

The Cultural Mediator: Bridging the Gap Between a Non-Western Community and Professional Social Work Practice

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Summary

This paper analyses a demonstration project that enabled social workers to practise effectively in their home community (a Bedouin-Arab city in the Negev, Israel) where gender relations are patriarchal and the interface of social work and cultural practices had previously impeded professional functioning. Collaborative work with cultural mediators, individuals with high social status and knowledge of community traditions, rendered interventions more culturally appropriate, bridged gaps between the cultural and professional canons, and promoted social work's role in a society that had a limited understanding of, and experience with, the profession. Future social work practice and research could focus on further enhancing women's choice making opportunities in this patriarchal culture.

In the Arab world, professional socialization is seen to create potential barriers to effective practice (Al-Dabbagh, 1993; Al-Krenawi, 1998; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000; Azaiza and Brodsky, 1996; Hammoud, 1986; Irani, 1999; Lev-Wiesel and Al-Krenawi, 1999; Ragab, 1980). The knowledge, skills and values constituting the profession (hereafter professional canon) may be in tension with the norms, values and practices of the culture (hereafter cultural canon), and workers need to thereby adapt the professional canon to the cultural (Al-Krenawi, 2000). The present study

of social work in one Arab community in the Middle East advocates collaborative work with a long-standing cultural tradition well predating the profession, described as a cultural mediator (CM). The CM provides insight into how social work might begin to interact with an Arab community in Israel that has only recently begun to encounter the helping professions. The paper does not profess to offer the only means to this end, but rather a beginning point upon which future culturally appropriate intervention and research might also be based.

The social work-CM interface is far from perfect. But in its current format, it holds the potential for rendering interventions more culturally appropriate, bridging gaps between the cultural and professional canons, and promoting social work's role in communities having only a negligible understanding of the profession. As we elaborate, CM dispute settlement involves culturally appropriate forms of communication; understanding conceptions of victimization and forgiveness; attitudes towards conflict; the role of the individual in society, kinship, family and patriarchy; and maintenance of individual, group and family honour (Irani, 1999). The paper introduces the structure of Arab society, and then a particular Bedouin-Arab community in Israel in which a CM demonstration project occurred. Next, it explains the CM, its development in the Bedouin-Arab community, its significance to and encounter with social work practice, and its potential trans-cultural applications. As we stress in the conclusion, future social work practice and research ought to focus on further enhancing women's choice-making opportunities in this patriarchal culture.

Social work training first emerged in advanced industrialized countries such as the United States and United Kingdom, and was subsequently transferred to other societies. As Midgley (1981) contends, a form of professional imperialism ensued, anchored to the premise that social work had an international identity and a universally relevant methodology. Beginning in the 1970s, the multicultural and multiracial nature of practice started to receive attention. The 1980s and 1990s, likewise, witnessed a corpus of research on the problems of adapting social work to those communities that were, geographically, either outside or on the periphery of Western culture. Some studies elaborate difficulties encountered by students and practitioners attempting to adapt Western principles of intervention to the problems of non-Western societies (Roan, 1980; Kulkarni, 1993; Nanavathy, 1993). A second corpus of research provides insight, sometimes via intra-national comparisons, into how practitioners have applied the profession differentially from one country to the next (Campfens, 1997; Hokenstad *et al.*, 1992; Watts, 1995). A third type of research, following closely on the second and expanding on writing from the late 1960s and early 1970s, advocates the indigenization of social work knowledge and skills (Drucker, 1993; Ewalt and Mokuau, 1995; Nagpaul, 1993). Jinchao, for example, argues that social work in China should achieve harmony and integration, rather than the personal actualization and development principles of Western practice (1995, cited in Nimmagadda and Cowger, 1999). Similar exploratory research has occurred in other parts of the world such as India (Mohan, 1993; Nagpaul, 1993; Nimmagadda and Cowger, 1999) and Africa (Silavwe, 1995).

Such indigenization research is consistent with recent applications of postmod-

ernism to social work, especially the latter's articulation of minority voices and promotion of a knowledge base in which local metaphors replace those that are universal (Leonard, 1997; Martinez-Brawley, 1999). Yet as Taylor points out, there is little such methodologically explicit indigenization literature adapting social work to international contexts (1999). The present study therefore provides further, and consciously applied, depth of insight into how social work epistemology can best be indigenized by 'preserving' and 'applying . . . the strengths' of particular ethno-racial communities in which the profession is practised (Chow, 1996, p. 5). Also implicit to our approach is social constructionism, in which any experience of culture is the outcome of human interactions, rather than being 'completely objective and 'out there', waiting to be discovered' (Lee and Greene, 1999, p. 25).

Arab Society

Arab peoples have one of the world's highest rates of population increase, numbering 275 million in 22 Arab states, and they constitute significant proportions within such Western countries as Australia (210,000), Canada (80,000), France (2 million), Great Britain (210,000), Israel (1 million) and the United States of America (700,000) (Boustani and Farques, 1991; UNESCO, 1997). The majority are Muslim, while a significant minority are Christian and a small minority, Druze. The Bedouin-Arab are a specific type of Arab people, differentiated primarily by virtue of being historically nomadic. Bedouin peoples are found throughout the Arab world, and have lived in present-day northern Africa and the Middle East since before Christianity or Islam became established religions. They remain organized according to tribal structures, but in many countries, Israel especially, the Bedouin-Arab have undergone a rapid and dramatic process of sedenterization and modernization (Al-Krenawi, 1998).

Arab societies are highly diverse, and consist of heterogeneous systems of social differentiation based on ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, familial, tribal and regional identities. On one level, therefore, Arab peoples may be perceived as having deep social and class distinctions, as being disunited and politically fragmented, transnationally and within national borders. Arab peoples likewise follow more than one faith tradition. Also, Western norms have penetrated much of the Arab world; but their impact has been differentially experienced within communities and across societies. At the same time, Arab societies share many attributes, including a common physical and geographic environment, and a collective memory of their place and role in history (Barakat, 1993). The Arab world is profoundly transitional, balancing modern phenomena such as oil exploration with traditional structures such as tribal castes (Barakat, 1993). Its economies remain largely dependent and underdeveloped, and, as one sociologist remarks, 'its material and human resources have been harnessed for the benefit of a small segment of the population and on behalf of antagonistic external forces' (Barakat, 1993, p. 26). The role of central governmental authorities is new to the Arab world, imposed by colonial forces from without. Save for Egypt, Arab nation states have heterogeneous cultural/ethnic/religious groupings that

may preclude any immediate identification with nation-state national identity. Instead, group frames of reference are to the family, extended family and tribe (Azami, 1981; Irani, 1999). As Irani points out, 'effective and flexible kin-based collectivities, such as the lineage and the tribe' have 'performed most of the social, economic, and political functions of communities' (1999, p. 10).

In many Arab communities, there are four main family units: the tribe (consisting of several *hamula*) the *hamula* (a patrilineal kinship structure of several generations, extending to a wide network of blood relations) the extended family (parents, siblings, their spouses and children) and the nuclear family (the married couple and children) (Al-Haj, 1989). Families are typically led by fathers. *Hamula* (extended families) and tribes (collections of *hamula*) are overseen by forums of male elders who ultimately defer to the patrilineal head, described variously as the *mukhtar*, *sheikh* or *zaim* (Barakat, 1993; Haj, 1992). The *hamula* is the central family unit in Arab society, and the family is the locus of blood bonds, inter-commitment, and responsibilities to the collective (Al-Haj, 1987). The typical patrilineal head tends to control and defend family cohesion inside and outside the group, act as a family referee in instances of in-family disputes, moderate inter-family solidarity and support, and be the family's principal ambassador towards outsiders (Sharabi, 1988).

The importance of the group is reinforced in daily interactions. Rather than adopting Euro-American ideals of conjugal isolation and withdrawal from the extended family, Arab social structures tend to be dominated by daily interaction with near and extended kin (Holmes-Eber, 1997). As a collectivist culture, individuals' interests unite with those of their group of allegiance, and the general good may supersede the personal. Problems tend to be constructed not in the context of the individual, but of the group, and draw group members together in common pursuit of solutions. In these respects, major life decisions—marriage, where to live, the range of acceptable occupations—would be determined with strong reference to, or often by, the collective. Arranged marriages are common, based on power and status relationships that are intra-familial, intra-extended familial, or intra-*hamula* (Al-Haj, 1987; Barakat, 1993).

Compared to the West, the Arab social structure can have a greater sense of social stability (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000, 1997a). Those adhering to a traditional value orientation may eschew premarital sexual activity, advocate arranged marriages, and in general, differentiate long-held values from those of the liberal West. Arab society can be highly gender segregated, and patriarchal. Men lead the household and dominate the polity and economy. Women's physical and intellectual capacities may be devalued. They may be perceived as 'physically and mentally weak in comparison to men' (Attir, 1985, p. 121) and 'powerless, subservient, and submissive' (Al-Haj, 1987, p. 103). Arab society controls women through such constructs as family honour, shame, female virginity, female sexuality, and in some societies, female genital mutilation (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999c; Al-Sadawi, 1995; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1997). Their social status may be strongly tied to marriage and rearing children, especially boys (Al-Sadawi, 1985; Attir, 1985; Chaleby, 1985; El-Islam, 1975). A divorced woman's marital prospects are usually restricted to becoming the second wife of a married man, or the wife of a widower or of an

older man (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1998; Darweesh *et al.*, 1995). Many mothers endure years of marital problems in order to avoid the stigma of divorce or, if they are Muslim, the prospect of losing their children (conventions hold that fathers have custody over boys over the age of 7 and girls over 9) (Amar, 1984; Brhoom, 1987).

Israel is an ethnically and racially pluralist society consisting of a Jewish Sephardic and Ashkenazi majority, and a non-Jewish, Arab minority, which constitutes 19 per cent of the total population (Statistical Abstracts of Israel, 1996). Local infrastructures in Arab communities—be they social and health care services, schools, roads or sewers—are under-resourced (Al-Haj, 1995). One study indicates that per capita federal expenditures on local Arab authorities are about 30 per cent lower than on Jewish local authorities (Lifschitz, 1994). Another reveals that the number of social workers allocated to Arab communities is half of what was provided to Israeli communities of similar size (Hage-Yehia, 1998). The Israeli welfare state retains some elements of universality, and is comprehensive by world standards (Doron, 1998). None the less, social problems are experienced, and responded to, differentially. Arab peoples, on aggregate, have lower levels of educational attainment, income and occupational status than their Jewish counterparts (Al-Haj, 1995). Housing conditions for Arab peoples are over 11 times as crowded as among Jewish citizens, infant mortality and unemployment rates are likewise higher, and infant and neonatal nutrition lower (Al-Haj, 1995; Hage-Yehia, 1998). On political and social grounds, as one scholar puts it, ‘Arab society in Israel can best be characterized as a developing society occupying the status of a national minority to which the majority represents not only advantage and power but also modernism’ (Mari, 1978, p. 5). Social policies towards Arab peoples in Israel constitute ‘politicization, discrimination, and mistrust in the allocation of resources’ (Hage-Yehia, 1998, p. 243). Israel is an economically developed country, with considerable ties to the West. Not surprisingly, its models of social work have been closely adapted from the West (Loewenberg, 1998), and until recently, intervention tended to downplay the significance of ethno-racial plurality with reference to such minority communities as the Arab (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 2000; Hage-Yehia, 1998). Accordingly, considerably more needs to be undertaken by policy makers, educators and practitioners, in order to provide services that are still more appropriate to Arab cultural values and belief systems.

Five Israeli universities provide undergraduate and graduate social work training and produce about 500 graduates per year (Spiro *et al.*, 1996). There are approximately 10,000 Israeli social workers, of whom about one third work in local welfare bureaux, and the rest in such fields as addictions, community development, corrections, family intervention, health and mental health (Spiro *et al.*, 1996). Arab practitioners are a small minority. A 1998 report indicates that not more than 15 Arab workers in Israel possessed the MSW, and estimates the number of BSW graduates to be under 300 (Hage-Yehia, 1998). Most graduated within the past 15 years, and the majority work in local welfare offices, although a small but growing proportion practise in other settings. The vast majority of Arab workers are employed to deliver services to members of their own community; in part because of the paucity of Arab professionals, Jewish workers also provide services to Arab peoples (Hage-Yehia,

1998). Recent trends in practice among Arab peoples include greater numbers of female workers, gradual use of institutions within and outside the client's community of origin, increased emphasis away from exclusive material assistance and towards psychosocial problems, and the gradual transformation from generalist to specialist capacity (Hage-Yehia, 1998; Ragab, 1995). In contrast to social work education in some other countries, Israeli accreditation requirements do not require the offering of cross-cultural courses (Ben-David and Amit, 1999). One study provides evidence that Israeli social work education 'does not orient students towards reducing prejudice or enhancing their cultural sensitivity.' In fact, the authors continue, social workers in this country 'are still "culturally encapsulated"'. They are 'trained to engage with clients according to explanations for behavior and prescriptions for treatment which have been formulated according to the majority "Israeli" culture and which are often inappropriate for clients from other cultural backgrounds' (Ben-David and Amit, 1999, p. 347). The barriers, therefore, of adapting social work training to the needs of an Arab society are particularly evident.

Mediation in Arab Society

Throughout the Arab world, mediation practices have existed to resolve individual, familial and group conflicts (Salem, 1997). Typically, people implementing such traditional forms of conflict resolution have not required training credentials or higher education. And so, strictly speaking, such mediation tasks cannot be described as indigenous social work. At the same time, as Canadian expert Edward Kruk contends, mediation has been applied to areas conventionally analogous with social work and human service fields. There exists significant potential for further application of mediation as a practice model, as well as a more informal incorporation of mediation skills into everyday social work practice (Kruk, 1997). These same insights, we argue, have bearing on the type of Arab conflict resolution we discuss.

Among Arab peoples, the *sulh* (settlement) is the society's major reconciliation ritual, in which other traditional mediation functions are involved: the *musalaha* (reconciliation) the *tahkeem* (arbitration) and the *wasta* (patronage-mediation) (Irani, 1999; Khadduri, 1997). These traditional mediation roles reflect Muslim values. According to Islamic Law, the *sulh* is a contract (*akd*) legally binding on the individual and community, the purpose of which is 'to end conflict and hostility among believers', and to promote Islamic norms of harmonious individual and community relations (Khadduri, 1997, p. 845). The Jordanian government recognizes the *sulh* in its legal codes, and among Arabs in Israel, Palestinians, Lebanese and Syrians, it is widely practised (Abu-Nimer, 1996; Irani, 1999). This paper concentrates on one such mediation function, the *wasta*, an Arab word meaning mediation and derived from the literary phrase *wastat al-kalada*, the precious stone in the middle of a necklace (Al-Munjad, 1975). This term emphasizes the centrality of the stone, flanked on either side by other beads (Farrag, 1977; Witty, 1980) suggesting an inter-relationship between all parties, and the well-respected status of the *wasit* (mediator). The *wasta* is a centuries-old tradition within Arab society. The *wasit* are

usually well respected, senior men within the collective, who initiate interventions in times of dispute within or between families, extended families, *hamula*, or tribes. Their ascribed status is based on several cultural values. The first is respect for age, providing legitimacy and credibility for intervention in a social conflict. The second is familiarity with the history of the city, region and people. A third, similarly, is knowledge of the community's customs and social fabric. A fourth is high community status and considerable power, based on kinship connections, political position, religious merit and previous mediation experience (Abu-Nimer, 1996; Landsman, 1988; Rothenberger, 1978; Witty, 1978). A fifth is the pre-eminent role of the family in all aspects of Arab life. A sixth, as will be elaborated, is the *wasta's* gendered function of leadership within a patriarchal social structure.

The Cultural Mediator Project

Rahat

The project was initiated in Rahat, Israel, the country's largest Bedouin-Arab city, established in 1972. Over the past quarter century, the Bedouin-Arab have undergone a rapid and dramatic process of sedentization, modernization and commensurate exposure, for the first time in the community's history, to modern helping professions. Rahat's present population is 33,000, and an additional 8,000 live in the periphery of Rahat but receive services from the city. A locally elected council and mayor run the city's education, roads, sewer and social welfare services. There are several primary care clinics and a major community health care centre in the city centre. The federal government administers and staffs the police station, and a federal government court in a neighbouring city has jurisdiction over the city. Because of poor job availability and cultural proscriptions against female employment, close to 90 per cent of Rahat's women do not hold jobs. Among men, rates of unemployment are as high as 20 per cent, and those with work tend to be employed in the local services industry, as independent farmers, or as labourers in neighbouring Jewish settlements. The population is very young, 64 per cent in the city being under the age of 18, and family size is high, with an average of 5.7 members per nuclear family. The city itself is divided into several self-contained sectors according to tribal status, each tribe living in its own city territory. The modern and traditional are integrated into the city's physical structure. Constructed houses exist side-by-side with traditional tents, and livestock are kept within and outside of city limits (*Rahat City Annual Report*, 1998)

The Social Service office in Rahat, which is funded by the federal Ministry of Social Affairs (75 per cent) and city (25 per cent) is mandated by national legislation, but administered by local authority. It was opened in 1982, with 1 social worker on staff. It currently employs 13 social workers, 6 of whom are Bedouin-Arab, 7 are Jewish; 7 are women and 6 are men. All have BSW-level training from Israeli universities, official certification, and practice experience ranging from 1 to 15 years. Since federal legislation deems the ratio of populace to social workers should be

1,000:1, Rahat is under-serviced by a total of 20 social workers. The most recent available data (1996) indicate the social service office had a caseload of 934, including addictions, child welfare, family counselling, income maintenance and youth-at-risk services (*Rahat City Annual Report*, 1997).

Planning the project

A Bedouin-Arab social work professor who used to practise in Rahat, and more recently had provided clinical supervision in the Rahat agency, chaired a weekend workshop and round-table forum for local social workers. The professor, like the workers, had become increasingly aware of the problem-solving role of well-respected community members in clients' lives. The workshop therefore concentrated on developing further social work collaboration. The session was followed by a round table meeting initiated by the mayor, at the professor's prompting. The professor and workers proposed a list of 35 well respected, male community leaders allowing each of the tribes, *hamula*, and major families to be represented. Most of the 35 had collaborated previously, on an ad hoc basis, in local social work interventions as *wasit* (mediators) and were traditional healers, *sheikhs*, religious leaders or other respected men.

For two reasons the 35 *wasit* are hereafter called 'cultural mediators (CM)'. On one level, as will be shown, they would mediate between the community (the cultural canon) and local social workers (the professional canon). On a second level, their *wasit* role invariably involved mediation between two or more parties.

The literature confirms, in a preliminary sense, the CMs' potential contributions. In the West, as a non-adversarial conflict resolution procedure, mediation provides an alternative to litigation, allowing disputants to retain authority and negotiate an agreement with the help of a third party in divorce and child custody cases, civil disputes, juvenile cases and criminal cases (Galaway, 1988; Irving and Benjamin, 1987). Research into community mediation programmes in the West likewise demonstrates how disagreements may be resolved between neighbours, and victims and perpetrators of crimes among other parties (Galaway, 1988; Payton and Tedesco, 1982). Moreover, preliminary evidence demonstrates the significance of individual, and community mediation to such non-Western communities as individuals of Asian and Korean backgrounds, in addition to Arab peoples (Abu-Nimer, 1996; Hirayama and Cestingok, 1988; Landsman, 1988; LeResche, 1992; Merry, 1989; Norell and Walz, 1994; Witty, 1978, 1980). Finally, the application of mediation principles to social work has been longstanding. Many basic social work skills contribute to the mediation process and assist mediators in their effectiveness. These skills include attention and focus in early stages of the process, developing and utilizing questions effectively, summarizing, reflecting and intervening (Kruk, 1997). There are other more specific skills that are required for successful mediation. They include 'normalizing, reframing, shifting the parties from position- to interest-based negotiation, mutualizing and emphasizing the common connectedness between the parties, future

focus, task focus, conflict management, establishing and maintaining ground rules, preempting, confrontation, reality testing, and caucusing' (Kruk, 1997, p. 8).

Studies have long concluded that social work's recent exposure to the Arab world has not been trouble-free (Al-Dabbagh, 1993; Al-Krenawi, 1998; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996). Social workers often develop poor working relationships with families in need. 'Husbands', one scholar notes, 'usually refuse to deal with the social worker' (Irani, 1999, p. 10). The reasons are myriad. The husbands and the community may lack familiarity with the profession. Opposite sex, practitioner-client contact is a challenge to the cultural principles of gender segregation. Cultural values preclude outsiders from ordinarily being involved in domestic issues. Social work processes may not sufficiently integrate indigenous culture and institutions with intervention, including such phenomena as blood vengeance, polygamous family structures, or traditional healing (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996, 1997b, 1999a, 1999b). In Israel, an additional dynamic prevails. The social worker operates within federal legislation. Most are trained within Israeli universities and work in agencies that are likewise funded by the state. The worker, in several respects may therefore represent the state, and any interaction necessarily places the worker—regardless of ethno-racial background—and Arab client into the broader universe of Middle East politics. In part because of these contexts, and in part by long-established precedent, Bedouin-Arab peoples tend to refer to local religious or political *zaim* (leaders) within their own community. The latter are very similar to the CM in Rahat, and provide assistance with such domestic issues as child custody, family violence, separation or divorce (Irani, 1999; Khadduri, 1997).

At the first meeting, social workers introduced their field of practice and geographic jurisdiction; each CM identified his tribal/*hamula* status and corresponding neighbourhood. Several ensuing meetings elaborated the nature and scope of local social services. Learning was reciprocal. The CMs heard about client autonomy, client confidentiality, the emotional needs of children, the psychosocial needs of mothers and the significance to individuals and families of such problems as addictions, family violence, intra-family disputes and marital discord. The social workers learned more about the CMs' informal roles in mediating between individuals and families over a wide spectrum of issues (as will be discussed).

On the basis of common CM-social worker concerns, all agreed to establish a project that would integrate the CMs, in a voluntary capacity, with current social service programmes. The project intended to:

- provide information about social services to CMs;
- increase social workers' cultural sensitivity;
- increase collaboration between the modern social welfare system and the CMs;
- develop social service community relations, and to enhance community use of social services.

During the project's first 12 months, 1997–98, the CMs collaborated with social workers in 120 cases. These included situations of blood vengeance, child abuse or neglect, divorce, family violence, marital problems, miscellaneous family problems, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, polygamous marriages and youth at risk (Al-Krenawi

and Graham, 1997a). Client participation in the project was voluntary, and at any point in the intervention the client was free to relinquish CM participation and proceed solely with the social worker, or, if the received services was not mandatory, terminate social work services. This approach, reflecting the professional canon, had certain assumptions about client power, control and autonomy, and intersected with a CM model that was closer to the cultural canon, and as will be seen, could be more proscriptive and authoritative.

In four respects, the approach is distinguished from one recently advocated in a family services clinic for Arab peoples in Jaffa, Israel (Savaya and Malkinson, 1997). First, CM participation was 'bottom up', integrating already well established modes of community intervention, rather than being a top-down strategy implemented by and conceived by a social service agency. Second, where the Jaffa project was initiated by Jewish practitioners for Arab peoples, the present project was initiated by and for members of the community, albeit with the participation of some Jewish social workers. Third, we disagree with how previous research portrays Arab community leaders. Far from 'an elite group not in touch with the feelings of the population', the CMs had an abiding understanding of, and commitment to, the well-being of their communities (Savaya and Malkinson, 1997). Finally, the present project was initiated with considerable reference to strategic community leverage points, including, for example, the support and participation of municipal leaders. It certainly reflects patriarchal power relations within Bedouin-Arab families.

A case example

The present case example illustrates the demonstration project objectives. The example was provided by one of the social workers at a monthly meeting of the social service agency and presented for other agencies in the region. The case begins with a dispute between a husband and wife, married for six years. The wife had a disagreement with the husband's mother over the latter's involvement in her daily life. Because of it, the husband retained his five children and insisted that the wife return home to her parents. The husband's immediate family cared for the children, ages 1 month to 5 years. Theirs had been an exchange marriage: where two men are married to each other's sister. The same day that the wife's brother learned of his sister's plight, he, in turn, retained sole custody of his children and insisted that his wife (the first husband's sister) be sent home to her parents. This reciprocal action was seen to have retained power symmetry between the two families, and hence the integrity of his family honour.

These actions immediately precipitated tensions between two extended families, both of which were within the same tribe and were of comparable social status. Within 20 days of the initial husband sending home his wife, a third husband, in response to increased intra-family tensions, decided to retain custody of his children and insisted that his wife go home to her parents. Theirs, too, was an exchange marriage, which led to a fourth husband immediately insisting that his wife go home to her parents, in response to the third husband's actions.

The actions of the third and fourth husbands further increased tensions between the two families. There was an increasing likelihood that all communication between the two families would be cut off, and that the four marriages would end in divorce. The first wife visited a general practitioner physician with complaints of anxiety, depression, fatigue and various stress-related somatic symptoms. The physician, who was not an Arab, in turn referred the woman to one of Rahat's social workers for counselling. The social worker was a Bedouin-Arab from a family of comparable social status to the other two families, and within another of Rahat's tribes. He held bi-weekly sessions with the woman and conducted a visit to the husband's home, where he met the husband, the husband's father and other male relatives. The social worker explained to the men that he was legally obligated to have the children immediately returned to the mother, according to Israeli law, and that if they did not agree to this plan, the police would have to get involved. (It should be noted that Islam also insists that young children be in the custody of their mother, if she is well.) The men were angered by the social worker's intervention, and sent a family delegate to the social worker's family, explaining to the family *sheikh* that further involvement from the social worker would create a dispute between their extended family and the social worker's.

Male elders within his extended family and tribe met with the social worker, and insisted that he not involve himself in the case. The social worker explained that his job legally obligated him to do so. The elders responded that the man should either desist, or quit his job, since the integrity of their family and tribal relations was the greatest priority. The social worker thus found himself in a major dilemma between the cultural and professional canons.

In consultation with his supervisor, the social worker met with four CMs, two from each disputing family and two from other families not involved in the dispute but within the tribe. Together, the social worker and CMs developed three goals. The first and most immediate was to return the children to their mothers. The second was to consult with the four women to determine if they wanted to return to their husbands, and the third was to restore relations between the two families.

The CMs met separately with powerful representatives from both families. They heard both parties' stories, allowing for the expression of anger and frustration, ate with members of each side, and used cultural stories, such as those that correlated bravery with forgiveness. In discussing the children, the CMs did not appeal to legal explanations. Rather, there were two other arguments. The first was to keep the problem within the tribe, and not to have a member from an outside tribe, or legal apparatuses such as a social worker, the police or courts, involved. The second was an appeal to the benefits of returning the children to their mother. Both arguments were common ground upon which all parties could agree. On the strength of their reputations, the CMs were able to provide sufficient assurances that the children would be well cared for upon their return to the mothers. The CMs would also act as go-betweens, were any concerns to arise over the children's well-being. Also because of their standing, the CMs were able to be directive, and to insist that the children be returned before any further discussions occurred. Within two days of

initial contact, the CMs had personally delivered the children to their respective mothers. Over the course of this stage of intervention, the social worker had been apprised of the process.

Turning to the second objective, the CMs had conversations with the first wife, her parents, her mother-in-law, and powerful leaders on both sides. The CMs obtained assurances from the mother-in-law that she would not interfere in the wife's day-to-day affairs as much as she had. Thereafter, having obtained consensus among these parties, the wife apologized to the mother-in-law, in the presence of the CMs and agreed to respect and obey the mother-in-law, just as she would her own mother. These two compromises led the wife, accompanied by the CMs, to return to her husband. The same day, the other three wives returned to their husbands, accompanied by the CMs.

Stage three, which occurred within 30 days of the initial incident, was a *sulha*, in which powerful male members of each extended family met in the house of the tribe's *sheikh*, one of the CMs. The men shook hands, ate a meal and agreed that the entire matter would be dropped. With this ritual completed, the social work case was closed.

It should be noted that all four women were asked by the social worker and the CM if they wanted to return to their homes, and all said that they did. All had expressed concerns about their families and children. The researchers remain unclear as to the extent of the women's choice making capacities here, as well as in the first wife's apology and subsequent return home; in these respects we suspect that further research and practice developments could occur, as we elaborate shortly. For their part, the CMs and social worker were highly motivated to bring the dispute to an end. Recent social work research emphasizes the importance of community involvement in all aspects of child protection (Barsky, 1999). These same principles certainly apply to the present community. If the social worker and the CM had not been involved, it is possible that the intra-family and inter-family disputes may have been experienced with greater intensity or duration, and that the period of non-maternal contact with children may have been longer. Divorce, or the creation of a polygamous marriage as a result of such conflict, is not uncommon (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1998, 1999a). As provisional and tentative as all generalizations should be, the present case study none the less provides some insight into how social workers and other helping professionals might intervene with such a non-Western society.

Analysis

The CMs' involvement in the case adhered to the following cultural principles.

- 1 Patriarchy is a core theme. The patriarchal nature of Arab (Chekir, 1996; Joseph, 1996; Makhoul-Obermeyer, 1979) and Arab-Palestinian families (Al-Haj, 1987; Haj, 1992; Hiltermann, 1991; Rockwell, 1985) has long been evident. As previous discussion has emphasized, and to which we return in the conclusion, gender

roles were both reinforced and potentially challenged, by the CM-social work interaction.

- 2 An emphasis on the group, since it is this level of society, especially the family, and not the individual that is the basis of Arab culture (Barakat, 1993; Sharabi, 1975). The definition of problems, and the processes leading to their solution, are invariably referenced to and involve the group. Individuals experiencing problems do not choose, in isolation from others, between alternative courses of action. Help seeking is often collaborative, involving family members more explicitly at every stage of intervention (Al-Krenawi, 2000; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999a). The importance of the group is reinforced in daily interactions. Rather than adopting Euro-American ideals of conjugal isolation and withdrawal from the extended family, Arab social structures are dominated by daily interaction with near and extended kin (Holmes-Eber, 1997).
- 3 Since they are from the culture, CMs are able to work with disputants to frame problems and solutions in the context of religion and culture, using metaphors, idioms of distress, and proverbs that are familiar and accessible. Stories and experiences related to similar events assist participants to universalize their problem and to appreciate potential solutions.
- 4 The concept of pride is key to Arab life, and when *Ar* (shame) descends upon an individual, family or tribe, the restoration of pride is key to the integrity of all. Thus, CMs emphasize the preservation and protection of honour among all parties, among other cultural values such as forgiveness, tolerance, respect and social status, and frequently refer to them as a way of pressurizing the other side.
- 5 Intervention is immediate, spontaneous, and quick, and occurs without, necessarily, the request of the disputant parties, in contrast to the sometimes slower initiation processes, the legal formality, and the preceding consent of disputants, that can occur in the West.
- 6 Intervention is often directive. Advice is given and settlements are strongly advocated, nearing the point of imposition.
- 7 Disputes are often resolved without face-to-face bargaining or negotiation, since that could be perceived as antagonistic or as a further state of humiliation. The process usually allows parties to present their story separately to the third party, engendering catharsis, ventilation, and the expression of disappointment and frustration.
- 8 Conflict is negative, threatening and disruptive, and needs to be settled quickly or avoided. A CM would focus on the need to quickly terminate the damage and destruction brought about by conflict.
- 9 Disputes restore social order rather than change power relationships or the status quo, and are based on the need to keep families, hamula and tribes unified. All areas of Arab familial, *hamula* and tribal life are interdependent, be they economic, marital, social or political. Instability in one area has

immediate repercussions in others, thus amplifying the need for immediate and complete redress.

- 10 Mediation references the immediate tense to the future. This reflects the cultural value that the life of the individual and collective should create a positive environment for the next generation. There is, therefore, a high incentive to avoid present-day disputes from disturbing future harmony.
- 11 Strong community pressure to obtain a settlement occurs in light of the above factors.
- 12 Priority is given to people and relationships, rather than to tasks, structures or tangible resources. Energies are concentrated on the relationship and social status between parties, rather than on concrete, substantive compensations.
- 13 If a payment is to occur, the third party is responsible for delivering and arranging it in a social public ritual, the *sulha*, which includes the two parties involved and is witnessed by other community members.
- 14 Age, gendered status, tribal affiliations and other ascribed roles are the CMs' point of entry; the social workers may lack some, if not all necessary attributes.

Conclusion

The project highlights several themes. CM participation expanded the social work role in several ways. By collaborating with the social workers, the CMs learned about the social work function, discovering that it was not just instrumental, and heard more about the various fields and some social work strategies. It should be stressed that Arab peoples underutilize helping professional services (Savaya, 1998). With their increasing awareness, the CMs were able to become ambassadors of the profession within the community, promoting its role, and in many instances bringing cases to workers. These facets led to still greater sensitivity among CMs over the difficulties faced by social work clients, particularly women and children. They shared this knowledge with others, helping to promote greater community sensitivity regarding the needs of women and children. These indigenous strategies, operating within cultural assumptions, are perhaps a more resonant vehicle for women's empowerment than imposing strategies from without.

Women, in bottom-up social relations, had an important role in identifying a problem, leading to a social work intervention that in turn precipitated the use of top-down male authority within the community. In one respect, then, the interaction reinforced prevailing gender-based community power dynamics. But in a second respect, the collaborative intervention of social workers and the CM helped to respond to a problem involving women, and in a small way may have cultivated community awareness of women's empowerment and problem resolution. Future research could delve further into the extent to which women were involved in, and consented to, the imposition of such top-down authority. A growing feminist ethnography demonstrates an elaborate and nuanced pattern of female social rela-

tions, and a considerable capacity for women, in their roles as mothers, spouses, daughters, aunts, grandmothers and cousins, to assert influence upon men, especially in private and informally (Abu-Lughod, 1985; Haj, 1992). While also beyond the scope of the present study, the wife in the first marriage, by resisting the interference of her mother-in-law, and the requirements of the traditional culture which she is expected to meet, may be seen to have resisted the imposition of patriarchal relations upon her. We emphasize that Bedouin-Arab gendered social relations are neither linear, nor static, but rather, are organic constructs, potentially malleable to transformation from within. Social work was implicitly part of that resistance process, both in relation to the immediate intervention and to community education and other interventions that could further enhance women's rights. Future practice innovation and research should build on social work's nascent role in these respects within this community, and in reference to other international work intended to empower women.

The case also reveals that modern and traditional helping approaches can be used successfully, in parallel. They may be mutually complementary (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996; Chi, 1995; Edwards, 1986; Schwartz, 1985). Moreover, rather than grafting cultural awareness on to prevailing structures of social work practice, the professional canon can be more truly adapted to, and changed by, the cultural (Devore and Schlesinger, 1994). The present community is a small, under-served minority with high levels of unemployment, poverty and social problems, outside the core of mainstream Israeli social, political and economic life. This lack of autonomy could exacerbate widespread 'fear', present throughout the Arab-Islamic world, 'of losing an indigenous 'authentic' Islamic-Arab culture', to which Arab scholars have widely referred (Ahmad, 1992 cited in Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 1997). The CM, an indigenous construct, counterbalances these influences, helping to sustain the culture.

The CMs involved in the case scenario provided an important buffering between the modern system, which was seen as intrusive and threatening, and a traditional system based on kinship relations and other cultural norms. On the other hand, the CMs shared much with modern social work practice: they operated systemically, could read a family's ecological map, were able to identify and utilize leverage points, and had a sophisticated repertoire of one-to-one and group process skills. Their identification of, and collaboration with, authoritative family and tribal members was widely seen as a key factor leading to success. As one CM remarked, 'only the powerful people in a family can bring about change', Another likewise said, 'if you don't choose the right person, you are wasting your time', A third concurred: 'change occurs from the top to bottom, not the other way around'. This is not to suggest that social work should appropriate all aspects of the CM role. The latter's status is culturally proscribed, based on gendered community status, and does not rely on formal university training, whereas the former is trained at a university and relies on a professional canon for status and skills. This does not preclude a CM from undertaking university training in social work, and, as already discussed, social workers can learn from the CM how to render interventions more culturally appropriate. Another theme is the social worker's successful functioning in two mutually

competing cultures: the social work profession, and the local culture of Rahat. At a critical stage in the case intervention, it appeared as though community leaders might have forfeited any possibility of the worker's participation. As he later divulged, 'I was frustrated. I didn't know what to do. On the one hand, I had a commitment to my profession and its ethics. On the other hand, I was worried that my job would endanger my family's reputation, and would lead to grave problems for the people I love'. Almost paradoxically, his society provided the answer to his dilemma. By using the social work skills of resource mobilization, advocacy, collaboration and facilitation, the social worker was able to work with the CMs, and ultimately, to resolve the child custody disputes, within the wider nuclear familial and extended familial structures that had created the disputes. By talking about the case with the CMs, the social worker was able to provide insight into psychosocial and developmental significance to the children. By working together to devise a set of intervention goals, he was able to help the CMs to partialize the problems, prioritize them and conceptualize them holistically. More broadly still, the social worker-CM collaboration empowered all parties, ensuring a successful social work intervention, sustaining the public reputation of the CMs, and creating stability within the community.

The literature has considered the role of social workers and allied disciplines as cultural consultants/brokers in front-line services (Fandetti and Goldmeier, 1988; Budman *et al.*, 1992; De Santis and Ugarriza, 1995; Eisenbruch and Handelman, 1990; Weidman, 1982). The project demonstrates that CMs themselves are a further extension of this brokering process, helping to bridge gaps between social work and a traditional community. While beyond the scope of the above example, CMs could provide valuable consultation for social workers regarding community norms, values, opinions and beliefs. Several non-Arab social workers involved in the project emphasized how often they had consulted community CMs during all stages of intervention. One remarked, 'without the help of one CM, I would have created a lot of damage in a delicate treatment process'. Another, providing addiction treatment, consulted a CM and learned who was the relevant person to consult within the client's family.

Moreover, Arab social workers had varying understanding of their culture. Some, like their non-Arab counterparts, learned more about the helping significance of the cultural canon. Many community members extensively use various traditional healing rituals, such as meal preparation and consumption during family mourning, or visiting saints tombs in times of anxiety or psychosocial problems (Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1996). Likewise, myriad traditional healers, such as the *Dervish*, or the Koranic healer, provide direct help to some people with mental health or psychosocial problems (Al-Issa, 1990; Al-Krenawi, 2000; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1999a, 1999b, 1997b; Al-Krenawi *et al.*, 1996; Al-Safi, 1982; El-Islam, 1982; Gorkin and Othman, 1994). Workers also learned new terminology used widely by members of the community to describe their psychosocial problems: halit sarah (a person attacked by an evil spirit, causing confused behaviour) or markob (spirit possession). The CMs also provided inter-

pretations of Islamic religious law regarding divorce, the raising of children, adoption, foster families and a number of other matters.

CMs personify the importance in Arab culture of an individual's reference to the group. People see themselves foremost as extensions of the *hamula* (kinship group extending to a wide network of family relations) extended family and nuclear family (Al-Haj, 1987; Al-Krenawi and Graham, 1997a, 1997b). Authoritarian and collective principles prevail over the democratic or individualistic, as does social stability over social change. The Arab family is likewise *the* source of economic, social and emotional support. But if traditional values are rejected, the individual faces complete ostracism. Problems of the individual, so strongly linked to the group, are also solved by the group. A social worker who does not operate in this systemic context will face minimal success.

Turning to broader structures beyond the Bedouin-Arab in Rahat, had the CMs *not* been utilized, the police may have been involved, hostilities might have escalated, the welfare of the children may have been further compromised, and marital, family and extended family stresses might have been amplified, perhaps leading to divorce. Agency policies and practices ought to appreciate the significance of, and enable, CMs to resolve community problems.

In today's context of globalization, where Western values permeate virtually all of the world, the Bedouin-Arab, like other communities in the Arab world, remain close to cultural/religious values that differentiate them from the West. Within a generation the community has been transformed from nomadism/semi-nomadism, to settlement, and from a time-honoured, agrarian economic base to growing participation in modern Israeli life. The CMs help to bridge those tensions that necessarily exist in any social work intervention, between localization and globalization, and the norms/values of Israel and those of the Bedouin-Arab community.

The present project is necessarily exploratory and preliminary. Future research might consider how to enhance women's choice making opportunities in this patriarchal culture. Other research could include outcome evaluations of CM-social worker collaboration, as well as greater empirical and ethnographic analysis of the perceptions of clients, social workers, CMs and other members of the community. Perhaps use of community mediation, while at once innovative and new, at a deeper level reflects some good things about social work practice, since the profession has always had a commitment to mobilize community resources towards the solution of the client's problem and the promotion of the client's welfare.

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