# The Needs, Engagement, and Agency of Fathers Receiving Family Welfare Services: A Care-Oriented Ecological Participatory Study

The low engagement of fathers with systems of child and family welfare and child protection (hereafter referred to collectively as “family welfare systems”) has been subject to rising scholarly interest in recent decades (Campbell et al., 2015; Featherstone, 2004; Haworth, 2019). However, while research on the characteristics of fathers has experienced several significant breakthroughs, our knowledge of their environment and systems of support is still lacking (See also Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2023). This project will present a care-oriented ecological theoretical perspective using participatory research to analyze these environments and systems. [fill in more on methodology]

## Scientific background

Father participation in family welfare systems is notoriously low. Fathers are absent from many interventions, and when they are present, their participation level is usually marginal, low, or secondary (Clapton, 2009; Davies, 2016; Haworth, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2012). However, research shows that father participation in these interventions is potentially beneficial for both intervention success and family welfare (Burrus et al., 2012; Malm et al., 2006; Velázquez et al., 2009).

The gap between the growing awareness of father engagement and the unchanged reality raises questions about the reasons for these shortcomings. Research on this subject has classically differentiated between three primary sources for paternal absence: the fathers themselves, social workers and other welfare workers, and mothers (Brown et al., 2009). The proposed project will focus on reasons related to fathers, the obstacles they face, and the role played by their ecological environments in their low participation.

Research on father participation began in the 1990s within two distinct fields of study. Emerging discourses in the field of violence against women framed men as a risk to their spouses and the role of interventions as reducing this risk through working with men. Concurrently, the growing attention to rising rates of divorce and single parenthood and (primarily right-wing) discourses around “the end of the family” and “deadbeat dads” focused on father absence and its effects on family welfare (Featherstone, 2013; Scourfield, 2003). Thus, fathers were framed either as a risk or a resource to their families, leaving no place for ambiguity or fathers’ subjectivity and agency (Featherstone, 2013).

Critiques of the risk/resource dichotomy led researchers to attempt a more nuanced account of fathers. These studies tended to focus on fathers’ motivations—or lack thereof—to participate in interventions and on the macro-level effects of these motivations. Such effects include, for example, men’s well-evidenced tendency to avoid approaching help services originating from masculine norms (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Seidler et al., 2016) or fathers’ traditional absence from the domain of childcare seen as connected to femininity (Baum, 2016; L. Brown et al., 2009).

The focus on fathers’ characteristics and their connection to father absence is closely connected to the definition of fathers–specifically low-income, young, and minority fathers–as a “hard to reach” population, assuming that they are unresponsive to and uncooperative with the system’s attempts to interact with them. However, as Davis (2016) notes, the definition of fathers as “hard to reach” may actually indicate that it is the services themselves that are hard to access. Following Davies and other scholars (e.g., L. Brown et al., 2009; Ewart-Boyle et al., 2015), researchers have moved to a focus on obstacles to fathers’ engagement rather than on causes for fathers’ apparent lack of interest.

Substantial research has focused on elements in the services that obstruct father engagement. Social workers’ knowledge of working with fathers is limited, as most studies and textbooks focus on mothers (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). Social workers often favor mothers based on sexist views (Brewsaugh et al., 2018) or racist stereotypes (Arroyo et al., 2019; Gřundělová et al., 2022; Gupta & Featherstone, 2015). Structural and organizational aspects, such as work culture or the organization of services, also play a part in father exclusion (Perez-Vaisvidovsky, Halpern, & Mizrahi, 2023; Perez-Vaisvidovsky, Halpern, Mizrahi, et al., 2023).

Some studies have emphasized the importance of the relational aspect of the social worker-father interaction. Ferguson et al.’s (2015) pioneering study pointed to the centrality of relational and holistic perspectives, focusing not only on factors on the fathers’ or the workers’ side but also on their relationship. Brandon et al. (2019) and Philip et al. (2018) expand on this research area by emphasizing the interrelation between social workers’ and fathers’ attitudes and actions. Critchley (2021) shows how organizational processes and social workers’ perceptions may limit the contribution of fathers while also demonstrating how participatory practices can promote their contribution to family welfare.

Thus, research on father engagement has moved from focusing on fathers’ characteristics to analyzing broader causes for father absence, mainly on the role of workers but, to some extent, touching on relational aspects of the worker-father relationship. However, broader relational elements have received little attention. Several studies note the importance of a whole-family approach to father engagement and the failure of existing research to account for it (Brandon et al., 2019; Gřundělová et al., 2022; Philip et al., 2018). In a closely related field, Piotrowska et al. (2017) examine parental interventions in child mental health and highlight the importance of paternal engagement, specifically the interaction between parents.

Fathers’ engagement with the family welfare 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 mothers. The importance of relationships within and outside the family, and the relational nature of the family, serve as a basis for theories of family in various disciplines, including psychology (e.g., Dallos & Draper, 2000; Minuchin, 1974), social work (Collins et al., 2012), sociology (Saraceno, 2011, 2018), and family science (Bowen, 1976; J. Brown, 1999).

The gap in the literature that this research proposal aims to address is the lack of research on relational and systemic aspects of father engagement with social services. To address this issue, this project adopts an ecological perspective, examining fathers not independently but rather within the network (or ecology) of relationships and systems in which they are embedded. The goal is to examine which of these systems encourage higher engagement, provide alternative support, hinder their ability to care, or affect them in other ways.

* Lack of attention to family-level and wider elements
* Keep agency in mind
* There is (some) writing on marginalized fatherhood (e.g., Tarrant on poverty), but not enough, and it does not focus on needs and social services.

### Theoretical Framework

To address the gaps described above, the proposed research will adopt a theoretical framework presented previously by the primary investigator (P.I.) (Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2023). This framework offers an ecological and systematic view of father engagement, using theories of social care and the capabilities theory to position father engagement within wider circles and systems. A full description of this framework is beyond the scope of this proposal, but the aspects relevant to the ecology of fathers are described below.

The broader context of this framework is Bronfenbrenner’s (1996) Ecological Systems Theory. This theory posits that five different, though interacting, systems affect a person’s development and well-being. The “microsystem” consists of the relations and interactions immediately available to the person, such as his family, friends, and peers. The “mesosystem” represents interactions that relate to the individual but do not include said individual. The “exosystem” includes the broader context of institutions that do not incorporate the person but affect him, usually through their effect on other systems. Finally, the “macrosystem” is the cultural and social context in which the other systems exist and interact.

Within the ecological systems theory context, this proposal uses social care theories to understand fathers’ living realities. The concept of “care” has gained significant attention in recent decades due to increased female workforce participation, aging populations, and other societal factors, which have led to a “care deficit” (Fraser, 2016). This deficit underscores the importance of care work, especially in the context of meeting the physical and emotional needs of dependent adults and children. According to Daly and Lewis (2000, p. 285), care includes “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.”

This proposal acknowledges the significance of including fathers in the caregiving equation and categorizing their involvement as secondary care or support for primary caregivers. Doucet (2020), following Kittay (1995), emphasizes the notion of “secondary dependence,” underscoring the necessity of recognizing the needs of those who provide care and establishing support systems for them. In this context, fathers who are engaged with the welfare system can be conceptualized as expressing a secondary need.

Mary Daly’s theoretical framework (2021) plays a pivotal role in theorizing father engagement within the context of care. Daly emphasizes the prominence of the systemic aspect of care in existing research, which revolves around the arrangement of actors and their positions. This systemic approach extends to organizational factors, examining how care is organized and resourced at various levels, from individuals and families to communities and welfare states. Daly’s definition characterizes care as a sphere of human engagement dedicated to addressing perceived needs, and she conceptualizes care as an intricate interplay of four vectors: relations/actors, resources, values, and ideas. The vector of relations/actors specifically concerns the relational nature of care, emphasizing agency within these relationships. Resources are crucial, encompassing both material and emotional support networks for caregivers. Additionally, the vectors of values and ideas delve into the ethical and moral dimensions inherent in caregiving practices.

## Research Objectives and Expected Significance

## Detailed description of the proposed research

### Research Questions

Thus, the main research question leading this proposal and its sub-questions will be:

1. How is paternal care for children affected by the ecology of the various systems in fathers’ environments?
   1. What are fathers’ secondary needs in terms of caring for their children in relation to the welfare system and other social support systems?
   2. How do fathers’ relationships and agency affect their capability to care for their children?
   3. How do resources available to families affect fathers’ capability to care for their children?
   4. How do ideas and values affect fathers’ capability to care for their children?

### Research design & methods

The proposed research follows an ethnographic-oriented, interview-based, and community-based participatory approach. Community-based Participatory research (CBPR) is a research approach that centers on performing research in collaboration with communities and individuals, especially those belonging to marginalized and excluded communities and those lacking power and voice. In CBPR, these communities and individuals are not viewed as research subjects but rather as equal participants in the knowledge-production process (Fine et al., 2021; Vangeepuram et al., 2023). Alongside the general advantages of CBPR as a research philosophy, this methodology was chosen for this project as it is appropriate to the examination of questions of voice and agency.

Questions of voice are highly relevant to research on father engagement. These fathers often belong to marginalized and excluded communities. Their ability to express their needs and desires is often limited. Their under-representation in the welfare system leads to their voice being suppressed and unheard (Baum, 2016; L. Brown et al., 2009; Critchley, 2021)

#### Setting and Participants

Following the research questions described above, the target population in the proposed project is fathers receiving services from the family welfare system. Following the care-oriented ecological perspective described earlier, the project adopts a broad understanding of this definition, specifically of the definition of fathers and families and of the family welfare system.

Relating to fathers and families, this broader view manifests in the selection of families and the definition of fathers. Traditionally, research on father engagement has tended to focus on fathers who had prior contact with the welfare services, as described earlier. However, considering the interest in absent fathers, this focus neglects fathers who avoid connection with the services for whatever reason. To remedy this problem, the target population of this project will be families receiving such services, regardless of the fathers’ prior contact with the family welfare system.

This decision leads to the question of the definition of fathers in the research population. Here, too, the project adopts a broad definition. Families will be considered suitable for inclusion if they (or any of their members) perceive themselves as containing a father or a father figure. Said figure may or may not be biologically related to some or all of the children, live with them in the same household, hold custody over them, be present in their lives, or be subject to any other consideration. These criteria may lead to the inclusion of families that are usually considered “single-parent” or “independent” (Perez-Vaisvidovsky, Halpern, Mizrahi, & Salamy, 2023), provided the father is related to this family. Single-sex families and single-parent families composed of fathers will be included.

The definition of family welfare services will also be broad. While the municipal Departments of Social Services serve as the mainstay of the Israeli welfare system, specifically the family welfare system, the ongoing privatization of the services (Benish, 2018) means that a growing number of interactions between families and service providers occur outside of the departments and outside of the state purview. Thus, while the “starting point” (Smith, 2013) of the proposed project will be families that interact with the welfare services in their more traditional sense, its ethnographic character may lead to the inspection of interactions with other welfare providers—who may be state-run, state-financed, NGO or community based, or otherwise.

While the target population will be fathers, the ecological perspective of the project requires the capturing of a broad view of the life conditions of these fathers. For this reason, as is common in institutional ethnography (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2013), the definition of the research population will change to adapt to ongoing research findings. The “starting point” (Smith, 2013) of the project will be fathers receiving social services and their spouses. However, other participants may be included if deemed relevant to the project.

#### Design and Methods

This project adopts an institutional ethnographic research orientation. The data collection method will be limited to interviews to limit potential difficulties in training co-researchers to use several research methods concurrently. The data collection method will be semi-structured interviews, according to an interview guide that will be composed in collaboration with the co-researchers and the Community Advisory Board (see below). Data analysis will adopt a thematic analysis methodology using Atlas.ti software to identify central themes in the interviews.

The project will adopt a responsive research design (Leavy, 2023, p. 250). The project will consist of recurring stages of research design, data collection, data analysis, group consultations, and collaborative re-design (see Figure 1). It is estimated that four rounds of this process will be necessary to reach saturation and provide adequately detailed answers to the research questions.­

Figure - Responsive Research Design

**Stage 1 – Recruitment of Community Advisory Board (CAB) – Months 1-4**

The Community Advisory Board (CAB) is a common practice in participatory research projects (Israel et al., 2005; Leavy, 2023; Stewart et al., 2019). A CAB brings together community members and stakeholders from various groups and positions to include a multitude of perspectives on research-related issues and to better inform the research project (Stewart et al., 2019).

The CAB in this project will be an academia, practice, and community partnership, including members from the research community, including the P.I., the research team, representatives of relevant state and NGO welfare organizations, and community members from a variety of backgrounds.

The CAB will be formed by disseminating a call for participants through social media, leveraging relevant networks and the research team’s acquaintances. CAB members will be compensated for their time and expenses. The CAB will meet physically during the group consultation phase of the research. In addition, the research team may consult with the CAB online, either synchronously (using video conferencing software) or non-synchronously (using email or instant messaging apps), to address specific issues and questions.

**Stage 2- Recruitment and Training of Co-Researchers – Months 1-6**

In line with the project’s participatory nature, central parts of the data collection process will be performed by co-researchers belonging to the community being studied—families receiving services from the family welfare system. This stage will include recruiting co-researchers through disseminating a call for applications and interviews with prospective candidates. Selected candidates will undergo training in the primary data collection methodologies to be used in this project, specifically in institutional ethnography, semi-structured interviewing, and participant observation.

Concurrently, the research plan for phase 1 (see below) will be submitted to the Ashkelon Academic College IRB for ethics approval.

**Stage 3 – Data Collection Phase 1 (Months 6-12)**

The first data collection phase will follow a pre-determined research design described below. Serving as the departure point for the entire project, the sample design in this phase will focus on participants that belong to the core populations being studied.

The project will focus on families that are clients of the mainstay of the Israeli family welfare system—the Departments of Social Services and, specifically, family social workers. These workers are the first line of response to families in need, and their role is to integrate and coordinate family interventions (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017). This phase will also focus on core populations by limiting participants to fathers and mothers in these families, as the goal of this stage is to understand the viewpoint of primary family members.

The research population in this phase will be mothers and fathers from families receiving services from family social workers. The data collection methodology in this initial phase will be semi-structured interviews. The interview team will be composed of academic research assistants and field co-researchers (see stage 2). The interviews will follow an interview guide built to represent research questions Q1.1-Q1.4. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed.

This stage is expected to include ten fathers and ten mothers as participants. At the research team’s discretion, this number may change.

**Stage 4 – Data Analysis Phase 1 (Months 13-15)**

In this stage, the interview transcripts from the previous stage will be analyzed using the Atlas.ti software. The analysis will follow a thematic analysis methodology, identifying common themes within and across interviews, with attention to the various research questions.

Following the nature of the research questions, specific attention will be given to analyzing ecological systems relevant to the life situation and support needs of fathers and families who are clients of the family welfare system, identifying hitherto undocumented support channels.

**Stage 5 – Group Consultation and Research Design Phase 2 (Months 16-18)**

This stage will include a multi-stage group consultation to design the proposed project’s second phase. The questions discussed at this stage will consist of:

* Which ecological systems are relevant to the support needs of families and should be investigated?
* Which research populations, groups, or organizations best reflect these systems?
* What should the specific research questions be regarding these populations, groups, and organizations, and what is the preferred research methodology to tackle these questions?

To address these questions, the research team will first present the findings from the previous phase to the CAB, who will discuss the questions. The research team will use the CABs discussion to formulate a research strategy for this phase. This research strategy will then be presented to the CAB and amended accordingly. The final research plan will be submitted to the Ashkelon Academic College IRB for ethics approval.

**Stages 6-7 – Data Collection and Analysis, Phase 2 (Months 19-27)**

Data Collection and Analysis will commence according to the research strategy devised in stage 5.

Table - GANTT Chart

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| Phase | Stage | 3 | 6 | 9 | 12 | 15 | 18 | 21 | 24 | 27 | 30 | 33 | 36 | 39 | 42 | 45 | 48 | 51 | 54 | 57 | 60 |
|  | 1 - Recruitment of CAB |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 2 –Recruitment of Co-Researchers |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| I | 3 – Data Collection |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4 – Data Analysis |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| II | 5- Group Consultation |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6 – Data Collection |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7 – Data Analysis |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| III | 8- Group Consultation |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 9 – Data Collection |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 10 – Data Analysis |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| IV | 11- Group Consultation |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 12 – Data Collection |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 13 – Data Analysis |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | 14 – Conclusive Analysis |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Phase 3 (Stages 8-10 – Months 28-39)**

The findings from the data analysis stage of phase 2 will be used to initiate another round of group consultation and research design, similar to stage 5, which will result in a research strategy for the third phase of research. This research strategy will then be implemented similarly to phase 2.

**Phase 4 (stages 11-13 – Months 40-51)**

Similar to phase 3.

**Stage 14 – Conclusive Data Analysis (Months 52-60)**

In this concluding stage, data from the four phases of the project will be combined to create a comprehensive account of the many aspects related to support for families and the role of fathers in this support.

### P.I.’s Suitability for Conducting the Project

The P.I. has been heading a research group focusing on fatherhood in social services for the last six years, completing several research projects on this subject. Members of the group include Ayana Halpern, PhD, and Reli Mizrahi, MSW. The group is highly experienced in recruiting research participants, including those from hard-to-reach populations, conducting semi-structured interviews and other data collection forms, and conducting qualitative data analysis.

### Expected results and potential pitfalls

The expected results of the proposed project include insights into the broader ecology of father engagement and lack thereof with social services. The project is expected to provide an understanding of the effects of the various vectors of care—need, relations/agency, resources, and values. It will provide insights regarding fathers’ ability and motivation to participate in social services interventions and the interaction between vectors.

As detailed above, existing research has largely overlooked the broader context of low father engagement. The few studies that examined this context suffer from insufficiently comprehensive theoretical frameworks (Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2023). The proposed research offers a chance for a comprehensive understanding of the realities fathers and families face in receiving family welfare services.

Alongside the academic-theoretical potential of the proposed project, it has a significant potential for practical benefits. A better understanding of the life realities of the subject population is expected to provide new ways to shape family welfare interventions in ways that will benefit fathers, children, and families.

Several potential pitfalls may present challenges in the course of undertaking this research project. The first and most significant is recruitment difficulties at all stages of the research, specifically in recruiting co-researchers and research participants. As evidenced in the literature (Davies, 2016; Ellard-Gray et al., 2015) and in the personal research experience of the P.I., fathers who receive services from the family welfare services, specifically those belonging to disfranchised populations, tend to avoid cooperating with researchers.

Several measures will be taken to mitigate this risk. First, as Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) point out, participatory research has an advantage when recruiting among marginalized populations. In addition, compensation will be offered to research participants. Co-researchers will, naturally, be paid for their work.

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