**Adjusting the Organization to a Changing Reality:  
“Poverty Knowledge” in the Public Social Services as Seen by Social Workers in Israel**

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# Abstract

Given the complex situations of life that people face when they live in poverty, social workers are called upon to broaden their fields of knowledge in order to develop social services that cater to this clientele. Many studies look into the question of developing public social services and tailoring them to people living in poverty, but very little research has been done on the kind of knowledge that social workers need for the care of this population group. In Israel, much effort and major investments of resources have been made in recent years to respond to steadily widening economic and social disparities by applying “poverty-aware” programs in the public social services—making this country as an appropriate case study for the issue at hand. The article focuses on examining “poverty knowledge” and reviews three main issues: What is “poverty knowledge?” where does it come from, and what are the barriers and opportunities for its development? These questions are investigated through a qualitative paradigm among social workers employed in Israel’s public social services. The findings, while underscoring the centrality of the component of knowledge in service development and treatment of persons living in poverty, reveal a profound epistemological controversy about what “poverty knowledge” is: Is it objective, consistent, readily available, and transferrable knowledge, or is it a dynamic and reflexive process affected by multiple changing contexts? The findings also stress the importance of knowledge that flows from practice with clients and the centrality of the learning organization as a source for development of knowledge for care of persons living in poverty. These findings accent the need to assimilate “poverty knowledge” into social-work education, including the development of critical thinking about the care of people living in poverty and active learning from clients.

**Keywords**: Poverty, Poverty Knowledge, Social Services, Social Work Education

# Introduction

Dealing with poverty goes to the very heart of the social-work profession. In the history of this vocation, social workers have worked with individuals, families, and communities in poverty in order to improve their situation. Over time, however, the many attempts that have been made to define principles for work with people living in poverty, based on diverse paradigms and sources of knowledge, have achieved scanty consensus (Cummins, 2018). Furthermore, intervention methods and relief programs for populations living in poverty and exclusion have varied widely over the years commensurate with changing socioeconomic zeitgeists (Davis & Wainwright, 2005). In recent years, it is increasingly understood that social workers need vast and changing knowledge to do their jobs. Given the profusion of social problems that they face today, they find it necessary to broaden their areas of knowledge in order to give their clients’ changing needs holistic treatment. O’Connor (2001) developed the concept of “poverty knowledge” to signal the need to develop a body of knowledge tailored to the complexity of the problem of poverty. Poverty knowledge, O’Connor says, is knowledge that reflects the economic, political, cultural, and institutional context of the poverty problem. Few studies, however, have dealt at length with the questions of what “poverty knowledge” is, how it is created, and what factors help to structure and assimilate it. The first of these questions—what knowledge it is that would help to lift people out of poverty—remains unanswered and contentious (Feldman, 2019; O’Connor, 2001).

Israel offers a unique context in which the answer may be sought. First, it is a living classroom: a welfare state undergoing a sharp neo-liberal transition and noted for some of the developed world’s highest rates of poverty and inequality (OECD, 2019). Second, due to its high poverty rates, in recent years it has made major investments of effort and resources in its public social systems to develop “poverty-aware” knowledge and programs (Davis & Wainwright, 2005; Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Concurrently, its social services have applied various reforms predicated on Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) in order to define, measure, and evaluate the various problems that clients face (Strier & Binyamin, 2014). All these factors make Israel’s social services a unique case study. The goals of this article are two: to discover how social workers who treat people living in poverty perceive “poverty knowledge,” and to seek the sources of this knowledge and the barriers to and opportunities for its development.

**Life situations of people living in poverty and the role of social workers in treating poverty**

Poverty is a social problem that affects individuals, families, and communities. People living in poverty face multiple challenges that manifest in economic distress, difficulty in taking up rights, and lack of opportunities in healthcare and education, to name only a few (Lister, 2004; Author, 2008). Ever since it came into being, the social-work profession has been associated with the treatment of poverty (Davis & Wainwright, 2005). The International Federation of Social Workers (ISFW) defines the solidarity and support of populations living in poverty and exclusion as one of the profession’s principal tasks: ….