**The intersection between cultural competence and political conflict: Social workers’ construction of cultural competence in polarized cities**

**Abstract**

*Summary*

Mixed cities are defined as ethnically diverse cities that are located within turbulent contexts of intensive, ongoing intergroup political conflict. As such, they may pose serious challenges to social workers’ efforts to develop culturally competent practices, especially in the public service sector. This article examined social workers’ constructions of cultural competence in the social services that are delivered to Arab and Jewish clients in Israeli mixed cities. Based on extensive qualitative data gathered from 80 public social workers in Haifa, Acre, and Jerusalem, this study discusses the strengths and limitations of the cultural competence approach, especially when applied in the context of varying degrees of political conflict.

*Findings*

Findings illustrated three approaches to the provision of social welfare services: (1) the “universal” construction, which corresponds to universal and egalitarian value-based approaches, by which social work professionalism is claimed sufficient to ensure equal treatment for Israeli Arab and Jewish clients; (2) the “indispensable” cultural construction, which indicates that cultural competence is vital and unavoidable in addressing the diversity of needs of Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities; and (3) the “critical” construction, which critiques the cultural competence and universal approaches as lacking the complexity to address the problematic ethnic and political nature mixed city settings.

*Applications*

The study proposes to adopt an integrated cultural competence approach that combines vital elements of each discrete construction to guide social workers’ practices in mixed cities. Context-informed priorities may occasionally emphasize some elements and minimize others. Institutional support and training is necessary for the proposition to work.

Keywords: cultural competence; public services; multiculturalism; mixed cities; social work

**Introduction**

Due to globalization and demographic changes, recent decades have witnessed increasing numbers of highly multicultural societies worldwide. Correspondingly, the social work profession has experienced increased ethnic-cultural diversity in clientele (e.g., Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015; Sue & Sue, 2003). In response to the needs of an increasingly diverse population, the cultural competence approach has gained traction in social work theory and practice. The cultural competence approach has guided the development and application of multicultural interventions, services, professional trainings, and policies (e.g., Ahmed, Gupta, Saeed, Jayasundara, & Nedegaard, 2019; Danso, 2018; Dodds, Yarbrough & Quick, 2018; Jani, Osteen, & Shipe, 2016; Feize & Gonzalez, 2018).

The term, cultural competence, has multiple definitions in the social work field; however, it commonly refers to the ability of social workers to provide culturally appropriate and modified social services to diverse populations in regards to language, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, and nationality (e.g., American National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Harrison & Turner, 2011). Models of cultural competence, which originated in psychology and were later applied to social work, are based on the principles of cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills. These principles are reflected in Sue and Sue’s theorization (2003), as well as in the intrapsychic processes of intersectionality and self-reflection that are involved in the acquirement of cultural competence (Garran & Rozas, 2013). However, the approach is still viewed as a “black box,” which has led to a number of theoretical and methodological discourses. One of the current debates focuses on the strengths and limitations of the approach for contending with issues of political conflict, power relations, oppression, and majority-minority tensions. The present study contributes to the understanding of cultural competence in social work practice within politically conflict-ridden settings. Using extensive qualitative data, the present study aims to answer the following research question: *How do Israeli social workers construe and experience the meanings of culturally competent services in the context of ethno-political conflict*?

The provision of social services in ethnically heterogeneous societies may be more complex in settings that are characterized by high inter-group ethnic political tensions, such as in Israel (e.g., Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2014) and other regions (e.g., Spain and Northern Ireland; Baum, 2007a; Campbell, Ioakimidis, & Maglajlic, 2019; Coulter, Campbell, Duffy, & Reilly, 2013). The personal experiences of therapists and clients during political conflicts are likely to unconsciously seep into clinical interventions (Baum, 2006; Kadan, Roer-Strier & Bekerman, 2017; Shamai & Boehm, 2001). During times of conflict escalation, social workers in direct practice may experience difficulty providing services to clients who are not part of their national group. In some cases, social workers may perceive the ‘other’ as the enemy, causing their professional role to be pushed aside, as the practitioners feel that they should show loyalty to their national group (Cohen, 2001; Kadan et al., 2017; Ramon et al., 2006). Studies have also indicated that, in times of conflict escalation, social workers may deal with feelings of fear, anxiety and mistrust (Kadan et al., 2017; Ramon, Campbell, Lindsay, McCrystal, & Baidoun, 2006; Shamai, 2003).

For example, Jewish therapists reported experiencing high levels of anxiety with the increased violence of the second Intifada in Israel, which resulted in a considerable strain in their relationships with their Arab clients and fellows (Baum, 2010; Ramon et al., 2006). Likewise, Arab social workers described their encounters with their Jewish clients as being characterized by hostility and lack of trust (Kadan et al., 2017). Although the interference of interethnic conflict-related emotions – e.g., fear, anxiety, stress, mistrust, and disloyalty -- in the therapist-client relationship is well studied, less is known about the challenges that interethnic conflicts pose to cultural competence in social work practice. Relatedly, scarce research exists on culturally competent practice in tense multiethnic mixed cities. Understanding the particular context of mixed cities can contribute unique insights into the opportunities and limitations of the cultural competence approach in social work practice. This study extends the literature by examining the theoretical and practical validity of the cultural competence approach in conflict-ridden settings of mixed cities in Israel by exploring the narratives of social workers involved in the public social services sector.

For the purposes of the present study, we utilized the following definition of a mixed city: a city with a population composed of different ethnic, national and/or religious groups living within a context of division, intergroup tension, conflict, and contest (Adelman & Elman, 2014; Rekhess, 2007; Stroschein, 2007). In many instances, mixed cities are the centers of ongoing, intense political conflict, as demonstrated in the cities of Belfast, Mostar, Nicosia, Beirut, Quebec and Jerusalem. In such instances, mixed cities are characterized by a multiplicity of tensions between groups, including open competition for public spaces and resources, issues related to municipal management, urban justice, and an ongoing conflict over the cultural, religious, or national hegemony of the city (Kallus & Kolodney, 2010; Solitsiano & Gofer, 2009).

These characteristics are especially evident in Jewish-Arab mixed cities in Israel (Shdema, Haj-Yahya, & Schnell, 2018; Swaid, 2007; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). Israeli mixed cities are composed of a Jewish majority, alongside an indigenous Arab minority. Israeli mixed cities are characterized by civilian inequality, segregation between Jews and Arabs, and municipal discrimination toward the Arab population as reflected by the unequal development of services and urban planning across the two groups (Shdema, Haj-Yahya, & Schnell, 2018). Israeli Arabs, in general, and particularly those in mixed cities hold an inferior status, which is notably attributed to structural and institutional inequality. Additionally, they struggle to maintain the indigenous identity of their place (Swaid, 2007).

As noted by Smyth (2009), ethnically mixed cities raise critical questions related to multiculturalism, cultural competence, urban justice, and distribution of resources. Extrapolating this perspective to the Israeli context, we presume that the particular nature of Israeli mixed cities will pose unique challenges and consequences for social work practice and will give rise to specific cultural competence adaptation strategies. Thus, the present study investigates the ways in which social workers construe cultural competence in Israeli mixed Arab-Jewish cities in response to the challenges they encounter. The study was conducted in three main Israeli mixed cities: Haifa, Acre and Jerusalem. Each of these cities are characterized by divergent levels of ethno-political conflict, as clarified below.

*Haifa* is Israel’s third largest city with a population of 283,640, 10% of whom are Arabs (Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019) who reside primarily in segregated neighborhoods. Haifa’s social services department provides joint services for both Jewish and Arab residents. Haifa is perceived by the general Israeli population as a city with relative Jewish-Arab coexistence; however, tensions and hostility still exist (Kallus, 2013). *Acre* is one of the world’s ancient cities. It has a population of 48,930 and approximately 32% of the population is Arab (Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The Jewish and Arab populations largely live in separate neighborhoods, and Acre‘s welfare department provides separate services to Jewish and Arab residents. The city has experienced multiple ethnic tensions, more than in Haifa, and has been affected by several acts of intergroup violence (Zeitzoff, 2018). *Jerusalem* is also one of the world’s ancient cities and it is considered holy by the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The city includes 901,300 residents, of which approximately 38% are Arab (Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The Arab population lives mainly in the Eastern part of the city, which was occupied by Israel in 1967. East Jerusalem Arab residents have residency status rather than Israeli citizenship (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2010), and their neighborhoods are characterized by insufficient public services (e.g., health and welfare) and a severe lack of essential resources (Asmar, 2018). Moreover, the city lies at the core of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, as such, has experienced extreme acts of intergroup hostility (Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2018).

**Method**

Anchored in qualitative methodology, the current study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This approach is in line with the research objectives, as it allows for the development of theoretical insights through the use of inductive data analysis. Moreover, it emphasizes researchers’ and participants‘ differing positions, subjective multiple realities and the contextual nature of knowledge. The approach also enables researchers to provide an interpretative emic analysis by examining views, values, and acts, as well as analyzing beliefs, situations, structures, and ideologies (Charmaz, 2000).

***Sample & data collection***

Face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 80 social workers at varying levels of seniority and management positions from three Israeli mixed cities: Haifa (28 participants), Acre (23 participants) and Jerusalem (29 participants). We employed a purposive sampling method in an effort to represent both Jews (46 participants) and Arabs (34 participants). Participants consisted of 60 front-line social workers and 20 social workers with managerial positions. Most participants were involved in one of the following three domains of social welfare services: children at risk, domestic violence, the elderly population. The interviews addressed participants’ perceptions of the experiences, issues, dilemmas and challenges that characterize the work of social-welfare service providers in Israeli mixed cities, particularly in regards to addressing the needs of the culturally diverse Arab-Jewish populations. Moreover, in order to enhance the reliability of the data, individual interviews were followed by a focus group consisting of 8 participants, which were conducted in each of the three cities. Interviews, including the addition of focus group participation for some, lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were conducted by the first two authors and by experienced Jewish and Arab research assistants. The research team consisted of a mixed group of Jewish and Arab academics. The authors all have extensive experience both working in and researching the social services field in Israel, which assisted the research team in receiving access to the interviewees. All participants voluntarily consented to partake in the study.

***Data analysis***

Interviews and focus groups with social workers and managers were transcribed and uploaded to ‘Atlas’, a qualitative software program that assists researchers in organizing transcribed materials into thematic categories (Bazeley, 2002). The interview data were analyzed across fields of social work practice (at-risk children, domestic violence, and the elderly) and cities (Haifa, Acre, Jerusalem). In addition, inter-field and inter-city analyses were also conducted to search for nuanced differences. Data analysis was performed in four main stages. First, through an inductive stage of open-coding, the researchers identified the main thematic categories. Themes and subthemes were identified through a process of constant comparisons (Padgett, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Second, data relevant to the research objectives were identified, and they constituted the “units of meaning” (Tesch, 1990). Third, all units of meanings with similar contents were merged. Through axial coding, the researchers detected associations between categories related to context and content (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Finally, links between themes were created through a process of comparison and confrontation associated with the various themes (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994). The researchers used “member checking,” in order to ensure the reliability of the analyses. Findings from the different sets of analyses were presented to, and discussed with, the participants in the focus groups, which helped to finalize the overall theoretical perceptions of cultural competence that emerged from the data.

***Ethical aspects***

To maintain anonymity, research participants were given pseudonyms and any identifying information was omitted from the final report. Moreover, research participants signed an informed consent form before partaking in the study. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, University of Haifa (approval number 312/16).

**Findings**

Analyses uncovered three main outlooks in the construction of cultural competence among social workers in Israeli mixed cities: (1) the universal approach, (2) the cultural competence approach, and (3) the critical approach.

***The Universal Approach***

For many participants in the study, social work practices in mixed cities are no different than social work practices in any other city. In an increasingly heterogeneous world, many cities are becoming mixed cities. Therefore, in numerous participants’ opinions, cultural competence, even within these challenging settings, meant treating differences with equality. In other words, they contended that social workers should respect diversity through professionalism. According to this view, the emphasis on cultural competence in social work is redundant; welfare services in mixed cities must provide all recipients with equal service based on universal rights and the social work profession’s core value of social justice is unrelated to cultural, national, religious, or ethnic affiliation. Moreover, these participants perceived universalism as the most efficient way to protect the profession’s core values as they serve Israeli Arabs citizens experiencing structural discrimination in Israel. In other words, they viewed universalism as an expression of social work professionalism and commitment. For example, for many social workers in the field of elderly services, the main goal was to be professionally competent with the elderly individual, regardless of the client’s ethnic affiliation. The following quotation from an Arab participant living in Haifa illustrates this perception:

*“I think it might be the foundation of social work, it’s a human being. You completely don’t care what his religion, and what do you believe in and who is your mother. I care about the situation. The question is …can I help, or not?”*

Similarly, a Jewish participant from Haifa shared her perspective:

*“[The department] treats the population, it doesn’t treat a Jew, Arab, “Russian” or “Ethiopian” … it treats citizens who reside in the area … treats everyone who comes to us regardless of their religion, race and sex.”*

This participant explained that providing services that takes into account the cultural, national or ethnic context might detract from professionalism, neutrality, and the universalism of providing welfare services. Some participants even explained that this approach is consistent with the values of the social work profession, which advocates for embracing an equal attitude when working with different groups. This approach is evident in the words of a Jewish participant who works with children at risk:

*“It is very important that we, as social workers, judge people by their needs rather than by their background. As I see it, it does not matter whether I am Arab or Jewish, I judge people by their own needs.”*

In addition, some of the participants were of the opinion that serving groups such as the elderly, children, and battered women does not necessarily require any unique cultural adaptations or reference to the urban context. A Jewish participant who works with families in a violence-ridden Arab neighborhood explained why cultural competency in the Arab culture is unnecessary for their daily practice:

*“Even if sometimes I don’t understand certain cultural codes, I realize that it has nothing to do with any misunderstandings of the Arab culture, but rather of a misunderstanding of the criminal violent culture of the place. Therefore, when working with a mixed population, added cultural understanding is insignificant… there is no need for anything special.”*

The universal approach was particularly evident among participants who work with elders. Some of the participants were of the opinion that the nature of services provided to elders necessitates a universal approach devoid of cultural adaptations, since these services do not tend to consist of thorough long-term care, which is mainly a concrete function. A Jewish participant from Haifa describes this perspective:

“*This service is universal, so I don’t have different options to offer someone who is Ethiopian, a new immigrant, Arab, a veteran Jew ..…I offer them the same service, implement it in exactly the same way ..…it’s the same nursing companies”.*

However, some of these participants were aware of some of the issues that challenged their universal approach. While most services for the elderly in Haifa and Acre provide universal services to both populations, in practice, Arab elders are not inclined to participate in joint settings such as day care centers for the elderly. In this respect, these Arab clients do not receive the same services. These settings usually operate in the Hebrew language and are oriented towards Western cultural norms. Therefore, some of the Arab research participants who espoused the universal view admitted to being hesitant of this approach and raised the question: Might it be necessary, despite the desire to provide universal and equal services, to create separate and culturally-adapted settings? The following quotation from an Arab participant illustrated these feelings:

*“There is one day care center that serves the entire city … But Arabs do not attend because they don’t feel at home there. Arab elders do not feel connected to the day care center because all the employees there speak Hebrew … The programs and what they offer are not compatible with Arab culture … They don’t enjoy the same rights awarded to Jews, they missed out because they won’t open another day care center for Arabs.”*

Furthermore, analyses of the interviews indicated that participants who supported the universal approach strived to provide welfare services that tended to minimize the impact of the political conflict on their practices. For these participants, both in times of calm and in times of escalation, the conflict itself and any preoccupation with politics should be kept away from the welfare territory. The following quotation, from a Jewish participant working with at-risk children, illustrates this perspective:

*“I don’t deal with political issues with the families I work with, even in my daily practice with them I try not to be affected by their political views. In the same way, I try to put my political views aside, as not to be influenced by my own stance.”*

For participants who agreed with this perspective, distancing from the political conflict protected their commitment to professionalism. In other words, they believed that providing equal and universal services that do not distinguish between Jewish and Arab clients is the only way to balance structural inequalities. Distancing the conflict from their professional practices reflects their concern with the ethnic political polarization between Jews and Arabs in times of escalation. In the following quote, a Jewish participant who works with the elderly population describes this outlook:

*“Those who come here see only themselves and their needs…we don’t develop any political discussion. [In times of escalation] I won’t react...Sometimes I’ll freak out but I won’t show it and they won’t know about it.“*

In summary, these participants felt that their professionalism and the ethical principles of being a social worker provided them with an extensive foundation for dealing with diversity and the national conflict. Distancing themselves from political conflicts during times of escalation was the strategy they used to uphold their universal approach to working with clients.

***Indispensable Cultural Competence Approach***

According to this approach, individuals providing welfare services in mixed cities must explicitly recognize the ethno-cultural diversity of the city’s residents, be culturally skilled, and provide adaptive services to different clients with reference to their ethnicity, culture, religion, and nationality. Hence, social workers in mixed cities must hold values of multiculturalism and acquire knowledge and tools to provide culturally sensitive, professional, and non-judgmental interventions. Many of the research participants, both Jews and Arabs across the three cities, supported this outlook. This approach was particularly emphasized among participants who treated battered women and at-risk children. In the following quotation, a Jewish participant speaks to the significance of providing culturally sensitive service in a mixed city:

*“A mixed [welfare] department is unique, particularly in its cultural sensitivity. Thus, everyone working in a mixed department must be culturally sensitive, […] respect any culture that differs from their own, and work with people as people without judging them by their affiliation […] I think that training that is more oriented towards familiarization with the culture is in order.”*

These participants were also of the opinion that, side-by-side with culturally sensitive treatment, welfare services in mixed cities must build a bridge between different cultural groups, including between Jews and Arabs living in the same city. This outlook is based on the premise that one of the functions of welfare services in mixed cities is to promote a multicultural society and communication between the various communities living in the city.

However, some of the Jewish participants admitted to having insufficient knowledge regarding the cultural codes of the Arab recipients, as well as a lack of tools adapted for working with Arab clients. They point to a lack of professional training in the area of cultural competence in general, and with regard to the Arab population in particular. In order to deal with this challenge, participants related that they relied on personal experience and also consulted with social workers from the other nationality. These feelings were particularly prominent among participants who work with women affected by domestic violence and at-risk children and teens. They reported that their lack of familiarity with the traditions and norms within Arab society makes it hard for them to diagnose, evaluate, and build appropriate interventions. As evident from the words of a Jewish social worker who works with clients affected by domestic violence:

*“Matters of danger, let’s say, what is customary, what is not customary… I’m concerned that I would not fully understand… There’s an atmosphere of danger here and a life-threatening state, and that’s a very serious responsibility.”*

In addition to the lack of familiarity with Arab culture, some of the Jewish participants were of the opinion that service users feel more comfortable approaching social workers from their own culture. At the same time, Jewish participants stated that sometimes Arab service users ask to be treated by a Jewish social worker because they are concerned that an Arab social worker will judge them for violating cultural codes or that the social worker may expose their personal information.

Jewish participants also admitted to having some service-delivery difficulties based on language barriers. Arab service users’ command of the Hebrew language varies considerably. Additionally, most Jewish social workers have no knowledge of the Arabic language and often find it hard to understand their Arab clients; thus, they rely on body gestures and intonation, as well as interpretation services. In addition, in sensitive situations, Arab service users sometimes speak in Arabic and the social worker is unable to understand what they mean. Jewish social workers had differing viewpoints about this. A number of the participants related that it makes them feel distant and not in control, whereas others accepted it with understanding and felt that by using their first language, service users would be able to maintain an authentic dialogue. In the following quotation, a Jewish social worker describes a situation that occurred during a meeting with Arab mothers who have at-risk children:

*“When a mother cries, she can cry in Arabic. Hey people, she has good reasons to cry. What, should I now also tell her “please, cry in Hebrew’? So I sit next to her and ask to be interpreted … I won’t ask her to speak in Hebrew. …I don’t have to be in full control all the time… .It’s okay for that to happen because the situation is extremely emotional.”*

Arab social workers have a good command of the Hebrew language, and thus do not find it hard to provide service in Hebrew to their Jewish clients. Nevertheless, they indicated that language is more than practicalities. Language reflects culture, belonging, and identity. Thus, as they see it, professional practice that does not take place in clients’ first language is detrimental to the quality of the therapy. This notion is illustrated by an Arab participant who treats abused Jewish women:

*“When a client does not speak in her first language, then she is not completely connected to herself. Language is part of your identity, where you came from. Language is your cultural context… and when you don’t speak it you become distant from your authentic self.”*

Other than the language issue, Jewish and Arab participants raised the issue surrounding tensions between welfare regulations and cultural norms of the Arab community. Social workers operate in light of Western child protection laws that are then applied to the Arab society, which is characterized by different cultural norms and codes. For instance, some Arab families have customary child-raising patterns that include spanking. The incongruence between Western law and cultural norms produces a professional ethical dilemma, as illustrated by the following quotation from a Jewish participant:

*“We don’t accept beating and violence, no way. But it would be grasped differently …* Later in the interview, she adds: *“We see the violence in its context, make some allowances.”*

Arab participants also described the complex consequences of applying child protection laws in Arab society:

*“When a child is beaten by his father – the police is immediately involved and all that … It’s a good law, but the implementation, sometimes you see that if you do something like that, it causes harm. For instance, if you arrest the father then you increase the harm to the entire family, so you have to be smart and not just. But you see, many families have been destroyed because of this law. It is possible to say that the Arab sector has suffered the most.”*

Moreover, results showed that participants tended to downplay the impact of the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violent conflict on their professional arena. In practice, however, the interviews showed the difficulties aroused by the escalating conflict. Jewish and Arab participants from Haifa and Acre indicated that, during times of escalation, some of them were concerned about traveling to clients’ homes who are of a different national affiliation. Some even reported experiencing emotional tensions between their professional practice and national identity. This matter is even more complicated in Jerusalem. In the following quotation, a Jewish participant who works in the field of domestic violence in Jerusalem, speaks of a difficulty he experienced in an encounter with an Arab client, after three Jewish boys were kidnapped by Arab guerrilla militants:

*“I saw his identity card [Arab client… it was after the kidnapping of the three boys from Jerusalem… and photographs were posted… and for some reason his photograph appeared to me to be that of one of the kidnappers. In the first moment, I thought that I won’t give service to a terrorist.… there was something that deeply confused me for a moment and I understood that it is something that is mine, because it did not really happen … I also had reserve duty after that … afterwards he spoke to the director and told her that he’s not certain whether he wants to meet with me… it disturbed him that I had been on reserve duty.”*

In summary, these participants recognized the need to adapt the welfare services to different cultural groups. However, they were also aware of the difficulties, including unfamiliarity with cultural codes, language barriers, and the impact of the conflict on their practices.

***The Critical Approach***

Some participants believed that the cultural competence approach falls short in addressing the complexity of the political issues at stake, especially in cities with high levels of political conflict. Accordingly, they asserted that providers of social services cannot ignore the structural and political inequality suffered by the Israeli Arab minority. Most of the participants who espoused this approach were Arabs, and primarily worked in the complex political reality of East Jerusalem. In the following quotation, an Arab participant from East Jerusalem illustrates this outlook:

*“When a nation comes and occupies another nation, (the former) must fulfill the needs of (the latter), grant it rights, but since they [the Israeli Jews] do not define themselves as occupiers of the Palestinian people, rather as liberators of the land of Israel, they do not see themselves as obliged to meet the needs and rights of that population. That is why we are working in these services, to care for that population whose rights are not being fulfilled by the occupier.”*

Moreover, some of the participants were of the opinion that the manner in which welfare services are provided plays an active role in preserving the discrimination towards the Arab population, as reflected by the small number of services available for the Arab population and the heavy workload of Arab social workers, among other matters. In this context, a major example that arose in the interviews was the small number of services dedicated to Arab at-risk children. Most of the services designated for them are located outside of the mixed cities and are perceived to be of poor quality compared to those provided to the Jewish population. In the following quote, an Arab participant from Haifa demonstrates this perspective:

*“There is a difference between the boarding schools. There are fewer boarding schools for Arabs than for Jews, and the quality in the boarding schools for Arabs is lacking. In the Arab society there is only one shelter for Arab girls.”*

In addition, participants from East Jerusalem were of the opinion that the political conflictual nature of the mixed city shapes the welfare services system and harms the quality of services provided to the minority population. An example of this was brought up by a participant who related that she was not able to hold home visits that would be needed to submit an expert opinion to the court, as service users lived in a violence-ridden area with no public transportation:

*“One of the things that a juvenile justice social worker has to do to provide her assessment to the court is to visit the place of residence of the teenager and look at the residential environment in general, but since there are areas of East Jerusalem that are defined as dangerous, have no police law enforcement…and lack public transportation, it makes it hard for us to hold house visits. Due to these difficulties, we were unable to issue these assessments. It harmed the clients and their right to a comprehensive and reliable expert opinion.”*

Furthermore, in contrast to the universal and “indispensable” cultural competence approaches, participants who advocated for the critical view approach see the political conflict as an inseparable component from the process of service provision. As they see it, the conflict has far-reaching implications both for the well-being of service users and for the nature of their social work practices. Moreover, participants from East Jerusalem related that any escalation of the security situation causes a real shift in the nature of social workers’ jobs. For instance, participants noted that, in times of escalation, parents of young children appeal to them with requests to place their children in residential facilities outside the city in order to keep them out of danger and away from violent incidents. In addition, family members of minors arrested in conflicts approach the welfare services with requests for help, as illustrated in the following quotation:

*“In the recent states of escalation, we experienced a heavy workload as people were constantly calling the department to say that their children had been arrested. Despite my emotional load in these times, I try to do my job well, call the police stations, and check out possible professional support for these children.”*

At the same time, these participants related that the political situation shapes “routine interactions” with clients of the welfare services, in theory and in practice. Some of these participants noted that, in times of violence, service users are unable to physically come to the department and that the clients’ trust in social workers is undermined as they see them as state agents:

*“What was most conspicuous in the project in time of escalation was the topic of employment. In every [period of] escalation of the security situation, the Jewish employers would lay off the Arab workers, harming our work with the family and often compelling us to return to the starting point. You say that you want to help us, but in fact you are not, the situation remains as it was.”*

Participants who embraced this approach held the opinion that the welfare service system cannot simply think in terms of cultural competence or universal applications of social work principles because a minimization or disregard of the political conflict, especially during times of escalation, does not help the clients.

**Discussion**

This study analyzed Israeli social workers’ perceptions of the experiences, dilemmas, and challenges they have encountered over the course of providing social welfare service in Israeli mixed cities. The study looked particularly at the intersection of the cultural competence approach and ethno-political conflict. The study found three main constructs of cultural competence among the participants.

We labeled the first perspective as the “*universal*” approach, which corresponds with the universal and egalitarian values of the social work profession, which are claimed to be sufficient to ensure equal treatment of both Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities. The social justice values of the profession, as perceived by those social workers who espouse this approach, can easily translate into universal social service principles that, by virtue, guarantee equality for groups in conflict and minimize feelings and acts of discrimination. This view undermines the cultural fragmentation and the need to tailor services according to culture. Cultural competence in social work is thought to be redundant among those social workers and may even be viewed as detracting from their professional practice; as such, a focus on culture should be omitted. These social workers believed that they are not destined to make erroneous decisions about a client of a different cultural background. Instead, they believed that a professional Jewish social worker can successfully serve an Arab client in the same way that a professional Arab social worker can serve a Jewish client. According to this view, it is only professional merit that matters and only minor cultural adjustments may occasionally be necessary, such as providing particular services or activities in the client’s native language. Social workers who abide by this universal approach to the profession handled periods of escalation during ethno-political conflicts by engaging in political-distancing and silencing. Otherwise, there would be a disruption to providing professional services. The adoption of this view reflects previous study findings that have criticized culturally competent practice (e.g., Danso, 2018; Johnson & Munch, 2009). Researchers have argued that some cultural competence aspects contradict major principles of the social work profession. Oversensitivity to cultural factors, it is contended, may facilitate privileges of a group’s rights and this contradicts the primary social work value of individual self-determination. Does disregarding culturally competent practice and ethno-political contexts during times of conflict help or hinder social service delivery? We do not have sufficient evidence to confidently answer the question one way or another. However, the adoption of the other two views among social workers indicates some difficulties in practicing universal social work with negligible cultural and political adjustments.

We labeled the second viewpoint as the “*indispensable*” cultural approach, which indicates that cultural competence is a vital and unavoidable component needed to address the diverse needs of Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities. Social workers who hold this view recognize the ethno-cultural diversity of Israeli mixed-cities and stress the need to acquire culturally appropriate knowledge and skills to deliver culturally competent service. The emphasis on culturally competent practice among these participants is in agreement with the growing body of literature that stresses the importance of acquiring cultural skills for social work practices with diverse populations (e.g., Ahmed et al., 2019; Jiang, 2018; Sousa & Almeida, 2016).

When resources allow, social worker-client ethnic matching seems to be the culturally competent strategy utilized by the social welfare service system in Israeli mixed cities. There is a presumption that culturally matched social worker-client relationships would lead to more culturally competent and efficacious services (e.g., Sue, Fugino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). This perspective has merit; yet, what happens when welfare resources are limited or when an ingroup member prefers to be served by an outgroup social worker for privacy reasons? In fact, a request for an outgroup social worker occurs quite frequently in the welfare service system in Israeli mixed cities, as noted by the participants. In such cases, matching clients with a social worker of another ethnic background is imperative.

Despite the genuine endorsement of the cultural competence approach among Israeli social workers, they noted that there was insufficient institutional support to develop cultural competence in mixed-ethnic settings. As such, these social workers feared that they would make erroneous decisions due to three interconnected reasons. First, they worried that there would be a misunderstanding of the cultural codes and cultural display rules of the client which may lead to a misinterpretation of the client’s responses, thoughts, and emotions. Secondly, the stereotypes and schemas of the social workers might consolidate their expectations about the typical responses and difficulties of the client, which may lead to unsuitable service. A number of studies, in fact, indicated that schemas shape what we perceive and the manner in which we perceive (Heine, 2015). Put differently, rather than social workers believing what they see, they may tend to see what they believe. In response to the two issues described and the limited institutional support for staff development, social workers who work with clients of another ethnic background reported privately learning about cultural matters and consulting with their outgroup peers. Despite these efforts, they still reported feeling insufficiently equipped to handle certain situations.

A third challenge that social workers noted when working with a client of another background was the language barrier. Social workers indicated that language reflects culture, belonging, and identity. Consequently, culturally competent service that does not take place in the clients’ first language can be detrimental to the quality of the therapy provided, as reported in other research (e.g., Fuertes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). Even if the social worker develops a good command of the clients’ language, his status and competence may still be devalued, unless being served by an outgroup social worker is specifically requested by the client.

Interestingly, adopters of the indispensable cultural competence approach also respond to ethno-political conflicts in Israeli mixed cities during periods of escalation by political-distancing and silencing. Otherwise, it would disrupt their culturally competent service. They even perceived culturally responsive welfare services in the mixed city as an opportunity to bridge cultural differences and provide immunity against conflict effects without any necessity for further interference. Nonetheless, they admitted that, to some degree, during times of conflict escalation, they became concerned about home visits with their outgroup clients, and that they experienced emotional tensions between their culturally competent professional practice and national identity, issues that have also been highlighted in previous research (e.g., Baum, 2010; Kadan et al., 2017).

We labeled the third viewpoint as the “*critical*” approach to cultural competence, which critiques the cultural competence (and universal) approaches as lacking the complexity to address the politically problematic nature of ethnically mixed cities. Social workers with this perspective advocated for the need of a *critical approach* to service delivery. Accordingly, the social services system cannot ignore the structural and political inequality suffered by the Israeli Arab minority. The welfare service system’s obliviousness to the ethno-political reality of Israeli mixed cities is proclaimed to sustain and reproduce discrimination, structural inequality, othering, and unequal power relations between the minority and majority (e.g., Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Garran & Rozas, 2013; Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013). These issues become more apparent during periods of conflict escalation, which additionally result in the clients’ loss of trust in social workers and an increased perception of them as state agents and oppressors. With the absence of a clear social welfare policy on how to constructively handle conflicts, advocates of the critical approach feel somewhat limited, frustrated, and helpless.

The call for a critical approach toward social service delivery in the current study intersects with other critical views of cultural competence (and universality), which portray them as tokenistic (e.g., Furlong & Wight, 2011). In our case, delivering social services in a culturally competent or universal approach is characterized as de-politicized professionalism, particularly in the presence of clear practices of political oppression (e.g., Nadan, Weinberg-Kurnik & Ben-Ari, 2016). We envisage that a social worker with a mastery of the universal principles of the profession, and who is both culturally and (critically) politically competent will be best equipped to effectively serve mixed-city clients. The integration of the three approaches does not put any of the discrete skills aside. With some precaution, it is worth noting that our participants’ endorsement of one approach over another tended to differ by the social worker’s ethnicity (Arab or Jew), city of service, and field of social work practice. For instance, the universality approach was more apparent among participants who work with the elderly across cities and ethnicities; the cultural competence approach was more common in Haifa and Acre among social workers who work in the field of domestic violence and at-risk children; and the critical approach was prevalent among social workers in Jerusalem across all fields and primarily among Arab social workers. Thus, some context-informed decisions might require, for instance, the main activation of the universality-attached discrete skills.

We are not the first to call for an integrative cultural competence approach. For instance, Nylund (2006) advocated embracing critical multiculturalism. In a similar vein, Nadan (2017) and Nouman (2019) suggested to view cultural competence through a constructive and reflective perspective, taking into account issues of power and oppression.

**Conclusions**

Three approaches to culturally competent practice among Israeli social workers in mixed cities were uncovered in this study: The universality approach with very little regard for cultural competence and the role of ethno-political conflicts; the indispensable cultural competence approach with minimal regard for ethno-political contexts; and the critical approach with major consideration of ethno-political conflict effects on social service delivery. Endorsement of any of these approaches tended to differ by the social worker’s ethnicity (Arab or Jew), city of service, and field of social work practice. We propose that the effective provision of social services in mixed cities requires a special type of social worker, one who professionally integrates vital aspects of the universality principles of the profession with cultural and (critically) political competent approaches to solving problems, and who is capable of switching between these two approaches as needed and informed by context-risen priorities. Institutional social welfare support for such a model is unequivocally necessary to effectively implement it in theory and in practice.

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