The low engagement of fathers in family- and child-related social interventions has received growing scholarly attention over the last two decades. The research has, at last, moved on from the instrumental ‘risk/resource’ dichotomy of the 1990s and early 2000s to consider fathers as subjects in their own right and as potential clients for social work interventions (Featherstone, 2004). In contrast, policy has been slower in adopting these shifts in perspective (Maxwell et al., 2012).

Studies of the engagement of fathers have proliferated over the last 15 years along three principal axes: giving fathers who are clients of the welfare system a voice; analyzing social workers’ perceptions of and attitudes towards fathers, and the effects of these perspectives on fathers and families, and, finally, analyzing father-oriented programs using a ‘what works’ approach.

These three research axes have provided important insights into father engagement, equipping social workers with tools that are essential to improving the welfare of fathers and families. However, based on a comprehensive analysis of the themes emerging from the literature, I claim that two main problems persist. First, while essential contributions have been made in each of the areas mentioned above, connections between studies in different areas, and sometimes within the same area, are found wanting. Moreover, the research, while abundant, lacks a unifying theoretical basis.

In this study, I examine theories of care and social care to address these two problems. I scrutinize Daly’s (2022) work on the theorization of care and Nussbaum and Sen’s (1993) Capability Approach and argue for their potential as theoretical bases for research in the area of father engagement and the development of a more comprehensive theory of care.

## Existing Research on Father Engagement

As expected from a burgeoning field of study, many studies from various perspectives have been produced. However, three main axes can be individuated – giving a voice to fathers, analyzing workers’ perspectives, and a ‘what works’ approach to analyzing specialized father-oriented programs. The following review is broad; it engages with the main elements in each strand, cognizant that exceptions naturally exist.

### Giving voice to fathers

The first axis concerns giving a voice to fathers that are clients or potential clients of the welfare system. Previous research has been criticized for ignoring the subjectivity of fathers and treating them instrumentally. Responding to these criticisms, newer studies adopt a phenomenological perspective and seek to highlight and represent the voice of fathers, especially fathers from excluded groups such as ethnic minorities, fathers in poverty, and lone fathers.

Many of these studies adopt a phenomenological theoretical perspective, aiming to bring the subjective experience of these fathers to the fore, recognizing that their voice has been silent (or silenced) for many years (Baum, 2015). Qualitative methodologies have been used in these studies to explore the experiences and give voice to fathers, especially fathers belonging to marginalized and excluded groups, in their interactions with the welfare system (see, for example, Gupta & Featherstone, 2015; Philip et al., 2018a; Storhaug & Sobo-Allen, 2017).

Another research strategy in this field seeks to explore fathers’ experiences and measure the prevalence of these experiences in the population, using either mixed-methods or quantitative methodologies (Coakley et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2017). These studies tend to be more practice-oriented, focusing less on the phenomenology of fathers’ experience and more on the way they perceive the welfare system.

Despite the limited number of studies with this orientation and the work still needed in this area (Gupta & Featherstone, 2015; Haworth & Sobo-Allen, 2020), significant developments have already been made in bringing the voice of fathers to the fore. However, a major theoretical drawback inherent to this orientation is that it is difficult to account for relationality. The phenomenological nature of these studies leads researchers to focus on the subjectivity of fathers rather than on their relationships, both within the family, with mothers and children, and with the system.

Another weakness of this orientation is the lack of attention to the balance of power. Classical phenomenological studies tend to focus on marginalized populations, highlighting the voice of the disempowered. However, the balance of power in the case of these fathers is far from clear. While they may be seen as powerless against the welfare system, the balance of power vis-à-vis other family members – specifically mothers – often leans in favor of fathers (Featherstone, 2010). For this reason, bringing the voice of fathers to the fore may obscure other disfranchised voices.

### Critical Analysis of Workers’ Perspectives

The second research orientation focuses on the views and perspectives of social workers. These studies rely mainly on critical discourse analysis methodologies and seek to analyze social workers’ positions towards fathers and uncover stereotypes, biases, and misconceptions.

Substantial findings have been made in this strand of research, indicating problematic views of workers that present an obstacle to father cooperation. An important finding within this research orientation is that workers prefer working with mothers, regardless of professional considerations (Brown et al., 2009; Nygren et al., 2019). Many studies have attempted to identify the causes for this preference. Among them are ambivalent sexism (Brewsaugh et al., 2018), power relations between workers and fathers (Baum, 2015, 2017), and the lack of gender-sensitive approaches to working with fathers (Philip et al., 2018b).

Scholars working in this area have made essential contributions to our understanding of the treatment of fathers by social workers. However, one significant theoretical drawback is its inherent reliance on the phenomenology of individual social workers, which moves the focus from the systemic and organizational levels. The focus on discourse analysis of interviews is very effective in uncovering problematic perceptions and misconceptions but is less helpful in identifying systemic or organizational issues originating in the organizational structure of the services or the prevailing work culture.

### ‘What Works’ – Analyzing the Effectiveness of Father-Oriented Programs

The last research area has focused on father-oriented programs. These programs, explicitly aimed at fathers, attempt to enhance their engagement with their children and improve their parenting skills. Many of these studies adopt a quantitative methodology, assessing fathers’ achievements within the programs as compared to control groups or against a known baseline. Others apply qualitative or mixed methodologies.

Studies in this area have contributed significantly to conceptualizing better practice with fathers. While the previous two strands focused on identifying and critiquing existing practices that lead to low father engagement, this strand looks at programs that attempt to change this reality. They have provided important insights into the obstacles that prevent father engagement and the practices that overcome these obstacles.

A problem with this research orientation is its narrow focus. The nature of this orientation limits these studies to specifically father-focused programs. While these programs are important, they do not represent the majority of father interactions with the welfare and child protection systems because these tend to occur in family-oriented settings. Moreover, some of the studies are flawed by a tendency to uncritically adopt the program’s assumptions and perspectives rather than challenge them.

## Going Forward

In the light of the preceding, it is clear that substantial progress has been made in this field, but several gaps remain in our understanding of the phenomena involved.

The first and the most substantial gap is the absence of a theoretical framework providing a common ground for the three research orientations described above. Studies within each strand tend to share implicit theoretical and methodological assumptions, but they are often left unexamined. Moreover, the theoretical assumptions of each of the strands are not compatible with those of the other. Therefore, a common and explicit theoretical background could offer a more synergetic and holistic understanding of the research field.

Another problem is the lack of attention to and theorizing of systemic and relational aspects of families and welfare systems. All three research orientations provide a comprehensive outlook for the specific phenomenon they are examining, but none pay sufficient attention to the inter-relations between these aspects or substantiative, empirical inter-relations within the field.

For scholars, the relational nature of the family is at the center of theorization. Internal relationships between family members and externally focused relationships with actors outside the family are no less essential to understanding families than understanding each family member individually (Collins et al., 2012; Saraceno, 2011, 2018).

The engagement of fathers with social services is, by definition, relational. Focusing on men, in their capacity as fathers, means focusing on their relational position vis-à-vis their children and often (though not always) vis-à-vis their spouses. Therefore, a theoretical framework for understanding father engagement must be relational, and it must be capable of theorizing not only father/worker relationships but the more complex relationship between multiple actors, including fathers, mothers, children, the worker, and others.

Turning our view to the worker, it is clear that they, too, cannot be seen as silos and must be viewed as part of a broader system. Social work is most often embedded (2020) within bureaucratic, state-oriented settings. Within these settings, the worker does not operate independently. They are subject to regulations and work procedures and are part of broader work culture (Kuronen, 2020; Montigny, 2021).

Therefore, it is clear that any theoretical framework that seeks to encompass all the strands of research on father engagement must be relational and systemic.

Another theoretical aspect that is often overlooked is that of agency. All three strands emphasize analyzing obstacles that prevent fathers from accessing the services. The reluctance of fathers to access the services is an acknowledged fact but is seldom integrated into the research framework. The tension between the fathers and the system’s reluctance raises questions of agency in terms of where the responsibility lies for engaging fathers in care and whether it is up to the social services to engage with fathers reluctant to accept care. A theoretical framework seeking to encompass all aspects of father engagement must relate to these questions because they are often raised as an objection to promoting father engagement.

The question of agency is a central question when discussing father engagement and has accompanied the field from its early days. The formation of father engagement as a field of research revolves, to a large extent, around breaking down the ‘risk/resource’ dichotomy (Brown et al., 2009; Featherstone, 2013). This analysis points to the instrumental view of fathers in prior studies – either as a resource to the family or as a risk to its members – and calls to view fathers as subjects in and of themselves.

However, while questions of subjectivity and agency have been raised in the field since its inception, many of these questions remain unanswered, if they are asked at all. Issues related to agency are central to understanding fathers’ attitudes toward the services because most scholars agree that a significant obstacle to fathers’ engagement is their reluctance to access services.

This reluctance raises a series of questions. Can fathers that refrain from accessing the services be seen as excluded? Should workers prioritize absent fathers over mothers who require services? What burden does father engagement put on mothers? While these and other questions are occasionally raised (see Featherstone, 2010), a twin focus on agents and relationships requires a comprehensive discussion of the question of fathers’ agency and its consequences.

## Father Engagement, Relationality, and Social Care

In the preceding sections, I revealed three drawbacks of existing research on father engagement – the lack of a theoretical framework, the absence of relational and systemic analyses, and the need for integration of questions of agency. In the following sections, I offer theories of social care and capabilities as a theoretical framework that could remedy these drawbacks.

### Social Care

Research and theorizations of care have flourished in recent decades. Societal trends emphasizing the importance of care, such as the increase of women in the labor force, ageing populations, and other factors, have created a ‘care deficit’ (Fraser, 2016). Concurrently, developments in feminist thought have drawn attention to the overlooked and unrecognized work women have historically been performing in the field of care and reproduction (Daly, 2021; Daly & Lewis, 2000; Sainsbury, 2013).

Daly and Lewis (2000, p. 285) define care as encompassing ‘the activities and relations involved in meeting the physical and emotional requirements of dependent adults and children, and the normative economic and social frameworks within which these are assigned and carried out.’ While social workers’ interventions with fathers do not necessarily constitute activities meeting the requirements of dependents, they are most definitely part of the frameworks within these activities – namely, fathers’ (and mothers’) care for children – are ‘assigned and carried out.’ Working with fathers can therefore be seen as secondary care or ‘caring for the carers.’

In her discussion of father involvement and care, Doucet (2020), following Kittay (1995), emphasizes the importance of ‘secondary dependence’ and acknowledging the needs of those who participate in caring and building appropriate support systems policies and services for them. Doucet (2020, p. 12) discusses the importance of this support specifically in the reality of a reconfiguration of human subjectivity, from a view of humans as carers *or* earners into seeing the simultaneous need to provide and be provided for.

Theories of care clearly encompass the domain of social work engagement with families, specifically with fathers. Mary Daly (2021) reviews existing care research and identifies several contrasting points of view between the various strands of research. A central commonality is a systemic focus – although the definition of ‘system’ may vary widely. A preference for configurational thinking characterizes the research, focusing on the relative positions of actors and not only on their characteristics. Another aspect of this systemic focus is an interest in organizational factors. Specifically, this refers to how care is resourced and organized, be it by individuals, families, communities or welfare states.

Building on this insight, Daly offers an understanding of the concept of care in the form of a policy-oriented conceptualization of care, clustered around a core of perceived need. She defines care as “…a vital sphere of human engagement and welfare-related activity focused on practices oriented to meeting perceived need” (Daly, 2021, p. 113).

Following this definition, Daly conceptualizes care as situated at the intersection of need, relations/actors, resources and values (Daly, 2021, p. 113). The vector of relations/actors relates to the relational aspect of care, described earlier – the focus on relationships and processes rather than individuals and situations. Relating to actors draws attention to the role of agency in these relationships – a critical question in the context of father engagement, as elaborated earlier. The question of resources draws attention to the network or system that supports carers in their work – supplying material resources such as time and money, but also emotional support. The last vector, ideas and values, raises questions on the ideational and moral levels.

### Fathers, Agency and Capabilities

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s concept of Capabilities (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993; Sen, 1995) may offer a relevant framework for this theoretical discussion. While the capabilities approach had initially been applied mainly to developing countries, in recent years, research in developing countries has been incorporating capability-focused analysis into the study of care, and paternal care specifically, in industrialized welfare states (Hobson et al., 2011; Hobson & Fahlen, 2009; Javornik & Yerkes, 2020; Yerkes & Javornik, 2018).

The theory of capabilities is concerned with people’s freedom to live a life they value, focusing on the actual rather than the theoretical. Capabilities concentrate on what people can effectively achieve – considering not only their resources but the entirety of their cultural and social contexts (Robeyns, 2017; Sen, 1995; Yerkes et al., 2020)

The concept of capabilities expands the understanding of agency in two ways. First, it puts agency in an institutional and systemic perspective, stressing the importance of resources and means for the actualization of agency. An individual’s actions, or lack thereof, must be seen in the light of the resources available to the individual and their effect on their ability to perform these actions (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009).

When discussing father engagement, resources and means are critical to actualizing agency. Much attention has been given in recent years to the tendency of social workers to ignore questions of resources and their effects on interventions. Michal Krumer-Nevo’s Poverty Aware Paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2020) stresses the importance of poverty to the well-being of people suffering from it, on the one hand, and social workers’ tendency to ignore the economic situation of their clients, on the other. Specifically, in the field of child protection, recent studies emphasize the tendency of workers to ignore the role of material hardship on children’s welfare, instead focusing on parental capabilities as a singular cause of risk to children (Featherstone et al., 2018; Gupta, 2017; Saar-heiman & Gupta, 2019).

A second way the concept of capabilities expands our understanding of agency is in recognizing the importance of the cognitive level to questions of agency. It broadens the discussion from looking at what a person wants but cannot achieve to the question of how the institutional and ideational context limits a person’s ability to shape their will, desire, and state of efficacy (Hobson & Fahlen, 2009). Yerkes et al. (2020, p. 521) point to two mechanisms of this aspect of capability. First, to have a capability, one must feel entitled to make a claim – to know that a particular option (policy, entitlement, etc.) exists. Second, they need to perceive the option as possible within their scope of alternatives – that is, they must know that the options exist and be aware that it is available. Thus, as Yerkes et al. (2020, p. 521) put it, “Key to the [Capabilities approach] is shifting the focus from whether or not individuals actually achieve outcomes to the mechanisms maintaining deeply entrenched social inequalities and individuals’ real opportunities to achieve what they have reason to value.”

Yerkes et al. (2020) also point to the importance of the mezzo level in determining a person’s capabilities. While researchers tend to focus either on macro-level policy or micro-level social interactions to understand the breadth of possibilities available to a person, the mezzo or community level has a substantial effect. The nature of one’s interaction with their workplace, their children’s school, or – in the context of this discussion - the local branch of the social services may be critical to their capabilities.

## Moving Forward – Applying Social Care and Capabilities Approaches to Father Engagement

After briefly discussing theories of care and the capabilities approach, we now return to current research on father engagement, asking – how can theories of care and the capabilities approach enhance our understanding of father engagement? Specifically, we will examine the three strands of research described earlier – giving voice to fathers, critical analysis of workers’ discourses, and ‘what works’ – both against Daly’s vectors of care and against the capabilities literature. What I present here is only preliminary, raising questions and pointing to possible directions rather than providing answers, but several points arise from these theoretical conceptualizations.

Looking back to Daly’s four vectors, it seems that the vector of need has received the most comprehensive treatment in existing research. As mentioned, the ‘giving voice to fathers’ strand deals extensively with the phenomenological experience of fathers and their difficulties in engaging with the welfare system. The ‘workers perspective’ strand focuses on the problematic response of the system to these difficulties. We can now re-conceptualize these crucial findings, in line with Daly’s (2021) terminology, as a perceived secondary need and the failure of the welfare system to meet it.

However, existing research has fared more poorly where the other research axes are concerned. Regarding the axis of relations/actors, the problem of relationality – discussed above – becomes prominent. For the research of father engagement to fully encompass the relational aspect of care, it must shift its focus from looking at individual fathers and their relationships with individual workers and adopt a more configurational outlook, understanding the issue of father engagement not as an issue relevant to fathers or workers, but as a characteristic of the interaction of two systems – the familial system and the welfare system, accounting for the multitude of relevant actors in each system.

While configurational thinking on care is generally preferable, it becomes crucial when discussing father engagement. The term ‘father’ is configurational by nature – men are defined as fathers based on their relationship with their children. In most cases, fathers – whether living in the same household as their children or not – are not the only carers for these children or even the primary ones. Thus, understanding the configuration of care within the family is crucial to understanding father engagement. The relationship between the worker and the father cannot be understood separately from the child’s needs and the father’s response to these needs, from the worker-mother and father-mother relationship, and a multitude of other relationships between a variety of actors.

As with any other type of social relation, care relations cannot be separated from power relations, and this is especially true for fathers in their engagement with the welfare system. The topic of intra-familial power relations has received ample attention in the sociology of the family. Less attention has been given to the effects of this power relation on fathers' engagement, on the one hand, and the changes they undergo as a result of the interaction with the welfare system, on the other hand (Authors, forthcoming).

The axis of relationality has consequences not only for the familial system but also for the welfare system. Workers, like fathers, do not work in isolation when interacting with fathers but, instead, form part of a broader system. They operate under rules and regulations, must answer to their superiors, and are pressured to conform to formal and informal workplace norms. These not only cause the worker to act differently than he would have based on his personal perceptions and beliefs, but they also affect and change them.

However, while both fathers and workers are parts of broader systems, it is worth noting that these systems are very different, and thus, each requires a distinct theorization. While intra-familial interactions and their effect on father engagement require theorization taken from the field of sociology of the family, understanding the relational aspect of workers requires one to look into organizational theories.

The vector of resources also uncovers issues that need to be addressed. Resources and means are critical to the actualization of agency in general and fathers’ agency in relation to the social services specifically. Much attention has been given in recent years to the tendency of social workers to ignore questions of resources and their effects on interventions. Specifically, in the field of child protection, recent studies emphasize the tendency of workers to ignore the role of material hardship on children’s welfare and focus instead on parental capabilities as a single cause of risk to children (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Saar-heiman & Gupta, 2019). Applying these understandings to father engagement, one may ask – what is the role of material hardship in low father engagement? How do poverty, breadwinning (or lack thereof), precarious employment, and more affect fathers’ ability to take a meaningful part in interventions? The Capabilities Approach may offer a useful lens through which these life realities form a part of our understanding of father engagement.

The issue of resources raises questions on our understanding of the side of the social worker. It begs us to factor not only for their norms, ideas, and biases but also for resources available for interaction – such as available time, caseload, specialized programs, and more. Our research with policymakers in Israel connects father-excluding work routines with scant resources for interventions, as policymakers refrain from providing needed resources to expand father engagement (Authors, 2020; Forthcoming).

Another matter that receives thorough attention in the existing scholarship is the broadest – that of ideas and values. The effect of societal and cultural ideas and norms on fathers’ engagement has been studied both from the perspective of the fathers and workers. The most prominent set of ideas in this context is, naturally, the gendered division of labor within the family and the role of the father. Other cultural ideas and norms that have been shown to affect father engagement are racism, classism, and more, as discussed above.

However, ideas and values are often treated as a given, unchanging reality rather than as a changing (or at least changeable) factor. A few novel research projects attempt to analyze how varying ideas and values affect father engagement – mainly through comparative research. Nygern et al. (2019) and Halpern (forthcoming) show how differences in the perceptions and values of social workers between countries affect their treatment of fathers and, therefore, these fathers’ engagement. These preliminary works accentuate the importance of a more complex view of ideas and values, following Daly’s (2020) view of this vector.

Lastly, I call attention to the contextual level. Theories of care – and lately also capabilities – have done important comparative work. I believe adopting an international, care-oriented, context-aware comparative framework in the field of father engagement may provide a meaningful way forward. The concept of ‘care regimes’ (Bettio & Plantenga, 2008; Mahon et al., 2012) follows the tradition of regime analysis to identify ways welfare states approach the issue of care. Understanding issues of father engagement through the lenses of care regimes will provide a better understanding of father engagement – and may also enhance our knowledge of care regimes.

Finally, it is essential to note that neither Daly’s original theorization nor our adaptation of it to father engagement is offered as stand-alone directions for research. Care – and father engagement – need to be understood through the interaction interdependence of these vectors. Research should not only look separately at the effects of each vector but also at the interaction between vectors. For example, questions of resources may affect both issues of agency and those of ideas and values, as the capabilities approach shows us. Even when researching a specific vector, as is often required of the researcher, one must account for the more comprehensive picture.

In this paper, we attempted, first, to show the state of current research on father engagement with social welfare and child protection services; we then pointed to the main gaps in this literature and offered theories of care and the capabilities approach as a theoretical framework for the study of father engagement. Finally, we have shown how these theories can be applied to the field.

This paper aimed to raise questions rather than provide answers. The theoretical framework offered is merely an outline, still requiring filling-in of significant elements. We hope to provide fertile ground for further research, discussion, and theorization.

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