***Fathers in the eyes of family welfare services’ social workers in Germany and Israel: Feminism, ideals, and disappointments***

**Abstract:**

Despite the expanding discourse on the importance and essence of fatherhood, several studies have reported that populations of non-hegemonic fathers in social work practice, many of whom are clients of family welfare services, are undertreated compared with mothers. This issue is examined here from a previously unexplored angle by comparing the perspectives of two groups of social workers from different cultures and working spheres in Israel and Germany. The study aims to understand the gender ideals, images, and socialisation processes that guide social workers in their work with fathers and to explore how feminist ideology impacts field practice within family welfare services in both countries. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven German social workers and seven Israeli social workers and were compared. Interviewees were selected through convenience sampling. All the interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative method of content analysis, with the aim of tracing social workers’ unique gendered perceptions and world views regarding fathers. The findings showed that whereas in both countries, fathers, unlike mothers, were not involved; unique aspects were evident in each country according to its specific demographic and cultural contexts and social workers’ idiosyncratic gender socialisation, feminist approaches and world views. This paper highlights the importance of understanding how these factors influence the dynamics between fathers and social workers and the need for self-reflection among social workers in different countries on the ideals, images and stereotypes that could impact their practice.

**Literature Review**

The notion of integrating fathers into welfare services treatment initially emerged in the 1990s in Western countries, such as those in North America and Europe, in a context of violence against women, which instigated the development of programmes targeting violent men (Sarkadi *et al.*, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2009; Featherstone, 2013). Another avenue was the rising divorce rate and changing family structures, which prompted concern about the potential effects of fathers’ absences on their children’s welfare and development (Brown *et al*., 2009; Maxwell *et al*., 2012). Thus, by the beginning of the 21st century, a dichotomous view of fathers as posing a risk to their families or as a resource had been adopted within the social services.

Fathers’ involvement in childcare is reported to have cognitive, behavioural, health and educational benefits for their children (Tully *et al*., 2017). Children with fathers who are present and involved do better in school, have healthy self-esteem and self-concepts and are more likely to exhibit empathy and pro-social behaviours and avoid high-risk behaviours (Heinrich, 2014). Conversely, the research suggests that compared with children with present fathers, children in households with absent fathers are more likely to use drugs, have increased educational needs and exhibit more health, emotional and behavioural problems (Horn and Sylvester, 2002). From a practical perspective, greater engagement of fathers in the treatment benefits the welfare system and the social work discipline, while also contributing to more effective family-oriented social work interventions (Malm *et al*., 2006; Burrus *et al*., 2012; Brewsaugh *et al*., 2018) ).

Yet, despite these consistent findings, fathers’ involvement in family welfare services remains low. Comprehensive statistical data are hard to obtain, but studies of various welfare states consistently show that almost universally, social work interventions rarely include fathers, and they focus mostly, if not exclusively, on mothers (Featherstone, 2004, 2013; Brown *et al*., 2009; Maxwell *et al*., 2012; Scourfield *et al*, 2015). This finding has been reported specifically in Israel (Author’s own, 2020, 2021), and it also seems to apply to Germany (Sabla, 2009). However, transnational comparisons remain absent from the research.

***Gender construction of fatherhood in welfare services***

As mentioned above, welfare services are universally targeted at women and children and are also incompatible with the traditional breadwinning role of fathers. For example, men’s long work hours are not compatible with the operation times of the services (Baum, 2015a; Ewart-Boyle *et al*., 2015). Men also often express distress, anxiety, fear, and depression differently from women (Addis and Mahalik, 2003; Brown *et al*., 2009; Baum, 2015a). The vast majority of social workers are women, and as women, they experience a power struggle in which the female worker, who holds professional and regulatory power, faces the male client, who holds patriarchal power (Bundy-Fazioli *et al*., 2009). Although male and female social workers may involve fathers differentially, this paper does not deal with this aspect and refers to social work as a feminine profession. The above discussion shows that a substantial part of social workers’ difficulty in working with fathers stems from gender differences.

At the same time, studies have shown that men fear social workers (Baum, 2015b), who often hold sexist and stigmatic conceptions of fathers (Philip *et al*., 2018; Author’s own, in submission). Additionally, mothers often position themselves as gatekeepers between the social services and fathers, sometimes going as far as to refrain from identifying the father (O’Donnell, Jr. *et al*., 2005). Their reasons may include fear of a father with a history of violence, concern about losing custody to the father, unwillingness to share responsibility for the children or fear of losing benefits attached to single parent status (Maxwell *et al*., 2012).

***Transnational and intersectional aspects of fatherhood in the context of welfare services***

The lack of a transnational perspective is especially problematic, considering the importance of ethnic, cultural, socio-economic and other intersectional factors when inquiring into fathers who are clients of family welfare services (Brown *et al*., 2009; Dominelli *et al*., 2011; Featherstone, 2013; Gupta and Featherstone, 2015; Brewsaugh *et al*., 2018). Besides the category of fatherhood, the substantial influence of intersectional elements requires a comparative study to grasp these differences and their influence. Israel and Germany, as countries with diverse demographic contexts due to immigration, may offer a significant comparison base.

Gender and the cultural construction of fatherhood in Israel as well as Germany is a well-studied topic, and will only be mentioned briefly given this paper’s focus on fatherhood in the context of family welfare services. In Israel, minority groups of fathers are mainly Jews with an Arabic background, Palestinians, and ultra-Orthodox Jews. These groups are often stigmatised and judged for their parental skills, even though their distress should be attributed partly to their structural position within society (Strier and Author, 2021). In Germany, scholarly works on the cultural aspects of fatherhood focus mainly on immigrants and refugees, mostly those with Muslim backgrounds, and their encounters with German norms (Tunç, 2021).

A brief comparison of social work in Israel and Germany is warranted. However, a comprehensive comparison and analysis of these differences relating to fathers will be reserved for another paper (Author’s own, in preparation), as the focus of the current paper is on the individual perceptions of social workers. In both countries, social workers are considered professionally qualified after they receive an academic or equivalent degree. In Israel, social work focuses more on psychotherapy or community work, whereas in Germany, the focus is on education (social pedagogy). In both countries, the social services operate under the respective federal governments, and specific welfare laws are aimed at protecting children and helping families (Textor, 1995; www.gov.il/he/departments/molsa).

Lastly, the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework is a notable gap in the scholarly literature on fathers and social work. Previous studies have identified numerous elements that reduce fathers’ engagement as well as sexist and gendered beliefs held by social workers (Philip *et al*., 2018; Brewsaugh *et al*., 2018). However, no explicit explanation that accounts for connections, mutual influence and counter dependencies among transnational and intersectional elements has been offered. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge the above gaps and offer a new perspective on the well-studied topic of the absence of fathers within family welfare services’ interventions.

**Research Questions**

1. What are the professional and gender perceptions of social workers, and what are their working habits, attitudes and actual interactions (or lack of them) with fathers?

2. Are there any certain gender ideas or norms that guide social workers in their work with fathers?

3. What are the differences, or similarities, between two groups of allegedly culturally different social workers and clients in Israel and Germany?

It is noteworthy that the study’s findings prompted a revision of the original research questions, noted above. Specifically, they highlighted the importance of grasping how feminist agendas influence father–social worker dynamics and of social workers’ self-reflection in different countries based on the unique ideals, images and stereotypes that could impact their practice in particular cultural-psycho-social and demographic settings.

**Methodology**

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, in parallel, with seven German social workers and seven Israeli social workers. Interviewees were selected using convenience sampling. Accordingly, departments and social workers willing to participate in the study were selected. In Israel, interviews were conducted in Hebrew, with six women and one man recruited from three family welfare departments. In Germany, interviews were conducted in English (not the interviewees’ native language) with six women and one man from Der Allgemeine Soziale Dienst (ASD), the equivalent of Israeli family welfare services, in two different regions. In both countries, these services, provided by trained social workers, deal with families in distress resulting from children’s severe psychosocial problems and/or educational problems. Most interviews in Israel and Germany were conducted online. They were aimed at understanding the social workers’ perspectives on involving fathers as well as their daily routines and actual practices.

In both countries, two interviews were initially conducted and analysed in a pilot study. Thereafter, the remaining interviews were conducted. All the interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative method of content analysis for tracing the social workers’ unique perceptions and world views regarding fathers. Interview transcripts were first read and analysed, and categorisation was conducted using a qualitative narrative method described by Shkedi (2005).

Next, the German interview transcripts were divided into categories identified in the preceding analysis of Israeli interview transcripts. However, the regular analysis according to categories did not yield sufficient in-depth conclusions. Therefore, a ‘second order’ analysis was conducted with other researchers (Shkedi, 2004) in the spirit of qualitative content analysis (QCA; Graneheim *et al*., 2017). On the axis of the two-dimensional model of QCA epistemological approaches, namely phenomenological description versus hermeneutic interpretation, the former was more prevalent in the initial analysis of the interview content, which focused on manifest content and concrete descriptions and a deductive (concept-driven) approach. During the second round of analysis, an approach of maintaining distance from the text was adopted with more abstract descriptions and interpretations and an abductive approach. Texts relating to specific clients, the social workers’ names and the locations of their departments were anonymised to avoid exposure of identifiable data.

**Results**

**Images of the ideal father**

Social workers in both groups explicitly or implicitly conveyed a certain image of the type or characteristics of the ideal father, associated with positive and highly appreciative expressions. By contrast, they portrayed common father clients using concrete case descriptions or general statements. These portrayals mostly contrasted with the ideal father image, although in very few and exceptional cases of fathers categorised as ‘good clients’ or ‘successful treatment’, they matched the ideal. The characteristics of the different father images were related to emotional, behavioural and familial aspects as well as economical functions and general attitudes towards the treatment, the welfare system or the social worker herself. In the following section, the varied expressions of the different father images and differences between the Israeli and German contexts are elaborated.

**An egalitarian trend?**

The interviews in both countries conveyed an ideal father image with some differences. In Germany, social workers described the desired father client as follows:

They [the fathers who are more involved in the treatment] are softer, open-minded, can talk about their own feelings, their own childhood, more kind in their marriage … the mother and father share … [equally in] looking after the children and [providing] money. (Germany, 3)

The egalitarian notion of gender equality and the ideal of men who are more aligned with feminine characteristics matched the sociological or social policy perspective of most interviewees in Germany regarding their wish to change gender roles and strengthen fathers’ involvement. However, this desire for social progression calls attention to the reality, wherein father clients are perceived as old-fashioned in their socialisation, being unable to fulfil this utopic desire and keep pace with the new trend of increased fathers’ involvement:

I think what [has] changed in the last 20 or 30 years is that the fathers do more, for example, than my father, the fathers of the older generations. … We have more and more fathers, of course, who want to take responsibility of their kids … but … quite often … they say “I can't do it” … because they are also socialised that fathers are not in this responsibility. … (Germany, 4)

In Israel, this ideal image of fathers was similar but differed in some aspects. Social workers brought up policy changes for promoting fathers’ increased involvement:

I think the policy [regarding fathers] has changed. If in the past, the mother was more dominant in the Vaada [the treatment committee or Hilfeplanung]. Today, the father has to be invited and [to be] present. (Israel, O1)

At the same time, like the German interviewees, they tagged father clients as being more old-fashioned in their socialisation. Nevertheless, the machoistic tendency of Israeli society as a whole was strongly emphasised:

I think that masculinity construction in Israeli society is … that a man has to be strong and macho, and then he won’t ask for help. … The problem is in the education and messages [conveyed] in the Israeli society; that there is a certain type of masculinity and other options do not count. … In the welfare client population, I don’t see any change in that aspect. (Israel, KY2)

Even if a father shared the maternal role with the mother, and adhered to the dominant father ideal expressed in the German interviews, he was perceived with suspicion as being unusual, as recounted by one Israeli social worker:

This father was … from [among] the quiet ones. … I do, I take whatever [the mother] says. … My impression was that this father cooks, functions at home … takes care of showers [for the children]; he takes care of everything … but it turned out that there was a sexual abuse [by the father towards a child] … so I say, one father that apparently functioned, this is what he did? (Israel, O1)

The German social workers deemed a father who took care of his children and demonstrated active parenthood, emotional capacity and equality with the mother within the household as a good father. By contrast, the Israeli social workers placed much greater emphasis on a father’s economical and materialistic capacities and his traditional role as the family breadwinner. This view contradicted the egalitarian model of equality between the parents:

He bought them [his children] everything that was needed because the mother had no money and she said: “they have [a] father with money, so he shall pay”… and he always said yes. … He really bought [things for] the children and gave them.… (Israel, A1)

**The disappointing common father**

The different images of ideal fathers in both countries were compared, mostly as contrasts to common father clients, who were not very involved in the treatment. Most of them were judged negatively relative to the above images of an ideal father or in opposition to the mother’s maternal functioning, as discussed further on.

In both countries, only a few interviewees acknowledged the stigmatic and judgemental approach of social workers towards fathers:

Social workers judge the father all the time; [they] perceive him as abusive, not caring enough … even when he made all the efforts he could. (Israel, A5)

I really do my best not to be stigmatising but it’s always a challenge. … We, as social workers; we make the experience that they are. If you look at some statistics, they are more violent; they are more [often] the perpetrator[s] of domestic violence. But I think that is all in our head[s], and we have to make sure that this is only … this is not always the case. (Germany, 6)

There were also some differences in this respect. For example, in Germany, the irony was that while fathers were expected, perhaps like women, to be emotional and soft, the discourse about them was at times harsh and judgemental, with frequent use of generalisations and very few expressions of empathy. The common father client was tagged as insensitive, unintelligent and unable to join the treatment process in stark contrast with the ideal father image mentioned in the German interviews:

It’s not possible for them to realise that it’s not good for the children, and it’s not just the fault of the mother[s] because it’s also the fault of themselves when they are acting like idiots because they are very insulted. (Germany, 3)

Like, they [fathers who are not very involved in the treatment] join the meeting, but they are not really open to chang[ing] anything, or they don’t bring [up] a requirement. … And then the mother is the one who wants support, like finding the meeting [location] and the appointments at the youth office, but the other person doesn’t really care about that. (Germany, 2)

In Israel, social workers also tended to tag father clients as emotionally blocked and unmotivated to participate in the treatment:

With fathers, it is very hard to talk [about] emotions, about the treatment or the process. The mother will [eventually] take the child for treatment. … Even when there is a crisis, the mother will be there all the time … [but] the father will not be there. … Maybe it is something cultural, especially in the welfare population we are talking about … that he is very busy with breadwinning or he is emotionally blocked. (Israel, A7)

Interestingly, when fathers did express emotions, they were also tagged negatively if these emotions did not match their expected role. Hence, fathers were expected to express emotions only in a way that suited the social worker:

I think about the fathers that I am in contact with. … They are very unbalanced. They are overwhelmed and flood you with information and [are] very manipulative. (Israel, B4)

The main gap, however, was between the image of the ideal father as a potent man and a full breadwinner and the common father client, who was economically impotent:

In many cases, it is a matter of poverty, so the father does not pay alimony … and then he either disappears or [ends up] in jail, or he just doesn’t care enough about the children. … There was a case of a father [whom] we tried to involve … [regarding] the daughter, [but] he did show up, [and] … regarding the payment [for the daughter] he refused. (Israel, KY2)

Paradoxically, even in cases of hardworking fathers who were breadwinners (although poor breadwinners), in one social worker’s view, there was no need to make an effort to involve them, as they were fulfilling their main task as fathers:

I have a couple … when I come [for a house visit], the father is sleeping because he did [a] night shift … so he won’t be interested to sit and talk (Q: And do you try to involve fathers?) A: In this case it won’t do any good … he won’t cooperate. He was not interested in me. (Israel, O2)

**Non-powerful fathers**

Not surprisingly, women hold great power over men in the family welfare system. ~~This is a well-studied issue that is not innovative.~~ However, the analysis revealed different ways in which this power imbalance manifested in each country.

In general, and in both countries, interviewees predictably depicted women within the sphere of family welfare services as being more powerful, firstly as feminine professional power in a context in which most practitioners, as well as leaders, are women:

Four men and sixteen women [in the team]. Yes, and also the women in the leadership [rung], so [a] lot of women power. (Germany, 2)

There is a lot of awareness among the social workers that there is a bias in favour of the mothers because it is easier for us as women to identify with the mother. (Israel, KY1)

In Germany, it seems that the legal aspect of custody plays a major role in enhancing and expressing feminine power over fathers. Mothers have a preliminary advantage when it comes to custody, as described in the interviews, whereas fathers are included mostly when they share custody. Therefore, mothers usually gain custody, have legal power and are the gatekeepers who decide if the social worker can get to know the father. Eventually, social workers in Germany become afraid to challenge or appeal against mothers and their ultimate power:

In Germany, you have to think about the custody, and in this case, the mother has … sole custody. That [means] she is entitled to custody, and the father, he doesn’t have any rights. (Germany, 6)

Because it’s more often [the case] that the child stays with the mother … and if the mother doesn’t want to involve the father, it’s also hard for us to involve him. (Germany, 2)

The only exceptions were refugees’ families, in which fathers were described as the more dominant partners and power holders in the family:

I would say, if there is a Muslim background, they are more [likely to] stick to cultural … and also, yeah, these old ideas about family and about the man being the head of the family. I think [for] the Muslim fathers, this is more important. It’s not always the case, but I think in my majority of cases, and the cultural factors are more important for them. (Germany, 6)

This issue will be further discussed in the following sections, but even considering the cultural gap, mothers were treated with greater respect:

I had huge difficulties with Caribbean mothers, and I had criticised their parenting. I mean, that it the worst thing I could do to this particular culture group. And you know, it was about me finding a way to reach these women without making this a cultural issue. So, you have to find a way because they feel they are being discriminated [against] everywhere. … (Germany, 7).

In Israel, however, custody was not such a central issue. This could be because unlike their German counterparts, family social workers do not handle divorce disputes. A different analysis of the Israeli interviews revealed that non-married fathers were less involved than married ones (Perez *et al*., in submission). Nevertheless, the excessive use of feminine power over men was more prominent in cases involving men who did not fulfil their expected financial role:

It was hard to handle him [the father] because it was obvious that he didn’t function. … He was not a working man. …[For] all those years, he and his wife made a living from income support payments … but she was working and he wasn’t. (Israel, KY2)

Moreover, fathers were seen and received full treatment only when they ‘bowed their heads’, conforming to the social workers' expectations and when they accepted the professional setting in which social workers possessed knowledge regarding their problems, motives and even their feelings:

The father felt that there was a great misjustice … done to him … that only his wife was being heard. … Eventually, I treated him for six years [after this crisis] … and it was quite an amazing therapy. … He also said it… we first recognised that when he screamed; this means he is afraid. … He feels threatened … he is a big man … and he shouts … but actually he is dying of fear. (Israel, KY1)

**To educate them**

The above discussion leads to another aspect of educational work with fathers. In Germany, it seems that the expectation of fathers’ full responsibility leads to a certain type of intervention, which is less therapeutic and more didactive. The social worker tries to fit client fathers into the ideal father category that she has in mind, encouraging them to adhere to a certain model:

To give them something like a “Vorbild”. You know what a “Vorbild” is? They learn something from someone else. Like modelling … because many fathers, they don’t have a model like this. (Germany, 7)

There are some cases where fathers need an explanation to understand that if the child doesn’t feel comfortable to meet them, ~~that~~ they have to be patient, and there is going to be a process. (Germany, 5)

This comparison of German and Israeli social workers revealed some nuances and differences in the educational method of working with fathers. The German interviews revealed a cultural-ethnic element in the image of the father client relating to immigration from Arab countries:

I think in old-fashioned Arab families, it’s very hard for the fathers when they arrive to take the children and meet them. … I think that they are not very flexible. … We’ve got 70 percent immigrants. … Sometimes I think when they've got a Turkish background or an Arabian background, it’s harder for them because they never had contact with their children. … On the Arab side, it’s very old-fashioned and very hard to find new solutions for families. (Germany, 3)

Accordingly, cultural-ethnic affiliations are not aligned with the ideal type of father, who is more equal to the mother and cares for the children:

I think there is a group that is more involved because they say “OK, then I [will] care for the children and what I can give is in family care, so I do it in family care”. There is a second group, [and] ‘they say, “no, it’s not my job”. In our region, we have a lot of people from Arabic countries and from African countries. They are socialised [such] that it’s not the father’s job to care for the family and to go with the kids to the doctor or things like that. (Germany, 4)

In the Israeli interviews, the element of immigration was less prominent, perhaps because of the different demographic contexts of welfare clients in Israel. Arab populations are mostly treated by Arab social workers. This group was investigated but was not part of the sample discussed in this paper. However, as mentioned above, the father’s financial functioning contributed significantly to his worthiness in the eyes of the social worker and thus to his ability as a breadwinner. Accordingly, the social worker’s educational task was to help the father client to become a better breadwinner and to transform him into an ideal father. This approach clearly contradicts the social workers’ expectation of equal parental participation.

If [the father] comes and ask for a fridge, probably the financial management is not so good … so we want to see how we can improve [the father] to be better financially. (Israel, O1)

A final interesting observation from interviews with the Israeli social workers touches upon the initial category of the ideal father image and expectations of father clients. In Israel, apart from the breadwinner ideal, an ideal of the all-knowing and strong father, who simply knows how to be a father and holds great parental authority, was evident. Those who did not match these ideals and required mentoring and help, as some clients did, were viewed very negatively as being weak and pathetic:

He [the father] received a lot of parental mentoring … a very weak, hesitant and knowledgeless father, [who] was very afraid [of] talking to the children. … I felt some kind of dependence on his side that I would tell him what to do and how … being a father naturally was not there. (Israel, B4)

Our difficulty as women [social workers] [is] to stand against crying and [the] strong emotions of men. There was [a father] … he just sobbed on the phone … and it turned my stomach inside out … because he is a man. (Israel, KY1)

In Israel, social workers were allegedly more therapy-oriented in their interventions, but they also applied pedagogy in their practice. This paradox wherein social workers perceive their role to include educating fathers or conducting emotional therapy with them, while simultaneously despising their neediness, is aligned with a previously mentioned finding. This finding is that less ‘masculine’ and more emotional fathers are viewed with suspicion according to the prevailing machoistic model in Israeli society. Economically or emotionally dependent fathers are scorned or reduced to dependent, irresponsible children. The following quote about a close and intense relationship with a father who shared his needs and distress with the social worker is illustrative:

So, I called him [the father] and told him, “what are you doing? What is this nonsense?” ... I went to them for a house visit, I explained why he needed to calm down, and that this was not a way to behave. (Israel, O1)

**Discussion**

This study analysed social workers’ perceptions about working with fathers in family welfare services. In addition to advancing understanding of their beliefs and world views relating to gender and interventions with fathers, it compared two culturally different groups of social workers and working spheres. It sought to bridge existing gaps identified in the scholarly literature and to examine comparative and intersectional aspects of working with father clients of family welfare services in two Western countries with different welfare regimes: Israel and Germany.

The findings demonstrated similarities and commonalities of not involving fathers and undermining their significance compared with mothers in both countries. However, they also illuminated unique aspects in each country relating to idiosyncratic gender socialisation, cultural influences and, most interestingly, different feminist approaches among social workers. Consequently, images of the ideal father and attitudes towards the common father client differed in each country. Consonant with the reviewed literature, the findings showed that social workers’ inclination towards implementing mother-centred interventions and the gender bias within welfare services constituted barriers and potential reasons for fathers’ disinvolvement.

Through its exploration of the intersectional prism and its comparison of two culturally differing social work environments, this study has also provided a deeper analysis and theoretical explanations for fathers’ disinvolvement. These explanations focus on the presence or absence of feminist agendas and ideals, the gap between the image of the ideal father and the common father client in each unique demographic context and the relations between the feminist approach and professional practice and interventions with fathers. Contrasting with the claim in previous studies that the less sexist social workers are, the more they will involve fathers (Brewsaugh *et al*., 2018), this study produced a more complicated picture, entailing other intersectional elements. A feminist or non-patriarchal attitude, by itself, is insufficient to prompt a radical change of increasing involvement of fathers, This failure can also be attributed to a more traditional and less radical feminist ideology.

The hegemonic discourse on fatherhood, popular among feminist scholars (though not in disciplines such as men's studies) was, till recently, aligned with the second wave of American feminism or the feminist liberation movement. Accordingly, the focus was on achieving equality between men and women and combating discrimination against women (Silverstein, 1996). Feminist theorists who identified with this stream related mostly to the importance of sharing parental duties within the private sphere of the family and household unit, and father-child bonding (Ruddick, 1983).

This scholarship can be seen as pro-fathering, encouraging male parents’ proactiveness in alignment with feminist goals of gender equality and positive outcomes for men, women and children (Palkovitz, 2002; Pleck and Masciadrelli, 2004; Woo and Raley, 2005). However, these ideas apply mostly to middle-class, heterosexual and white families and fathers, while excluding other forms and different shades and marginalised representations of masculinities (Inhorn, 2004), as only recent studies are trying to expose with regard to fatherhood (Randels, 2020; Author’s own, 2021). As noted by Doucet and Lee (2014), there are still gaps in feminist thinking on fatherhood in relation to intersectional prisms, such as colonialism, state policies, racism and class-based inequalities. This study has attempted to touch upon these gaps.

These aspects were highly prominent in the interviews conducted for this study in both Germany and Israel, but in varied forms. In both countries, an internal contradiction was apparent regarding the expectations of fathers, which are aligned with the contradictory myth of masculinity within the wider society. Accordingly, the ideal man must be aggressive but not violent, sensitive but not too emotional, healthy and a feminist as well as a breadwinner and active and smart (Shor, 2000).

In Germany, the main expectations of father clients were that they were emotional, communicative, cared for their children and shared parenting duties with the mother. These expectations (and their disappointment) fit very well with the above-mentioned liberal feminist agenda of parents’ equality, and in one way, they contradict the image of non-German fathers, who are mostly immigrants from ~~Muslim~~ Arab countries. In Israel, the main expectations of father clients (and, conversely, disappointments) are related to being successful breadwinners and demonstrating mental resilience.

Most of the common father clients were dealing with poverty and difficult life circumstances and did not fit the above ideal. Hence, Israeli social workers were less affiliated with the liberal feminist stream of egalitarianism, adhering more closely to the traditional patriarchal model between the sexes. However, even though the two groups of social workers held opposing perceptions regarding gender socialisation and the expectations of fathers, the outcomes were similar. Both groups adopted an uninvolving and often disrespectful approach towards fathers, leading to minimal efforts to reach out to them and a preference for working with mothers. Poverty or ethnicity appeared to play a similar role in undermining fathers within family social workers’ practices.

The findings showed that poor fathers who are also ethnically not hegemonic, are often viewed as failures, either as fathers or as non-masculine men (Collins, 2000). Negligent black fathers, for example, were stigmatised as being promiscuous, predatory and violent and blamed for the social ills of communities of colour (Battle, 2018). Certain welfare programmes targeted at fathers draw on a discourse that characterises them as worthy fathers and, by implication, worthy men, providing role models rather than money for children (Randels, 2020). Such programmes, described in the literature, resonate strongly with the findings of this study on German social workers’ expectations but less with those of Israeli social workers, who strongly emphasised fathers’ breadwinner role, as described above. However, both groups of social workers adhered to a discourse that asserts that fathers play an essential role in their children’s positive development, thereby encouraging responsible fathering. Indeed, the common father clients in this study were blamed for not being responsible enough.

This finding could also be explained with reference to the notion of *fear*, which is related to power. Lorber’s (1994) definition of hegemonic masculinity entailing economic success, racial superiority and visible heterosexuality is very similar to expectations of ideal fathers among social workers in both countries. Nonetheless, this study demonstrated that hegemonic, as well as non-hegemonic masculinity, are culturally relative and fluid concepts.

In the eyes of German social workers, non-hegemonic fathers are culturally and ethnically different; dominant, patriarchal men, who mostly hail from ~~Muslim~~ Arab countries. Paradoxically, in the eyes of Israeli social workers, hegemonic fathers are closer to the ~~Muslim~~Arab patriarchal image that German social workers deter from, whereas non-hegemonic and ‘less worthy’ fathers more closely resemble German hegemonic fathers, who express their weakness and feelings. Cheng (1999) argued that the dominant group needs to find a way to justify its dominance by making other masculinities inferior. Any alternative masculinity is perceived as a threat to hegemony and the status quo.

Social workers in this study were afraid of or recoiled from fathers who displayed violence or, conversely, weakness (either emotional or economic). In Germany the fear of dominant men was more prominent in relation to the reservation from culturally and ethnically non-hegemonic fathers, mostly from ~~Muslin~~ Arab countries, who were labelled as patriarchal. In Israel, fear was mostly directed against fathers who expressed their weakness but also against those who were ‘too aggressive’. These findings could explain the excessive use of power over these fathers and the use of educational approaches to overcoming the threat perceived by social workers, as the following quote illustrates:

I agree that there is a bias in favour of women in family welfare services. … This is a feminine profession, and also women are coming more often to ask [for] help, and there is a common language with them. … The man is the other; the threatening one. (Israel, KY1)

However, this feminine power entails an inherent trap. Women have power only because they adhere to their traditional gender roles as social workers (caregivers), mothers, those who ask for help (are helpless) or those cooperating with the social worker (obedient to the regulatory and authoritative system).

Thus, in both countries, it seems that social workers only allegedly hold power over fathers. In reality, they lack significant professional knowledge, which could improve their working skills, treatment outcomes and self-confidence. Social workers lack an understanding of the different challenges that father clients may face, which intersect with other excluded affiliations (such as being an immigrant, poor, etc.). Several questions arise, for example, have social workers grasped the tension between the traditional breadwinner ideology and new father ideals that emphasise the importance of fathers being emotionally present for their children? Do immigrant and refugee fathers experience disruption to their provider role as being detrimental to their identities (Este and Tachble, 2009)? Do low-income fathers demonstrate that breadwinning as well as nurturing are driving motivations to be good fathers (Edin and Nelson, 2013)?

**Conclusions**

Evidently, prevailing liberal and second-wave feminist ideas of how a father should act, feel and talk have shaped and influenced the attitudes of social workers towards fathers and their working relationship with them. This conclusion emerged in two different Western countries. In Germany, the ~~Muslim~~ immigrant client is perceived as patriarchal, and thus in opposition to the ideal of the new father, who shares the parental role with the mother. In Israel, socio-economic characteristics play a major role in defining father clients. Notably, living in poverty mark fathers as less functional and thus in opposition to the ideal of the father as the full breadwinner.

The findings of this study explicitly show that social workers failed to understand these complex and meaningful nuances of their clients’ intersectional affiliations, despite working in varied cultural and demographical contexts. They did not acknowledge how ethnicity, poverty and affiliation to a certain class impact men’s access to resources and opportunities and therefore their parenting abilities. Moreover, they did not acknowledge how being constantly judged by social workers, and being part of an unequal power relationship with social workers, could impact their parental self-esteem. Therefore, despite holding different gender perspectives and feminist approaches, social workers in Israel and Germany demonstrated a lack of self-reflection on their gender approaches and specifically on the gap between the ideal father image and their expectations and the ‘real’ fathers with whom they work.

The findings further highlight the importance of acknowledging the unique perceptions, expectations and apparently inevitable disappointments of social workers that shape the power imbalance between them and father clients within family welfare services. It is also necessary to examine how they hinder feminist ideals and images. Furthermore, it is important for social workers to advance their understanding and knowledge of the unique characteristics, challenges and difficulties that may be experienced by the particular fathers with whom they work, with their specific ethnocultural backgrounds and socio-economic status.

It is to be hoped that uncovering and understanding the unique expectations that social workers have of fathers and the constraining ideologies that may influence them in these differing demographic and cultural settings could increase their self-reflection on their working habits with fathers. Consequently, the father–social worker relationship could be improved. Moreover, the importance of comparing two different countries is reflected in the findings, which demonstrated different approaches used for different client groups. It is important to expand comparative research on fathers in family welfare services to other Western as well as non-Western countries.

Lastly, this study’s limitations should be noted. The German interviews were conducted by a researcher who was a cultural outsider and not in the interviewees’ native language, whereas the Israeli interviewees and interviewers shared the same language and culture. This difference between the interviewees in the two groups could have affected their ability to open up and feel comfortable about expressing themselves. Additionally, contrasting with the analysis of the Israeli family welfare services, with which the researcher was familiar, the analysis of the German interviews lacked a comprehensive familiarity with and understanding of the German family welfare services system. Moreover, the sampling of social workers in both countries was not entirely reliable or representative, as specific social workers were chosen by the departments’ managers. Hence, further studies encompassing a larger group of social workers and entailing collaboration with a local German team are required.

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