Studying social work
Dilemmas and difficulties of Ultra-Orthodox women

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Introduction

Ultra-Orthodox Jews, termed Haredim in Hebrew, are fundamentalist Jews committed to particularly strict interpretation of Jewish religious law. Concentrated in large cities in the United States and Europe, they comprise a small but unknown percentage of the Jewish people worldwide. However, in Israel, where they are found in several locations, it is estimated they comprise approximately 15–17 per cent of the Jewish population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2006).

Wherever they live, they are a self-secluding group, who separate themselves from the larger society, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, through their choice of distinctive dress, widespread use of Yiddish in daily conversation (among those of European descent) and, most substantively, by a lifestyle centred on precise observance of the many Jewish religious laws that govern all areas of life, from prayer, ritual observances and diet, through family relationships and relations with others (Friedman 1991; Shalhav 2005). Even though Haredi society consists of often fractious and vying factions, all Haredim view the spiritual, cultural, social and political phenomena of the surrounding society as corrupting and as a threat to their values and lifestyle (Caplan 2007; Friedman 1991). Blocking out the surrounding society, they live in Haredi neighbourhoods and send their children to gender-separated Haredi schools, which focus on religious education and do not prepare their pupils for matriculation. To block out information and ideas that are unacceptable to the community’s highly conservative worldview, most secular literature is deemed out of bounds, television is forbidden, and internet use is restricted to a few closely supervised Haredi sites. Special cell phones block Sabbath calls.

For the most part, too, higher (non-religious) education has been out of bounds. Haredi men, encouraged to engage in lifelong religious study, have had a very low participation in the workforce (Hakak 2004), whereas Haredi women are expected to support their families economically, despite marrying young and bearing many children. However, the strong emphasis placed on female modesty in the Haredi lifestyle restricts higher education for women. In addition to requiring full body coverage (except for the hands and face), the preservation of modesty means that women must avoid unnecessary contact with men and refrain from activities in the public domain (Caplan 2007; El-Or 1997; Shalhav 2005) as the mingling of the sexes violates the strict gender separation practiced by Haredi society. Contact with non-Haredi students and
faculty raises fears of ‘assimilation’ into the wider society. Furthermore, much of secular learning is viewed with a combination of disdain and apprehension, both as unimportant and as a source of ideas that may undermine the Haredi lifestyle and values.

In recent years, several developments have led to growing recognition in Haredi society of the need for post-high school academic education (Caplan 2003). One is the increasing economic pressure on the average Haredi family. These are large families, where the parents married in their late teens and early twenties and who, in their strict adherence to the commandment to ‘be fruitful and multiply’, typically have many children. The resulting poverty has been exacerbated by the reduction of special government economic benefits to members of the Haredi community, at much the same time that growing numbers in the community have become less willing to accept poverty as a way of life (Jerby and Levy 2000). Moreover, the community and its leaders, the rabbis, have become increasingly aware of the need for well-qualified professionals from within the community who understand its ways (Aviram and Dahan 2002). Finally, in the wake of the numerical growth of the community, there are an increasing number of individuals within it who want higher education (Sheleg 2000).

Social work is one of the areas where the need for professionals from the community has been strongly felt. After many years of denial, the Haredi community now admits the existence of social problems such as family violence and children’s behavioural difficulties, in its midst. Haredi rabbis have come to recognise that social work intervention can be useful in helping community members cope with such difficulties as personal and family problems, normative life transitions and crises such as illness and unexpected death.

The need for Haredi professionals could not be met, however, by any of the institutions of higher education in Israel. Haredi society is characterised by strict gender separation anchored in the Haredi interpretation of Jewish law. Since all of Israel’s colleges and universities are co-educational, the required gender separation obviously makes it impossible for Haredim, whether women or men, to attend them. Moreover, the self-imposed cultural segregation of the Haredi community and its fear of contamination through contact with non-Haredim and/or through exposure to information and ideas that are not accepted in the Haredi worldview constitute barriers to their attending any non-Haredi educational institutions, whether co-ed or not.

The outcome has been the beginning of a slow and as yet still limited entrance of Haredi men into the workforce and some acceptance, albeit grudging, from among the rabbis that women have to receive higher education that will better enable them to support their families. Until quite recently, the main profession for which Haredi women were trained was teaching. However, for many years now the number of young Haredi women who wanted to earn their living by means of professional employment has far outnumbered the positions available in teaching.

In the 1990s, these developments in the Haredi community converged with the policy adopted by the Israeli government to bring the increasingly numerous Haredim into the workforce, for which academic education was understood to be necessary. Thus, at about the same time as higher education in general was being expanded in Israel (Shavit et al. 2007), the country’s Council for Higher Education set out to create culturally-appropriate academic frameworks that would meet the special needs of the Haredi community (Kalaagi 2007).

**Establishing a social work programme for Haredi women**

The first step in the process was the establishment of a number of colleges for Haredi women, which avoid challenging the values of the Haredi community. A prime example is the Haredi College for Women in Jerusalem. Like other Haredi colleges, it trains the students in practical
occupations in which they can obtain gainful employment. In addition to social work, it offers degree programmes in education, medical technology, communication disorders, management, economics and computers. An in-house rabbi is employed to vet the study materials and to advise the students, and day-care is provided on the premises for newborns through toddlers. Where male students are admitted, as is now the case, strict gender separation is maintained. Males and females attend different classes, use the library at different hours, and even walk along different routes in the corridors and on campus so that they do not see members of the opposite sex.

Social work was included among the colleges’ programmes of study only after considerable hesitation by the Haredi leadership. The psychological contents of social work education were viewed as alien to Haredi concepts of human behaviour. There was also concern that fieldwork encounters with drug users, persons with psychiatric illnesses, and other social work populations would spoil the Haredi students’ innocence. It was only the recognised need for social work intervention in the Haredi community that finally overcame these deterrents. Moreover, since only a BSW is required in Israel for licensing as a social worker, social work studies were regarded as an efficient and practical way to employment.

To be included in the college, social work was defined as a ‘sensitive program’ (Aviram and Dahan 2002). Although the programme was designed to resemble as closely as possible social work programmes in other academic institutions in Israel, adjustments were made so that culturally sensitive contents were treated with care. For example, contents involving sex were introduced slowly, in careful gradations and avoiding graphic language. Films showing unclothed arms and legs were not shown. Books with long descriptions of behaviours were not used.

The students’ experiences

The remainder of this chapter will describe and discuss the findings of research into the motivations and experiences of Haredi social work students in Israel.

Method

Data on 66 current students and 76 graduates of the social work programme were obtained from the files of the Haredi College administration office. The students were between 18 and 51 years (M=22.8, SD=6.53) old when they were accepted to the programme. At the time of acceptance, 70 per cent had never been married, 29 per cent were married, and 1 per cent were divorced; 15 per cent had children (M=4 children); 48 per cent reported that had been Haredi all their lives, 4 per cent that were ‘newly Haredi’, and 48 per cent that they were ‘national-religious’, that is modern Orthodox and not Haredi. The participants who had graduated from the social work programme were employed. Most were employed in the Haredi community, though some worked in settings catering to the entire population, such as hospitals.

Thirty-two Haredi students and graduates were recruited to participate in one of four hour-and-a-half long focus groups. Each focus group was led by two social workers with experience with group facilitation and qualitative research. All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Each group opened with a statement informing the participants that we were interested in learning about their decision to study social work at the college and about the processes involved. The participants introduced themselves by first name without providing any other information. They were invited to talk freely. We did not ask specific questions so as not to lead them in a preconceived direction. As they spoke, however, we at times asked them whether they could expand on what they were saying or provide details or examples.
As befitting a subject about which little is known, cross-case thematic content analysis using a phenomenological approach was separately conducted by two coders (Berg 2001; Giorgi 1997). Two main issues were identified. One was the opposition to and support for higher education for women that the study participants encountered before they began their social work education. The other was their dilemmas and ways of coping during their education.

Findings

All in all, the findings tell the story of a relatively small vanguard of women who went on to pursue an academic education, which until very recently no Haredi woman and very few Haredi men in Israel had done. As the interviewees present it, they are exposed to two messages from their communities. One, the traditional message, sounded by their teachers and the older and more conservative members of the community, is that they should not go on to study at all, lest their exposure to the secular education in particular and the outside world in general undermine their religious observance and the cohesion of the community. As they explained it, the opposition was grounded on fear that exposure to the outside world, whether through contact with non-Haredi persons or the secular contents of their studies, would corrupt their innocence, draw her away from Haredi religious practices, and thus undermine the entire Haredi society and way of life. Some interviewees put it succinctly: ‘What’s the chance you’ll stay Haredi if you go on to study?’ Others elaborated on the perceived dangers:

It’s scary to someone who raises Haredi children. Exposure to the world outside is very tempting. But not everything that glitters is gold. … Exposure to certain contents before the right time is problematic. It can cause loss of innocence, which is one of the advantages of Haredi society. Wherever boundaries are broken, one can very quickly fall into the abyss. My Haredi sister-in-law went to study in a non-Haredi religious college. She tells that very quickly she stopped wearing her wig, then started to go about without stockings. If you’re not strong enough …

A related concern that the interviewees reported was that higher education for girls stood in opposition to the value that Haredi society places on family. The concern was that such education would conflict with her designated role as wife and mother and would dim her chances of finding a desirable husband:

There’s tremendous opposition to girls going to college – because it means they’ll go on to a career. … It’s something that’s not wanted … as there are higher values: family.

They [the high school teachers] brainwashed me: “No one will want to marry you”, and all kinds of things like that …

The women were exposed to a tremendous amount of pressure. They were pressured not to matriculate, so as not to be able to meet the prerequisite for higher education, and not to go to college. They were made to feel that they were violating basic religious tenets. ‘They believed that matriculation is blasphemous’, one interviewee told of her high school teachers. They were made to feel that they were acting in an untoward, totally unacceptable way: ‘I was the only one [who went to college] out of all the girls in my cohort. They were really against it… They kept saying to me… “How can you do it?”’ In a society where marriage and family are the most important things in life, the prospect of not being able to marry constituted a real threat.
The opposition was not across the board, however. Most of the interviewees told that women in their immediate environment encouraged them and that some even expressed envy:

When I went to study [social work] I thought all the girls in my class would say “no”, “don’t do it”. Actually, all of them congratulated me, and a lot of them were really supportive. Even now, women who are just my neighbors say, “How great that you had the courage to do that, and that your parents supported you”. Wow, you’re going to have a career and me … what am I going to do in another year or two?

Most of the women also received encouragement from their rabbi. In all cases, this encouragement was restricted to study of a clearly defined occupation at the college for Haredi girls. As the following quotation indicates, the rabbis’ support was predicated on the notion that having an occupation would increase the girls’ earning power and thereby improve their ability to fulfill their role as family provider:

The rabbi knew about it and encouraged me… Actually, this rabbi encourages any woman who wants to learn an occupation. He told me, “you’re going to build a home, you need to have food on the table”.

The rabbis’ support was not unqualified. Thus, one student told that her rabbi personally approved of her going on to study, but also brought to her attention that not marrying might be the price she would have to pay: ‘Who will you marry? … I’d say you can go to college … but if you want to find a match, just bear in mind that most men won’t want to marry you.’ In short, what emerges is a contradiction between the notion that by pursuing an academic education, these women will be doing a vital service for their families and community and the high personal price that the community will exact for their doing it.

Like the rest of the Haredi community, the women interviewed were concerned with how they could pursue their studies while preserving the religious purity of the society and their traditional role as wives and mothers. Their concerns reflect their internalisation of the values of their community and of its perception of higher education as potentially dangerous to the Haredi lifestyle.

Virtually all the interviewees found or crafted ways of overcoming the external opposition to their studying and of mitigating their own inner conflicts. The most common coping tactic, employed by almost all the interviewees, was framing their studying so that it accorded with Haredi values. The women all insisted that they were not pursuing higher education for its own sake or for a career, that they viewed their role in life as wives and mothers, and that their studies were aimed at enabling them to fulfill their obligations as Haredi women to provide economic support for their families.

Another common form of coping was to compromise in their field of study. Most of the interviewees reported that they chose to study social work because social work studies were available at the Haredi college for women. This was the only place where they could go to study, given that their primary consideration was that their place of study be a gender separated Haredi institution. It is quite conceivable that had a wider selection of courses been available, at least some of the women might have chosen a different field. Since, for most of the interviewees, the field of study was apparently secondary to the place of study, however, few of them actually felt that they were making a compromise and few mentioned another field of study that they might have preferred.

The exception was a small number of interviewees who told that they would have preferred
studying psychology. Some of them gave up on this preference on their own, stating as their reasons that psychology was not taught at the Haredi college, that it required too many years of study and that it was incompatible with their role as Haredi wife and mother. A few interviewees reported having been strongly pressured not to study psychology. The pressure that was reported came from respected authority figures: a career counsellor chosen by the community or from a rabbi, an esteemed religious leader, who dismissed the possibility and laughed at the woman who raised it. There was no way that these women, brought up in the community and sharing its values, could possibly have acted against the rabbis’ directives. In contrast to those who opted for social work without considering other alternatives, these women strongly felt that they had given up something that they wanted, and anger and resentment could be heard in their voices.

Once the students started to study, they encountered two main difficulties: that the contents of their courses were inconsistent with the perspectives of the Haredi community and that the fieldwork expectations and requirements violated the Haredi rules of gender separation. With respect to the course contents, many of the women indicated that they were exposed for the first time to topics whose open discussion is practically taboo in the Haredi community. The topics most frequently mentioned were men, premarital sex and rape. As one put it: ‘Thinking about the values I was taught in high school, men were never mentioned in our classes. It’s much more open here.’

Also upsetting to the students was their exposure to Freudian theory, which they variously termed ‘bizarre’, ‘funny’ and ‘totally unacceptable’ without further elaboration. The single student who in any way indicated what her objections were referred to Freud’s contention ‘that a person acts only on the basis of impulses and drives’. This she considered an offensive and ‘shameful’ claim that denied a person’s responsibility for their choices.

With respect to their fieldwork, students told of feeling awkward when a male extended his hand for them to shake and described the thought of having to sit alone in a room with a man as ‘scary’. Home visits with single men, even elderly or disabled, were entirely out of bounds. As one student put it: ‘Being alone with a man is a violation of religious law, and I don’t have to commit that violation just because I’m studying here. I’m not studying in order to stop being Ultra-Orthodox.’

Most of the Haredi students made determined efforts to cope with their distress, to learn the course material, to carry out their fieldwork assignments and to reconcile the discrepancies between their deeply-held Haredi values and ways and the incompatible course contents and expected behaviours. The married students among them, who constituted about half the student body, made the effort even as they fulfilled their responsibilities as mothers and wives in a society where the burden of housework and childcare still falls almost entirely on the woman.

Three types of coping were employed to deal with offensive course contents. The least functional professionally consisted of minimisation and blocking of the course contents, by referring to them as ‘bizarre’ and ‘funny’. This approach was adopted to avoid having to really know and engage with the material. Adopted at an early stage of professional training, this approach makes it impossible for students to properly judge the theory and make an informed choice.

More functional was compartmentalisation, both of course contents and clients’ disclosures, adopted to enable the student to deal with the offensive contents in her work while keeping them out of her personal life. This strategy has the advantage of enabling the students to maintain a sense of personal integrity while acknowledging the ‘other’.

The most functional strategy, adopted by most of the students, was searching for correspondences with Judaism. This was a way of trying to bridge the discrepancies between the two worlds so as to be able to engage with and integrate unfamiliar, unsettling social work concepts.
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and contents into their worldview with Torah at the centre. In essence this strategy compelled those who adopted it to engage with the contents, enabled them to absorb the material and would later enable them to incorporate what they learned into their professional practice.

Most of the study participants reported seeking rabbinic advice on how to meet the professional demands placed on them without violating the prohibitions. They described their rabbinic consultations as a means of enabling them to carry out problematic fieldwork assignments:

If you know what to do in advance, and if you ask the right questions, you can overcome the difficulties … There can be a lot of obstacles, but Jewish Law has solutions for every situation.

The interviewees reported different solutions to the prohibitions against handshaking and against being alone with a man in a closed space. They avoided handshaking by politely explaining that it was forbidden them. So as not to be alone with a man in a closed space, they refused to make home visits to male clients and kept their office doors open when they met with their male clients there. On the whole, the students felt that their clients understood and respected their position, However, one student felt that keeping the door of her office open might impair her intervention:

We sit together, and don’t completely shut the door. The door is left open a crack. You can’t leave the door wide open. It disrupts the therapeutic process if the door is wide open.

If I’m meeting with a woman, I lock the door.

None of the students even mentioned the inconvenience that their refusal to visit single male clients at home might cause.

Where the discrepancies could neither be smoothed over nor compartmentalised within the professional realm, the students used two other means of coping to reduce the dissonance and conflict the discrepancies caused. One was to go through the motions of learning the unacceptable material without internalising it and, in fact, blocking its meaning and implications: ‘I have to study it – so I study it. I don’t recall finding anything that’s contrary to Judaism …’ The other was to prioritise the Torah over the thinking and values of the profession: ‘I’m not at all sure that we have to “buy” everything they try to sell us. The values of the Torah are much more important, and what we’re learning carries no weight in comparison.’

Issues for social work education in fundamentalist religious communities

The findings of the study show how very difficult it is to create a culturally sensitive social work programme for members of a fundamentalist enclave community, which meets both the requirements of the profession and the needs of the students. For virtually all the students, the discrepancies were a source of considerable distress. The students were shocked, discomforted and outraged by the sexual contents and the notion of the unconscious they encountered in their classes and fieldwork. They felt awkward and scared in the face of the potential breaches of the rules of gender separation that confronted them in their fieldwork. In both areas, at least some students felt that their most basic values were being overlooked, ignored and even challenged.

The contents that were problematic for the students were references to sexual matters and instruction in Freudian theory. In theory, it might be argued that these contents are not essential to social work training. Social work training and practice in Israel, however, still retain a strong
clinical underpinning. The programme at the Haredi College was designed so that its graduates would be qualified to work in any social work agency in Israel, not only in the Haredi community. Even though a key motive in establishing the programme was to provide Haredi social workers for the Haredi community, the programme’s founders were adamant not to restrict the employability of the students or to provide them with a different, potentially second rate, degree. Since a BSW in Israel, whether at the Haredi College or elsewhere, entitles those who possess it to be employed as licensed social workers, it would be counter-productive to eliminate course contents that students find unacceptable or distressing, especially since they will probably encounter some of those contents in their fieldwork and professional lives. With this, it would be advisable to consider whether and how shocking or objectionable contents can be presented in a more palatable, less jarring way and, following the students’ lead, to try to draw connections between the contents and the Torah.

With respect to the gender contact prohibitions, it is clear that concessions must be made by the training institution. Given their prioritisation of religious teachings and the rabbis’ views, the students will not bend on this matter. Despite the inconvenience that their adherence to the prohibitions may entail for their clients and agency, it may be argued that the same sensitivity be shown in training programmes for distinct populations as is today the accepted norm in social work with persons of different cultures. At the same time, so as to minimise any detrimental impact on the clients, the students should be made aware of the impact that their observances may have on their clients and, to a lesser extent, on their co-workers.

References