views, perceptions of reality, faith, the following of religious commandments, and persistent resistance to secularism (Hakak, 2011).

Despite the isolated ideologies between ultra-orthodox and secular societies in Israel, they are both interrelated, as ultra-orthodox members join the secular society and secular individuals join the ultra-orthodox community. In addition, especially recently, participation of the ultra-orthodox community in civic duties, such as serving in the army and taking part in the workforce, is a highly debated topic in Israeli society. This reality reflects the complexity of the mutual relations between the secular and ultra-orthodox communities. On the one hand, individuals defend community members from progressive tendencies available in the larger society (Goodman & Witztum, 2002); on the other hand, the ultra-orthodox population is not autonomous enough to disconnect from the uncomfortable environment in which they live (Bilu & Witztum, 1993; Goodman & Witztum, 2002). As a result, the ultra-orthodox "negotiate" and depend on the secular society, especially regarding issues related to a lack of internal resources, such as general and mental health, violence within the family, addictions, etc. (Baum, 2007; Goodman & Witztum, 2002).

2. Characteristics of professional culture in social work

Meeting the needs of people from different cultures creatively, professionally and responsibly is one of the biggest challenges faced by social workers (Derald, 2006). The social work professional ethos assumes that social workers represent the humanistic force in society, considering themselves agents of change (Jaffe, 1995; Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Similarly, Hare (2004) relates to the individual's attitude within his/her environment, considered a major concept in social work. Some scholars claim that this concept distinguishes the social work profession from other aiding disciplines, as one which is intended to produce changes in human beings, their environment, and society as a whole (Gibelman, 1999; Johnson, 1999). Social workers are subjected to the professional code of conduct (The Association for the Advancement of Social Work, 2007), compelling them to examine their personal views in relation to their commitment to follow these principles, making sure that ethical principles are congruent with the policy and agreements of their employers (Shapiro, 1997).

This raises the importance of multicultural intervention defined by concepts such as: cultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, intercultural effectiveness and cultural skills (Ridley, Mendoza, Kanitz, Angermeier, & Zenk, 1994). The social work profession engages in cross-cultural encounters with clients from different backgrounds (Ben-David & Amit, 1999). Knowledge, understanding, acceptance and sensitivity are prerequisites for professional social work in regard to cultural and human diversity (Chau, 1990).

This cultural-sensitive treatment includes the development of three skills: "cultural awareness", referring to the thera-pist's awareness of personal background, values, perceptions and views that may affect the therapeutic relationship. "Cultural