**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 serves as a living laboratory: 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 invested much effort in coin and in kind 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 central among its targets for 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 winding up 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 not yet researched. In this context, we note that the onset of scientific development of poverty knowledge is closely related to the history of the social-work profession. Charles Booth’s pioneering studies in Britain, marking the beginning of scholarly research into the phenomenon of poverty, were based, *inter alia,* on data gathered in the slums of London by women activists in the Settlement Houses Movement, which is considered the founder of social work. The current study joins a lengthy tradition in the development of poverty knowledge in social work.]

The concept of “poverty knowledge” mates two hybrid concepts that have provoked many years of brisk theoretical and philosophical controversy that 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 processes of analysis, working through, and interpreting information (Gray & Schubert, 2013). Positivistic outlooks define knowledge as the systematic discovery of truth; post-structuralistic views, in contrast, see knowledge as a dynamic, constructivistic 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 flow 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 convey 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 experience (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., laws). Finally, there is “conceptual knowledge,” a general holistic understanding of interrelations 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 has touched off a debate that, again, breaches the limits of this article. The definitions of poverty also head in two directions: 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 social 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) also finds a “poverty paradox” in the context of developing knowledge, 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 caregiving 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, they accrue a great deal of experience by combining practice and professional knowledge derived from academic and on-the-job training (Buchbinder, Eisikovits & Karnieli-Miller, 2004). To build the resources that allow their knowledge to be exploited optimally, organizations act on three main levels: processes, culture, and tools and their supporting 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 the 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 propel the assimilation of knowledge, perceptions, and working methods. Another challenge that they face concerns the production of pan-organizational intellectual capital (Bassi & Van Buren, 2000; Stewart, 2001). Many obstacles loom in developing and managing knowledge in the social services and, more generally, in social work. They include scanty use of technology in the public services, an organizational atmosphere that demands reactive work and a continual “emergency” footing, 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 the sources of, impediments to, and opportunities for poverty knowledge are examined, the organizational aspect should be borne in mind as well.

**Goals**

This study has three main goals: to learn how social workers perceive, define, and construct poverty knowledge, trace the sources of poverty knowledge, and 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 make the training and curricular programs that social workers take in their academic studies and in-service activities easier to examine.

**Methodology**

The study was approved by the ethics committee of Haifa University 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 “realia” 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 who held a range of functions in social-service departments and had been on the 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 to take part in the study and signed an informed-consent form. Their veterancy ranged from one year to twenty-two years (M=6). Among them were thirty-seven women and three men, nine social workers from Arab society and thirty-one from the Jewish sector. Twenty-five participants (all female) had families. The sample included three department or division managers, eight community workers, and four team leaders (all female). The study took place in 2017–2019.

The data were gathered via in-depth semi-constructed 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. They were given an opportunity to ask questions about the study. They also signed the aforementioned 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 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, the processes in which personal and organizational knowledge develops, and factors that promote and impede the development of knowledge concerning the care of people living in poverty.

**Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of arranging, structuring, and categorizing the information gathered. Here the data were analyzed in a circular stage-by-stage manner. First, the information obtained in the interviews was collected. To verify the reliability of the analysis of the findings, six actions were taken (Shkedi, 2003): (a) recording and transcribing the interviews, (b) building a database, (c) analyzing the findings by using the peer debriefing method, (d) testing the findings from various approaches in order to mitigate interpretation biases, (e) discussing the findings in sundry settings including conferences, encounters with social workers in various systems, and meetings among the authors, and (f) comparing the responses of participants who held managerial and coordination positions, frontline social workers, community workers, and staff of Otzma Centers. To allow readers to test the reliability of the analysis and the interpretation, the participants’ remarks are presented in the Findings section by way of direct quotation.

**Findings**

The data analysis revealed themes relating to three main questions: What is poverty knowledge in the participants’ eyes? 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 disagreement 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 explains:

Knowledge … it really means having command of certain contents, certain topics.… In regard to poverty, I’d say that knowing about poverty means having control of the field that you’re working in. […] Let’s say it’s the takeup of entitlements, knowing about National Insurance, or being familiar with those organizations, knowing what’s out there. In a nutshell, they are things that you learn and then you’re supposed to use them on the job (Dana).

Dana regards poverty knowledge as something that is tangible and within a person’s control. Control of poverty knowledge, she stresses, means control of applied information (takeup of rights, familiarity with National Insurance). She stresses the pragmatic aspects of this kind of knowledge. Some participants, however, define poverty knowledge as something dynamic, susceptible to interpretation, the product of protracted thinking and discovery. This brand of poverty knowledge is thought to emerge from continual interaction with the surroundings. In this context, knowledge is perceived as an ongoing, evolving process that accompanies the social worker along her or his 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 believes are. […] Afterwards, they have to do work in this field, to meet with people. It’s ongoing work that includes reflection. Really, poverty knowledge is not a session of “I did it, I check it off, and it’s over” (Yarden).

Yarden stresses the perception of poverty knowledge as context-dependent and produced in 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 interrelations that form 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 of the development of poverty knowledge.

**Wisdom of action.** Many participants single out “wisdom of action” as an important source of poverty knowledge. They define this knowledge as something acquired in “natural” ways and as action-oriented knowledge meant to place service users in a different situation. Helene, a frontline social worker, explains the uniqueness of knowledge gained by practice:

Look, about the knowledge that we use, with the service users … I feel that lots … most of the way I act is from the experience that I build up here…. I feel that a great deal is based on experience and familiarity with the families that I work with and with their needs. Poverty looks different with each of them…. In fact, that’s how the knowledge develops (Helene).

Poverty knowledge, Helene states with emphasis, depends on connecting with service users who live in poverty; it is influenced by experience and families’ specific needs. It takes shape and emerges from the unique context of the encounter between social workers and people living in poverty. Ada says much the same thing:

In terms of knowledge about poverty, it means we don’t have a panacea here. I think we learn it together or, to be more precise, together with those who turn to us. A new case comes in almost every day and you have to learn it all over again. You base yourself on experience and learning while doing (Ada).

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

**Knowledge acquired from service users.** Several participants refer to service users as a source of knowledge, albeit one that receives scantier attention than do the others. When participants relate to knowledge that originates in service users, they usually credit users with having “street smarts,” practical knowledge, the kind of information that helps to move things along with bureaucracies:

Poverty knowledge that comes from service users ... We get people who … What can you do when they’re … alley cats, I call them …. They have lots of knowledge, put it to lots of use, 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 it, too…. How lucky you are to have met this guy before (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 worker 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 offer 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 single out the organization as an important source of knowledge. They refer to special training activities on the topic, largely at department meetings and in personal counseling. According to several participants, department meetings that deal with personal and value aspects of their work in the context of poverty are more meaningful than theoretical training on the topic. One participant describes a special training activity on poverty that she attended:

There was a lecturer who came here and held six meetings for the whole 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. Then you really understood 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 mentions the training sessions that she holds with her team leader as a source of poverty knowledge—particularly procedural knowledge, the kind that helps to expand the response to service users’ ongoing problems:

The training [sessions] serve me as a source of knowledge on how to move things ahead. In the training, I learn more and more about things that I can give service users, more places I can refer them to, and lots of connections…. In fact, in the training activity my team leader directs me to additional places that I can approach in order to help (Noa).

**Academic knowledge.** The participants also mention poverty knowledge acquired in academic studies. They perceive this source, like knowledge harvested from service users, as marginal relative to the other sources. They describe it as rudimentary, “101-type,” for understanding the personal and social phenomenology of the poverty problem and less relevant than other sources because it is not “practical” for their day-to-day work with service users:

After the fact, the poverty knowledge that I got in my degree studies was too theoretical, but if I’d had a chance to work and gain experience at an Otzma Center as well, and 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 on this topic in college; it’s not knowledge that I use (Shadia).

Several participants even describe their academic studies as having taught them nothing specific about how to treat the poverty problem. One social worker states:

In college I learned everything about empathizing with poverty but nothing about takeup of 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 academic poverty knowledge makes one wonder about what academic programs can contribute to social workers’ knowledge of poverty.

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

In their remarks, the participants related to obstacles to, and opportunities for, the development of poverty knowledge that would enhance their intervention actions.

**Opportunities to develop poverty knowledge**

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

**Peer learning.** Formal or informal peer learning is found meaningful in developing poverty knowledge. Many participants comment on the importance of learning encounters with peers, “meetings in the hall,” and informal consultations with peers as important factors in attaining and developing this kind of knowledge. One participant, a frontline social worker, notes:

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 each other.

Keren, a department manager, adds:

New workers much search for knowledge of what to do, they need it. They approach more experienced staff members who’ve been around the block and pick their brains.

Another frontline social worker explains 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 that always has something 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 show us that sharing and discourse among peers is useful in being exposure to new poverty knowledge, acquiring practical poverty knowledge, and testing the organization’s existing poverty knowledge.

**Practical experience—interpersonal encounter.** Many participants give examples of “face-to-face encounters” with the distress of service users’ lives in poverty. These examples are usually presented together 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 can refer [your social-work colleagues] to families whom they can help. But there’s something about the encounter, the acquaintance .… You find things about this [service user] that are changing, that [the user] understands. So you do create balances. … Then you become a little optimistic because something has changed, and it’s enough (frontline social worker).

Shira, a team leader, describes a department meeting that was part of a training activity on poverty held together with service users. She stresses the unique learning process that unfolded there:

I can tell you that getting together in forums with people who live in poverty is 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 very, very meaningful learning about poverty.

Shira describes 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 describe the deep process that they undergo when they make the acquaintance of service users; it transforms their way of looking at service users and the problem of poverty.

**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 need to interact and cooperate regularly with community organizations that offer supplemental responses to service users who live in poverty (National Insurance, NGOs, schools, healthcare providers, etc.). These formal or informal connections, many participants believe, animate learning processes, exchanges of knowledge, and even the development of new knowledge about possible ways of addressing service users’ needs:

Knowledge is created by sharing with everyone.… If you maintain good relations with other service providers, you can learn with them, develop with them, and avail yourself of them. You have knowledge that you’ve created and you learn about what people are entitled to (said a social worker, sighing in relief).

Similarly, many participants consider it immensely important to arrange formal encounters with community organizations, department meetings, or in-service activities for the purpose of broadening their procedural knowledge. These occasions, they say, abet the sharing of practical information and personal acquaintance with key people who will be helpful in responding to service users’ needs:

Connecting with professionals from other organizations is very helpful. It shortens distances and it gives tools and knowledge. At the level of inviting people here to 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 mention 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 system and the organizational 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 freighted and 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 can hardly pause for learning or reflection. One participant, a frontline social worker, explains that much knowledge in her organization “gets lost”:

Knowledge in our department washes over us a bit. We talk things over in the hall. 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. It’s no simple matter. It’s knowledge that gets lost. Lots of people here went on pension. Twenty-five or thirty years of experience or more ... everything they had just went away when they did (Ronni, 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. The daily grind is a big deal .… You don’t appreciate how heavy our workload is. The matter of using and documenting sinks lower, lower, lower each time on the scale of priorities. There are so many more critical things to do (Hadar, frontline social worker).

This perception recurs among participants who hold senior department positions. They stress that, notwithstanding the importance of developing and retaining knowledge, in practice it is often difficult systematically to supervise or regulate the documentation and development of knowledge.

**Poor access to information or information mismatch in online knowledge communities.** Several participants relate to knowledge communities. The interviews show 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, expresses 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 get 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 love 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 that occasional information about rights and things is posted there and gets updated. Now and then someone uploads an article or an invitation to take part in a study.

In sum, the findings show how challenging and controversial the concept of “poverty knowledge” is. Our participants perceive it in different ways, some as a product and others as a process. They also trace it to four main sources: “wisdom of action,” the organization, service users, and academia. Finally, we describe opportunities and obstacles to the development of poverty knowledge that underscore the importance of organizational environment in the context at hand.

**Discussion**

This qualitative study looked into three main issues: What is poverty knowledge? What are the main sources with which to construct 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, some embracing positivistic outlooks and others endorsing post-struturalistic and interpretive perspectives. While many participants expected to receive “concrete” knowledge (information, skills, and tools), others saw poverty knowledge as a processive concept: dynamic, contextual, and complex (Philp, 1979; Schön, 1992). This reflects the discursive divide that typifies the attitude of social work toward the treatment of poverty.

The findings comport with the literature on professional knowledge in social work (Gray & Schubert, 2013; O’Connor, 2001; Philp, 1979). In respect of the sources of poverty knowledge, we found that knowledge flowing from practice or the organization is more meaningful and important to the participants than knowledge from other sources such as service users and academic studies. This finding reinforces previous works that establish knowledge obtained through practice as meaningful and professional. It also illustrates the gulf that separates academic knowledge from the knowledge that practicing social workers require and stresses the need to reassess academic curricula at both baccalaureate and advanced levels. In fact, the findings emphasize the need to reexamine the nexus of academia, research, and practice in applying knowledge (Gabbay et al, 2003; Humphreys et al., 2003).

One of the most troubling findings in this study concerns the participants’ disregard of the importance of what service users know for the development of poverty knowledge. The participants still attribute marginal or instrumental importance to users’ knowledge 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. Our findings demonstrate the need to reexamine the power relations between social workers and those whom they serve in the context of knowledge. They also reinforce findings in the literature about the importance of the encounter with populations living in poverty as a crucial source for development of knowledge (O’Connor, 2001).

Finally, the study detected opportunities for and obstacles to the processes of learning and developing poverty knowledge. Among the opportunities, we identified peer learning from players in the organization and outside, practical experience and unmediated encounters with service users living in poverty, and workshops with outsource players that provide supplemental responses to service users. The obstacles that the participants noted include an organizational atmosphere of continual emergency and inability to access dedicated professional communities in order to discuss the phenomenon of poverty. These findings reinforce the literature on the need to create an organizational space that abets discourse and working through of interventions and stresses the difficulties and the political, social, and establishmentarian contexts of care for people who live in poverty (Krumer-Nevo, 2016, 2017). Such a space is also essential for the development of poverty knowledge that keeps itself current and appropriately tailored to needs.

In sum, our findings confirm emphatically that “poverty knowledge” is a complex, multidimensional, and debatable term. It combines four forms of knowledge: theoretical/conceptual, practical/professional, organizational/institutional, and that provided by people living in poverty. It also requires awareness of the complex contexts 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 abet and promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The same findings, however, signal the need to revise the organizational atmosphere in social services that are too overworked to make a meaningful learning zone possible. Similarly, the participants mentioned the imperative of improving their access to online knowledge communities and adjusting the knowledge generated in these communities to the characteristics of poverty knowledge. If these changes are made, the public social services’ professional care of people living in poverty may improve.

# Conclusion

First, the study demonstrates the need for a discourse on the various meanings of poverty knowledge for social workers. Second, in order to develop poverty knowledge, the organizational atmosphere in the social services will have to transition from a reactive model to a learning and reflective one that includes awareness of the social and political contexts of the knowledge in question. 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. Also worthy of emphasis is the need for active learning from service users, not only from the practical standpoint but also at the level of theory. Third, the findings bespeak the need to rethink the nature of academia’s treatment of the 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 the creation of the institutionalized function of a “knowledge-development expert” in the field of poverty in every social-service department. The goals here are two: to develop a systematic organizational methodology for learning from service users and to integrate users into knowledge-development processes at the departmental level. Finally, the study underscores the importance of assuring better access to digital knowledge communities that address themselves to poverty. This would promote the creation of an institutional data pool populated with concrete “procedural” information on services, entitlements, and other matters.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study was based on interviews with staff in Israel’s public social services (Northern District). To broaden the picture, it would be helpful to expand the sample to include social workers in the “third sector” and the privatized services. Further utility might be gained by subjecting the issues raised in the current study to future research based on quantitative methods and tools.

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