**Adapting Organizations to Shifting Realities:  
“Poverty Knowledge” in Public Social Services as Seen by Social Workers in Israel**

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# Abstract

Given the complex life circumstances of people living in poverty, social workers are called upon to broaden their knowledge with the purpose of developing social services that cater to this population. Many studies have examined the development and tailoring of public social services for people living in poverty, but very little research has been done on the kind of knowledge that social workers require in order to care for this population group. In recent years, Israel has invested much effort and significant resources to respond to steadily widening economic and social disparities, through the application of “poverty-aware” programs in the public social services. Thus, Israel serves as an appropriate case study for the issue at hand. The present 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 to 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 knowledge in service development and care for those 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 a great number of fluctuating contexts? The findings also stress the importance of knowledge derived from practice with service users as well as the centrality of learning organizations as a source for knowledge development regarding the provision of care to those living in poverty. These findings highlight the need to assimilate poverty knowledge into social-work education, including the development of critical thinking about care for this population and active learning from service users.

**Keywords**: poverty, poverty knowledge, social services, social work education

# Introduction

Attending to poverty is at 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 alleviate their situation. Over time, many attempts have been made to define principles for working with people in poverty, based on diverse paradigms and sources of knowledge. However, these have achieved limited consensus (Cummins, 2018). Furthermore, intervention methods and relief programs for poor and socially excluded populations have varied widely over the years, commensurate with changing socioeconomic zeitgeists (Davis & Wainwright, 2005). In recent years, it has become increasingly recognized that social workers require vast, mutable knowledge in order to do their work. Given the profusion of social problems that social workers encounter today, it is necessary to broaden their areas of knowledge so that they may holistically address their service users’ changing needs. O’Connor (2001) developed the concept of “poverty knowledge” to signal the need to develop a body of knowledge tailored to the complex nature of the poverty problem. According to O’Conner, this 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 support its construction and assimilation. The first of these questions—what knowledge would help lift people out of poverty—remains unanswered and is subject to dispute (Feldman, 2019; O’Connor, 2001).

Israel offers a unique context in which the answer may be sought. Firstly, it offers the case of a welfare state that has made a sharp neo-liberal transition and is 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 services in order 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 service users face (Strier & Binyamin, 2014). As such, Israel’s social services can serve as a unique case study. The goal of this article is to explore how social workers who provide care to those living in poverty perceive poverty knowledge. Furthermore, this study seeks to identify 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 addressing poverty**

Poverty is a social problem that affects individuals, families, and communities. Those living in poverty face numerous challenges that manifest in economic distress, difficulty in claiming their rights, and a lack of opportunities in healthcare and education, to name only a few (Lister, 2004; Author, 2008). Ever since its inception, the social-work profession has been associated with responding to 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:

In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty, liberate the vulnerable and oppressed, and promote social inclusion and social cohesion.

In Israel, as in many other countries, most direct care of people living in poverty is channeled to the public social services. Although the profession emphasizes action on behalf of these population groups in its rhetoric and its orientation, in practice it rarely defines poverty as a focus of its intervention (Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Cummins, 2018). Similarly, given the growing needs, social workers are called upon to engage in non-routine activities including surmounting bureaucratic hurdles and displaying flexibility in adjusting and responding to service users’ needs (Walter et al., 2016). Much about the role of social workers has changed in recent years. In Israel, following the introduction of new public-management methods, social workers are defined as case managers and provide very little hands-on care. Their new duties have several components, including designing and managing intervention programs, putting intervention practices to use, managing and establishing contact among multiple caregivers, and evaluating and wrapping up the interventions. As for the importance of the role of social workers in treating poverty, studies on relations between these professionals and service users find that users living in poverty often feel shame and estrangement when they approach the public social services or consider the services too deficient in resources and knowledge to address their problems (Lavee, 2016; Lavee & Strier, 2018).

Poverty Knowledge

The development of social workers’ poverty knowledge is a topic that has received limited research attention. It worth noting, in this context, that the beginning of scientific inquiry into poverty knowledge is deeply embedded in the history of the social-work profession. Charles Booth’s pioneering studies in England marked the beginning of scholarly research into the phenomenon of poverty. His studies were based on data gathered in the slums of London by female activists in the Settlement House Movement, which is credited with providing the foundation for the field of social work. The current study joins a lengthy tradition of developing poverty knowledge from within this field.

The concept of poverty knowledge fuses two multifaceted concepts that have provoked years of theoretical and philosophical controversy, and which cannot be surveyed within the limits of this article (Antes & Clark, 2012). We merely note that the concept of “knowledge,” according to the literature, includes analysis, processing, and interpreting information (Gray & Schubert, 2013). Positivistic outlooks define knowledge as the systematic discovery of truth; post-structuralist views, in contrast, see knowledge as a dynamic, constructivist process, a subjective one that depends on perspective (Philp, 1979; Schön. 1992). According to the latter view, knowledge, including scientific knowledge, is influenced by social, political, and historical contexts and the power matrices that arise from them (Gray & Schubert, 2013; Ife, 1997). Although the terms “knowledge” and “information” sometimes appear in the literature as synonyms, they actually represent different levels of abstraction. Information is organized data that conveys an understanding of a given issue or topic; knowledge is broader, encompassing analysis, processing, and interpretation (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Many studies deal with the nature of knowledge and organize it into a typology: “explicit knowledge” based on the guiding perception of knowledge as objective, factual, and able to explain various phenomena (Närhi, 2002); “formal knowledge,” relating to concepts and information conveyed in formal ways, e.g., official documents and procedures (Nurminen, 2000; Zaheer & Rulke, 2000); “declarative knowledge,” the kind that people have about the world (phenomena and facts); “tacit knowledge,” a personal resource that people build by accumulating and working through their experiences (Lam, 2010; Von Krogh, 2009); and “procedural knowledge,” which helps people to put processes into action by following rules, patterns, defined stages, and so on. This knowledge, by and large, is based on experience with familiar procedures (e.g., regulations). Finally, there is “conceptual knowledge,” a general holistic understanding of interdependent relations and sets of concepts in a given context (Healy & Wairaire, 2014). As stated, “knowledge” is also created by discourse, words, texts, and nonverbal communication.

Similarly, “poverty” is a complex concept that triggers far-reaching theoretical disputes (Parton, 2008). Research into poverty is quite broad and the debate within it is, as with the “knowledge” debate, beyond the scope of this article. The definitions of poverty can also be divided into objective and absolute outlooks, and relativistic and interpretive ones. Much like the concept of knowledge, the discursivity of the concept of poverty has implications for the development and application of knowledge in various domains, including poverty. The processes of knowledge development in regard to poverty raise many questions—methodological, ontological, epistemological, and theoretical (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). The debate over perceptions of the origins of poverty oscillates between poverty as a problem of the individual and poverty as a structural societal problem influenced by its context (Strier, 2008). Research into social work in relation to poverty is copious and usually focuses on three main topics: the implications or effects of poverty on individuals, the efficacy or impact of intervention programs that aim to extricate people from poverty, and poverty as experienced by different groups (Feldman, 2019). Cummins (2018) relates to the “poverty paradox” in the context of knowledge development, in which social workers are “blind” to poverty when they treat service users even though the poverty problem is often fundamental to their intervention. The current study examines the place and status of knowledge in providing care for people living in poverty from the perspective of social workers in the public social services.

Development, Collection, and Management of Knowledge in the Public Social Services

The social services serve as an important pool of knowledge. In the course of their activity, much experience is accrued through a combination of practice and professional knowledge derived from academic and on-the-job training (Buchbinder, Eisikovits & Karnieli-Miller, 2004). In order to build the resources that allow this knowledge to be utilized optimally, organizations act on three main levels: processes, culture, and tools/supportive infrastructures. They also manage their knowledge by collecting, organizing, disseminating, and re-using it in the realization that it may also enhance their efficiency (Abell & Oxbrow, 2001).

When referring to the development of knowledge, one should also relate to organizational culture. An organization’s culture is a reflection of its accepted values, norms, and specific behavioral practices. It may also include prioritization in defining “important knowledge.” Furthermore, it may create opportunities for knowledge-sharing, establishing norms, documenting and disseminating knowledge, and controlling the transfer of personal, group, or organizational knowledge among members of the organization. As stated, organizations create and assimilate knowledge via processes, practice, norms, documents, peer discourse, and discourse between staff and management (Ife, 2003). One of the most significant challenges for organizations is how to promote the assimilation of knowledge, perceptions, and working methods. Another challenge that they face involves creating intellectual capital that is shared by the entire organization (Bassi & Van Buren, 2000; Stewart, 2001). Numerous obstacles stand in the way of developing and managing knowledge in the social services and, more generally, in the field of social work. These include minimal use of technology in the public services, an organizational atmosphere that demands reactive and “emergency” work as the norm, sparse opportunities for peer learning, and an organizational structure that impedes the institutionalization of knowledge management (Heinsch & Cribb, 2019; Wang and Qin, 2005). Therefore, when examining the sources of poverty knowledge as well as its impediments and possibilities, the organizational aspect should also be addressed.

**Goals**

This study has three main goals: to learn how social workers perceive, define, and construct poverty knowledge; to trace the sources of poverty knowledge; and to identify obstacles to, and opportunities for, the development of poverty knowledge. By understanding these issues in greater depth, we may more easily specify the knowledge that social workers need in order to cope more effectively with service users living in poverty. It will also allow for an examination of the training and curricular programs for social workers in their academic studies and in-service training.

**Methodology**

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Haifa and the Israel National Insurance Institute. It was performed in accordance with the constructivist paradigm, an essentially inductive theory that defines every reality as the corollary of social structuring— context-dependent, interpretable, and composed of several “realities” that the research participants and the researcher invest with shared meaning (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1988). In this sense, the approach described is well suited to the research topic because it creates an opportunity to study the phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives.

**Sampling, Data Collection, and Participants**

The study is based on purposive sampling, in which those interviewed were chosen in accordance with predetermined characteristics and criteria. The goal in this sampling strategy is to represent a broad range of groups and subgroups that are identified with the phenomenon being researched (Patton, 2002). The sample comprised forty social workers with a range of roles in social-service departments who had held their job for at least two years. To recruit them, the authors approached department managers for referrals or contacted social workers directly. All of those sampled chose voluntarily to take part in the study and signed an informed consent form. Their years of work in the field ranged from one year to twenty-two years (M=6). They included thirty-seven women and three men, nine social workers from the Arab sector and thirty-one from the Jewish sector. Twenty-five participants (all female) worked with families, three worked as department or division managers, eight were community workers, and four were staff leaders. The study took place between 2017 and 2019.

The data were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007). After their names were obtained, the participants were approached for a preliminary telephone call in which, among other things, the study was explained to them. They were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. They also signed the informed-consent form and affirmed their interest in taking part. Each interview lasted 90–120 minutes. The interviews were held at social-service departments and “Otzma” Centers (public “empowerment” services for the poor) in the Northern District. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The participants were asked various open-ended questions about their work and their perceptions of knowledge, about the processes they believe contribute to developing personal and organizational knowledge, and about the factors that promote or impede the development of knowledge about caring for those living in poverty.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of arranging, structuring, and categorizing the information that has been gathered. In this case, the data were analyzed in a cyclical manner, according to different stages. First, the information obtained in the interviews was collected. To verify the reliability of the analysis, six steps were taken (Shkedi, 2003): (a) recording and transcribing the interviews, (b) building a database, (c) analyzing the findings using the peer debriefing method, (d) testing the findings using various approaches in order to mitigate interpretation biases, (e) discussing and debating the findings in several settings including conferences, meetings with social workers in various systems, and meetings among the authors, and (f) comparing the responses of participants in managerial and coordinator positions, frontline social workers, community workers, and staff from the Otzma Centers. To allow readers to examine the reliability of the analysis and the interpretation, direct quotations from the participants are presented in the Findings section.

**Findings**

The data analysis revealed themes relating to three main questions: How do the participants understand what “poverty knowledge” is? What are its sources? And what obstacles and opportunities exist for the development of this knowledge?

**What is Poverty Knowledge?**

The study revealed an epistemological debate about the definition of poverty knowledge. The participants’ remarks allow one to perceive this concept in two dichotomous ways. The first is a positivistic, essentialist view of knowledge: Here, poverty knowledge is perceived as a “product,” something palpable and concrete that can be shared, acquired, and imparted. Many participants see this knowledge as usable, applied knowledge. Those of this conviction also lend poverty knowledge a scientific, objective, autonomous, and pragmatic status. Dana explained:

Knowledge … it really means having command of certain material, certain topics.… With regards to poverty, I’d say that knowing about poverty means having mastery of the field that you’re working in. […] For example whether it’s claiming rights, knowing about National Insurance, or being familiar with those organizations, so, knowing what’s out there. In a nutshell, these are things that you learn and then you’re supposed to use them in your work. (Dana)

Dana regards poverty knowledge as something that is tangible and can be mastered. Mastery of poverty knowledge, she stresses, means control of applied information (claiming rights, familiarity with National Insurance). She stressed the pragmatic aspects of this kind of knowledge. In contrast, some participants described the concept of poverty knowledge as something dynamic and susceptible to interpretation, the product of protracted thinking and discovery. This kind of poverty knowledge is thought to emerge from continual interaction with one’s surroundings. In this context, knowledge is perceived as an ongoing, evolving process that evolves with social workers over the course of their professional path:

I think poverty knowledge is first of all a process in which [social workers] should know themselves, understand their attitudes, perceptions, how they see things, and what their basic values and beliefs are. […] Afterwards, they have to do work in this field, to meet with people. It’s ongoing work that involves reflection. Poverty knowledge is really not just a session of “I did it, I checked it off, and it’s over.” (Yarden)

Yarden stressed an understanding of poverty knowledge as context-dependent and as being produced over the course of a lengthy personal and professional process. This process includes the social worker’s awareness of her feelings and attitudes toward people who live in poverty; it also has a social dimension that comes to light in the interactions between the social-service professional and service users who live in poverty.

**Sources of Poverty Knowledge**

From the participants’ remarks, we were able to detect four main sources for the development of poverty knowledge.

**Wisdom of practice.** Many participants singled out “wisdom of practice” as an important source of poverty knowledge. They defined this knowledge as something acquired in “natural” ways, and as action-oriented knowledge meant to help service users change their current situation. Helene, a frontline social worker, explained the uniqueness of knowledge gained through practice:

Look, about the knowledge that we use, with the service users … I feel like most of it… most of how I act is based on the experience I gain here…. I feel like a great deal is based on experience and getting to know the families that I work with and their needs. Poverty looks different for each of them…. That’s actually how the knowledge develops. (Helene)

Poverty knowledge, Helene emphasized, depends on connecting with service users who live in poverty; it is influenced by experience and by families’ specific needs. It takes shape and emerges from the unique context of the encounter between social workers and those living in poverty. Ada made similar statements:

In terms of knowledge about poverty, meaning, we don’t have any magical solutions here. I think we learn it together or, more precisely, together with the people who turn to us. A new case comes in almost every day and you have to learn it all over again. You base it on experience and by learning through doing. (Ada)

Ada’s remarks again indicate that poverty knowledge accumulates over time based on trial and error. As knowledge created by practice, it is learned together with service users through the ongoing experience of responding to users’ specific needs.

**Knowledge acquired from service users.** Several participants referred to service users as a source of knowledge, albeit one that receives less attention than others. When participants related to knowledge that originates with the service users, they usually credited service users with having “street smarts,” i.e. practical knowledge, the kind of information that helps to move things along with bureaucratic offices:

Poverty knowledge that comes from service users ... We get people who … What can you do, they’re … alley cats, I call them…. They have lots of knowledge, they use it a lot, and have lots of experience…. Sometimes you learn from them…. You also “copy and paste.” If you see someone who’s in the same situation, then you say: Hey, he’s entitled to that too…. I’m so lucky that I met the other guy first. (Adi)

A social worker at an Otzma Center offers a similar perception:

I get most of what I know about National Insurance … from [service users]. When I started out, I had a service user who told me, “Don’t do it that way; here’s how it’s done” …. There are people who’re applying for the second or third time, and by then they’ve figured it out and can give me information.

These two quotations show how social workers resort to service users as sources of practical knowledge with which they can respond to other users more effectively. It is noteworthy in this context that the participants offered few examples of learning from service users in order to understand the experience of living in poverty.

**Poverty knowledge originating in the organization.** Some participants singled out the organization as an important source of knowledge. They referred to special training activities on the topic, generally at department meetings and in personal supervision. According to several participants, department meetings that address personal and ethical aspects of their work with poverty are more meaningful than theoretical trainings on the topic. One participant described a special training activity on poverty that she attended:

There was a lecturer who came here and did six meetings for the entire department on the topic of poverty. She explained poverty and how it’s perceived … and she began to work with us on clarifying our attitudes toward poverty. That way you actually understand how your positions intersect with the person who comes to you … for example, what a person goes through physically when they experience poverty…. It was something I hadn’t known; it was very meaningful. (Hagit)

Another social worker mentioned her supervision with the team leader as a source of poverty knowledge—particularly procedural knowledge, the kind that helps broaden the response to service users’ ongoing problems:

The supervision sessions are a source of knowledge on how to move things forward. In supervision, I learn more and more about things that I can give to service users, more places I can refer them to, and lots of connections…. In fact, in supervision, my team leader refers me to other places I can turn to in order to help. (Noa)

**Academic knowledge.** The participants also mentioned poverty knowledge acquired in their academic studies. They perceive this source, like knowledge originating with service users, as marginal relative to the other sources. They described it as rudimentary, introductory-style knowledge, for understanding the personal and social phenomenology of the poverty problem. They consider it less relevant than other sources because it is not “practical” for their day-to-day work with service users:

Looking back, the poverty knowledge that I got during my degree was too theoretical, but if I’d had a chance to work and gain experience at an Otzma Center as well, and to see how they work with people and bring them in, I’d have a much easier time today .… I remember nothing of what I learned about this during my degree; it’s not knowledge that I use. (Shadia)

A few participants even stated that their academic studies taught them nothing specifically about addressing the poverty problem. One social worker said:

In college I learned everything about empathizing with poverty but nothing about claiming one’s rights. I wasn’t taught to understand what poverty is, what National Insurance and legal aid are, how to help people. I was taught what it is to be empathetic.

This attitude toward poverty knowledge in academia raises questions about the contribution of academic programs to developing such knowledge among social workers.

**Obstacles to and Opportunities for Acquiring Poverty Knowledge**

In their remarks, the participants discussed obstacles to, and opportunities for, the development of poverty knowledge that could enhance their intervention efforts.

**Opportunities to develop poverty knowledge**

In this study, we define “opportunities” as processes or factors that support the development of poverty knowledge.

**Peer learning.** Formal or informal peer learning was found to be meaningful in the development of poverty knowledge. Many participants pointed to the importance of educational encounters, “hallway chats,” and informal consultations with peers in attaining and developing this kind of knowledge. One participant, a frontline social worker, noted:

If I have to consult about things that are more legal in nature, I go to Miri, who’s worked here for many years. She’s a walking encyclopedia…. She knows everything. It’s great. We learn a great deal from one another.

Keren, a department manager, added:

New workers really seek knowledge about what to do, they need it. They approach more experienced staff members who’ve been around the block and they learn from them.

Another frontline social worker explained the utility of peer learning in developing poverty knowledge:

Here at the welfare [bureau], a [social] worker can’t [cope] with the service users’ problems alone; it’s a profession and a job where there is always more to develop and to know. It’s brainstorming, creativity, sharing… It broadens your horizons when you talk and suggest solutions; it brings up facets that you hadn’t thought about.

These and other quotations demonstrate that sharing and discourse among peers is useful for being exposed to new poverty knowledge, acquiring practical poverty knowledge, and testing the organization’s existing poverty knowledge.

**Practical experience—interpersonal encounters.** Many participants gave examples of “face-to-face encounters” with the distress of service users living in poverty. These examples were usually presented along with a description of long-term acquaintance with a specific service user. The participants’ comments indicate that these experiences make it possible to examine their outlooks on these matters and the stigmas attached to them:

Sometimes it’s terribly easy to give up and say, “He can’t change, enough!”—you know, to cut back on contact with the family because you realize you’re spinning your wheels, wasting all that energy, when [instead] you could be referring [your social-work colleagues] to families whom they can help. But there’s something about the encounter, getting to know them … You find things about them that are changing, that they understand. So, you create balances.… Then you become a little optimistic that something will change, and that’s enough. (Family social worker)

Shira, a team leader, described a department meeting that took place in the context of a staff training about poverty, which involved both staff and service users. She stressed the unique learning process that unfolded there:

I can tell you that getting together in forums with people who live in poverty has been very powerful for me. In these forums you hear about their lives in the most authentic way; you also hear about what happens to them when they meet with a social worker…. There’s something very meaningful about this discourse because it holds a mirror up to us all. It’s a very, very meaningful lesson about poverty.

Shira was describing a structured encounter, a forum, that her department hosted jointly with service users who live in poverty. Her remarks demonstrate the existence of two parallel processes in reference to the phenomenon of poverty: a personal, reflective learning process and a conceptual one. These quotations join those of additional participants who described the deep process that they underwent when they get to know service users; it transformed their way of looking at service users and at the poverty problem.

**Outsourced workshops and training activities.** The participants also perceived workshops or encounters involving players outside the organization as conducive to the development of poverty knowledge. Social workers at welfare departments and Otzma Centers regularly interact and partner with community organizations that offer supplemental responses to service users who live in poverty (National Insurance, NGOs, schools, healthcare providers, etc.). Many participants believe that these formal or informal connections lead to learning processes, exchanging knowledge, and even to developing new knowledge about possible ways to address service users’ needs:

Knowledge is created by sharing with everyone.… If you maintain good relationships with other service providers, you can learn with them, evolve with them, and utilize their help. You have knowledge that you’ve created and you learn what people are entitled to (said with sigh of relief).

Similarly, many participants described how important it is to arrange formal meetings with community organizations, through department meetings or continuing education classes in order to broaden their procedural knowledge. These occasions, they say, help promote the sharing of practical information and allow them to meet key people, who were able to help them later on in responding to service users’ needs:

Connecting with professionals from other offices is very helpful. It condenses things, and provides tools and knowledge. I think that in terms of inviting people here for joint meetings, [people] from National Insurance, from the rehab benefits program, and the like … it’s essential, it lets you get to know people, to cooperate, to share knowledge.

**Obstacles to the Development of Poverty Knowledge**

Alongside the opportunities, participants mentioned several obstacles to the development of poverty knowledge, i.e., factors that inhibit or impair the development of this knowledge. Most of them pertain to the organizational system and environment.

**An organizational atmosphere of perpetual emergency.** Some participants cite their organizational atmosphere as a serious impediment to the development of poverty knowledge. The organizational environment of the social services, they said, is extremely busy, concerned mainly with putting out fires. Routine work is intensive and fraught with multiple tasks, emergencies, and unforeseen events. According to the participants’ testimony, workers rush from one task to another and cannot pause to engage in reflection or a learning process. One participant, a frontline social worker, explained that much knowledge “gets lost” in her organization:

Knowledge in our department passes between us a bit, we talk things over in the hallways. It’s not written down; it isn’t documented. Emergencies are our routine. We as an organization don’t gather the knowledge that accumulates here. Definitely not where poverty is concerned… And it’s not… it’s just not… it’s knowledge that gets lost. Lots of people here have retired. Twenty-five or thirty years of experience or more ... everything they had just went away when they did. (Roni, frontline social worker)

Consequently, most participants give performance higher priority than preserving knowledge, even seeing the latter as “a waste of time”:

You don’t realize how much I’ve got on my desk… it’s not for no reason… just because of the daily grind … you don’t understand how heavy the workload is. It gets lower and lower down on the list of priorities, the issue of use and documentation. There are so many more critical things to do. (Hadar, frontline social worker)

This perception arose among participants in senior department positions. They emphasize that despite the importance of developing and retaining knowledge, in practice it is often difficult to supervise or regulate the documentation and development of knowledge in a systematic way.

**Inaccessible or non-relevant information in online knowledge communities.** Several participants discussed knowledge communities. The interviews indicate that most social workers are aware of knowledge communities but either refrain from using them or find them irrelevant for the development of poverty knowledge. One participant, a frontline social worker, expressed her stance on knowledge communities in general terms:

For example, this matter of knowledge communities. I know there are knowledge communities on the Ministry of Social Services website … with topics … poverty, entitlements. It’s important, but few people here go into it…. I tried and I couldn’t access it and it was cumbersome.

Another obstacle mentioned is a mismatch between the knowledge available in the information databases and the participants’ needs. This hurdle stands out in particular in view of the social workers’ need for practical knowledge and information in treating service users who live in poverty. One participant, a community worker, described this in her interview:

I like research studies, I read [them], I take part in a knowledge community…. I don’t know how relevant they are for treating poverty. It’s not like information there about rights gets refreshed, or something gets updated. Now and then someone uploads an article or an invitation to take part in a study.

In sum, the findings demonstrate how challenging and controversial the concept of “poverty knowledge” is. Our participants perceived it in different ways, some as a product and others as a process. They trace it to four main sources: “wisdom of action,” the organization, service users, and academia. Finally, we described opportunities and obstacles to the development of poverty knowledge, which underscore the importance of organizational environment to the present issue.

**Discussion**

This qualitative study examined three main issues: What is poverty knowledge? What are the main sources that contribute to creating it? And what obstacles and opportunities present themselves in developing it? The study shows that the involvement of the social services in developing poverty knowledge remains marginal. It also revealed a profound epistemological disagreement about the way the concept of “knowledge” is perceived, with some embracing positivistic outlooks and others endorsing post-structuralist and interpretive perspectives. While many participants expect to receive “concrete” knowledge (information, skills, and tools), others see poverty knowledge as a process-oriented concept: dynamic, contextual, and multi-faceted (Philp, 1979; Schön, 1992). This reflects the discursive divide that typifies the attitude of social work toward the treatment of poverty. The findings are aligned with the literature on professional knowledge in social work (Gray & Schubert, 2013; O’Connor, 2001; Philp, 1979).

With regards to of the sources of poverty knowledge, we found that knowledge developed through experience or from the organization is more significant and important to the participants than knowledge from other sources such as service users and academic studies. This finding reinforces previous research demonstrating that knowledge obtained through practice has professional value and significance. It also illustrates the gulf that separates academic knowledge from the knowledge that practicing social workers truly require, and stresses the need to reassess academic curricula at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In fact, the findings emphasize the need to reexamine the nexus of academia, research, and practice when it comes to applying knowledge (Gabbay et al, 2003; Humphreys et al., 2003).

One of the most troubling findings in this study concerns the participants’ lack of attention to the importance of service users’ knowledge for the development of poverty knowledge. This knowledge is attributed marginal or merely instrumental value, despite strenuous efforts in recent years to assimilate “poverty-aware” approaches (Krumer-Nevo, 2016). Moreover, the dearth of reference to service users’ knowledge is strongly reflective of the unequal power relations that exist between social-service systems and people living in poverty; it substantiates the views of Foucault and others (Ife, 2003) and stresses the strong bond between knowledge and power. On the issue of knowledge, our findings demonstrate the need to reexamine the power relations between social workers and those whom they serve. They also reinforce findings in the literature about the importance of the encounter with populations living in poverty as a crucial resource for knowledge development (O’Connor, 2001).

Finally, the study detected opportunities for and obstacles to the processes of learning and developing poverty knowledge. The opportunities we identified include: peer learning from those within the organization and outside of it, practical experience and unmediated encounters with service users living in poverty, and workshops with external organizations that provide supplemental responses to service users. The obstacles that the participants noted include: an organizational atmosphere of perpetual emergency and poor access to professional communities intended for discussing the poverty issue. These findings reinforce the literature on the need to create an organizational space that encourages discourse and processing of professional interventions, and which stresses the challenges and the political, social, and bureaucratic matters that arise when providing care for those living in poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2017). Such a space is also essential for the development of poverty knowledge that is relevant and up-to-date.

In sum, our findings confirm emphatically that “poverty knowledge” is a complex, multidimensional, and debatable term. It combines four forms of knowledge: theoretical-conceptual knowledge, practical-professional knowledge, organizational-institutional knowledge, and knowledge coming from those living in poverty. It also requires awareness of the complex circumstances of service users’ lives. The study revealed the tension that exists between opportunities and obstacles to the development of poverty knowledge. Peer learning, organizational learning, and encounters with extra-organizational players who respond to service users’ needs help promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The same findings, however, signal the need to revise the organizational atmosphere in social services, which are too overworked to make a meaningful learning environment possible. Similarly, the participants mentioned the imperative of improving their access to online knowledge communities and adjusting the knowledge generated in these communities be relevant to the issue of poverty. Such changes are likely to improve the professional care provided by public social services to people living in poverty.

# Conclusion

Firstly, this study demonstrates the need for a discourse on the various meanings of poverty knowledge for social workers. Second, the development of poverty knowledge would require a shift in the organizational climate of social services, from a reactive model to one that prioritizes learning and reflection and fosters awareness of the social and political contexts of this kind of knowledge. Social workers’ training should be deepened and broader attention should be given to reflective and critical thinking about the care of people living in poverty. It is also worth emphasizing the need to actively learn from service users, not only from a practical standpoint but a theoretical one as well. Third, the findings underscore the need to rethink the nature of academia’s treatment of this topic. Namely, organizational and learning processes on the topic of poverty should be developed and broadened to include conceptual learning, peer learning, and learning from service users. Fourth, we recommend establishing a role for a “knowledge-development expert” in the field of poverty in every social-service department. The goal of such a position would be to develop a systematic organizational methodology for learning from service users and to integrate them into knowledge-development processes at the departmental level. Finally, the study highlights the importance of assuring better access to poverty-focused digital knowledge communities. This would promote the creation of an institutional data pool populated with concrete “procedural” information on services, entitlements, and more.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was based on interviews with staff members from Israel’s public social services (Northern District). Expanding the sample of participants to include social workers in the non-profit and private sectors would serve to broaden the understanding of this topic. Future research may benefit from examining these issues through quantitative research, while utilizing research tools based on the themes arising from the present study.

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