# *'Fathers are very important, but they aren't our contact persons'*: The Primary Contact Person Assumption and the Absence of Fathers in Social Work Interventions

Nadav Perez-Vaisvidovsky, PhD; Ayana Halpern, PhD; Reli Mizrahi; Zhara Atalla

## Abstract

Research on the low level of engagement of fathers in family- and child-oriented social work interventions has focused on individual factors relating to the father, to the mother, or the social worker. Much less attention has been paid to the impact of organizational aspects of the social work services themselves. This article uses the methodology of organizational ethnography to examine this impact on the engagement of fathers in those services provided by municipal departments of social services in Israel. We found that service delivery was structured by the primary contact person assumption—that one person should be designated as the primary contact in the routine course of an intervention. Together with gendered, political, and cultural factors that support preference for the mother, this structuring assumption results in a full or partial exclusion of fathers from family- and child-oriented interventions.

Given the recognized importance of paternal involvement to the well-being of the family unit and to children, the low participation rates of fathers in child- and family-oriented social work interventions are of concern to both scholars and practitioners. Despite efforts by social service programs to specifically engage fathers, their participation in these interventions remains low.

Existing research has pointed to three central causes for this low level of engagement: fathers' reluctance to access the services, mothers' role as gatekeepers that hinders fathers' access to the services, and the structure and delivery of the services themselves. Research on this last factor has mainly focused on social workers' attitudes and perceptions as the cause of father absence.

In this article, we focus on an aspect that has hitherto received scant attention, if any: the impact of social services' organizational culture on fathers' levels of engagement. We seek to answer this research question: ***What role does organizational culture, norms, and structure in the social services play in the low levels of engagement of fathers in family- and child-oriented social work interventions?***

To answer this question, we present a new theoretical concept: *the primary contact person* (PCP) assumption. It holds that routine interactions within family social work interventions are based on the implicit assumption that only one of the family members is the primary contact person. Although both written policies and program mandates require that, wherever possible, contact be made with both parents, in practice these contact persons are almost exclusively mothers. The PCP assumption and the cultural preference for mothers are central elements of the *mother-based intervention*, which focuses on the mother as the center of child- and family-related interventions and is previously described by the authors (The Authors, 2020; Forthcoming a; Forthcoming b).

In the first part of the article, we review existing research on father engagement in social services and point to the gap in the literature on the impact of the services' organizational structure and culture. After describing our methodological approach, we present our findings, documenting the PCP assumption and how it is manifested in the routine work of social workers. In the discussion section, we connect this assumption to existing research on father engagement and show how together they create the mother-based intervention. In the concluding section, we discuss the answer to our research question, both its impact and its limitations.

## Literature Review

Fathers' participation in social work and social services interventions aimed at improving the welfare of their family and children is very low. Indeed, many scholars refer to fathers as ‘absent' from the arena of social services [reference]. Quantitative data on fathers' participation are hard to come by, but existing studies show that levels of father involvement tend to be less than 50% than those of mothers and are sometimes much lower (Haworth, 2019; Strega et al., 2008; Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003). Many qualitative studies have described the clientele of the social services as being predominantly mothers, characterizing fathers either as 'hard to reach' or as 'neglected' or 'excluded’ (Clapton, 2009; Davies, 2016; Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012), focusing on fathers as the cause with a focus on the role of the services (Baum, 2015b; Gupta & Featherstone, 2015).

These low levels of involvement are of such concern because evidence shows that father engagement increases the effectiveness of family-oriented social work interventions (Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018; Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). Systems-level efforts to include fathers have been found to reduce the time a child spends in the welfare system and foster care and provide better results of such care (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; Velázquez, Edwards, Vincent, & Rey, 2009).

Given that existing low levels of paternal engagement in social work interventions are detrimental to their outcomes, it is important to first determine the causes of that low engagement and then explore how to increase it. Existing research identifies three primary causes: individual factors relating to fathers, individual factors relating to mothers, and the organizational structure and culture of the services themselves.

Fathers tend to refrain from accessing the services for various reasons. In general, men tend to avoid help-seeking and psychological assistance (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). As Baum (2015a) notes, this tendency does not originate in a decreased need for services, but rather in common perceptions of masculinity that require men to be strong and independent.

 Societal perceptions of the role of fathers in the family, in which they are seen as not as central as the mother, further discourage their use of social services. Family-oriented services are often perceived as targeted at children and mothers and as irrelevant to fathers (Baum, 2015b; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & Mccolgan, 2015). Other reasons for fathers’ absence include negative past experiences with social services (Malm et al., 2006) or, in situations of family breakup, the reluctance of the father’s current spouse who is not the child's mother (Maxwell et al., 2012).

A second cause of father absence is maternal gatekeeping. In some situations, mothers position themselves as gatekeepers between fathers and the services. They may refrain from bringing fathers into the picture and sometimes resist the services' attempts to engage them (O'Donnell, Jr., D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). Mothers may be afraid of involving a father who has been violent in the past, may be worried about losing custody to the father, and/or may desire to keep full responsibility for the children. Another possible reason is their fear of losing benefits attached to single-parent status if welfare services identify a father in the household (Maxwell et al., 2012).

The third cause of this absence is the organizational structure of the services themselves: how and when they are delivered and by whom, as well as what cultures and norms shape them, are some of the elements in the services that deter fathers from participating in interventions.

Existing research has focused on those organizational elements related to the individual social workers who deliver service: their knowledge, training, perceptions, and attitudes that influence how they work with fathers. Therapeutic knowledge on working with men in general and specifically with fathers is lacking. Men express distress and pain differently than women, and professionals' lack of knowledge regarding this difference often leads to the misinterpretation of men's feelings and needs (Baum, 2015b; Brown et al., 2009). Regarding fathers specifically, research on families and parenting tends to focus primarily on mothers and neglect fathers (Shapiro & Krysik, 2010; Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003). This focus is reflected in social work textbooks that emphasize the role of mothers and the mother-child connection (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016).

A major cause of difficulty for social workers in working with fathers—and therefore, a major cause of father absence—is the gender differences between social workers, who are predominantly women, and fathers. Female workers and male clients face a contradictory power relation, in which the worker holds power originating in her professional status, while the father holds power stemming from the privileged status of men in society (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, & Hardiman, 2009). Gender gaps may give rise to a fear of violence when social workers have to work with fathers who have been violent in the past, are suspected to be violent, or are subject to stereotypes of being violent (Baum, 2015a). Baum (2015b) points to the social worker's unresolved conflicts as a source of difficulty. In addition, fathers report experiencing micro-aggressions from social workers (Authors, forthcoming a).

Few studies have addressed the impact of the structural and organizational elements of social services on engagement of fathers. Brown and colleagues ( 2009) list several reasons for this lack of research. The use of the gender-neutral term 'parent,' rather than 'mother’ and father,' may lead workers to choose to contact only one parent—the mother—sparing them the time and effort of contacting the father. Furthermore, the global spread of managerialism, emphasizing standardization and efficiency, in social services may constrain efforts to engage fathers; overworked professionals may be discouraged from the attempt. In addition, micro-aggressive acts of social workers toward fathers were found to be influenced by norms and work routines in the organization, which tend to supervise the parental functioning of the father more harshly than that of the mother (Authors, forthcoming a).

These organizational and structural sources of father absence, as outlined by Brown et al. (2009), have received little consideration. In this article, we introduce the *mother-based intervention* and the *primary contact person* assumption as key concepts providing a framework for understanding the structural exclusion of fathers from social services.

### Theoretical Framework: The Mother-Based Intervention

This article is part of a larger project that is mapping fathers' structural and organizational exclusion from social services. The hypothesis guiding this project is that such exclusion exists and at least partly originates from the services themselves, for organizational reasons that go beyond the level of the individual social worker.

Previous research has mapped the structural exclusion of fathers on the policy-making level, identifying three types of conflicts—the professional, the ethical, and the political—that act as barriers to strengthening fathers' engagement in family-related policy and dissuade policy makers from creating father-oriented policies (The authors, forthcoming B).

In the absence of explicit policies, regulations, and guidelines targeted at the inclusion of fathers, we have identified what we call *the mother-based intervention*. While social workers may identify the importance of fathers and may interact with them as part of family-oriented interventions, these interventions are built on the assumption that mothers stand at the center of the family and, therefore, should stand at the center of the intervention (Authors, 2020). To date, research has focused on the policy-making level and has been limited to identifying how this assumption has been explicitly addressed in policies and regulations; it has not tracked its mechanisms and expressions in social work interventions. In this article we examine the manifestations of the mother-based intervention in the day-to-day routine work of social workers in the field. Our research question is: **In what ways do the *organizational culture, norms, and structure* of the social services affect the inclusion of fathers in family-oriented social work interventions?**

## Methodology

To explore this research question, we chose the methodology of organizational ethnography. It explores organizational life on a day-to-day basis, providing a look into the inner workings of an organizational structure (Neyland, 2008).

We conducted an organizational ethnography of six Departments of Social Services (DSS) in Israel, focusing on the practices of family social workers—the frontline workers delivering family-oriented interventions. In Israel, DSSs are found in every municipality; they operate under the municipal authority's jurisdiction and professionally answer to the national Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA). They are considered to be the mainstay of the Israeli welfare system. Family social workers are defined as primary professionals in charge of family-oriented interventions (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017). They are required to undergo specialized training for the position and serve as the key professional in the regional team entrusted with family interventions; they are responsible for managing the intervention with the individual client or with the family, including all its members. Their role is to create, implement, and monitor an intervention plan that will improve the family situation, with the aim of achieving goals determined in partnership with the family (Winter & Morley-Sagiv, 2011). The designated clients and the target of the family social worker’s intervention are, by definition, the entire family, including the interaction between its members, between the parents, between parents and their children, between siblings, and between the family and its surroundings. Collaborative working relationships are the essence of the intervention (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017).

Although there are few studies of fathers' engagement with social services in Israel, existing research shows a pattern similar to that documented in other systems (and described earlier). It has documented patterns of workers' reluctance to engage with fathers (Baum, 2015a), the expression of gendered perceptions of parenthood in the work of social workers (Davidson-Arad, Peled, & Leichtentritt, 2008), difficulty in identifying feelings expressed by fathers (Baum & Negbi, 2013), and more. Thus, the working assumption of this article is that findings from the Israeli system are, to a high degree, relevant to other contexts and systems.

The six DSSs chosen for study represent various settings and cultures: a low-income rural town, a high-income rural town, a low-income urban neighborhood, and a high-income urban neighborhood. In addition, a department serving mainly Jewish ultra-Orthodox clients and one serving Palestinian clients were selected to provide representation of these two groups' cultures.

The ethnography included interviews with relevant workers and the collection of relevant documents, both physical and digital. When deemed necessary, we also participated in staff meetings. For ethical reasons, personal data on clients were not collected and were omitted when research participants accidentally reported them.

Interviews focused on the day-to-day routine work with families. Participants were asked to describe their daily work, focusing on the role that fathers take in it. When needed, the participants were asked to provide examples of typical and atypical families.

In the first stage we interviewed three family social workers in each DSS (except in one DDS, where the entire team consisted of two workers). We then interviewed other workers who were deemed relevant to the project, based either on participants' recommendations or on our analysis of the initial interviews. This study reports on interviews with 43 workers; most were family social workers, but we also interviewed intake workers, child protection officers, custody officers, team heads, department managers, and deputy managers.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated by the interviewer when not conducted in Hebrew. Data were analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, identifying common themes within and between interviews and departments.

## Findings

As described earlier, this article's main argument is that the work routine of family social workers in the DSS prioritizes engaging with one person in each family, in contrast with the policies and guidelines for family social work. This section presents the empirical support for this claim. We begin by describing the implicit nature of the primary contact assumption and then provide an account of three of its manifestations: the preference for mother-focused programs on the organizational level, the focus on father engagement in complex situations, and the engagement of fathers in the absence of mothers. We then explore the reasons for and causes of the primary contact person assumption.

### The Implicit Nature of the Primary Contact Person Assumption

Formal work routines, policies, and practice guidelines in MOLSA and the DSS do not document a preference for working with one parent. Indeed, one of the primary documents of the MOLSA defining the work of family social workers, titled '*An Outline for Family Social Worker Intervention in the Departments of Social Services,'* stresses the importance of connecting with all family members:

One must note that reality points to the fact that most clients of the department's services in practice are women, and an essential role of the family social worker is to provide accessibility to the department's services to all family members, that is also to men and children. (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017, p. 17)

In emphasizing that the expectation is for the social worker to be in contact with all family members, this document, however, acknowledges that 'reality points to the fact' that this is the exception and not the rule. Similarly, most research participants claimed, on the one hand, that they attempt to work with all family members equally; on the other hand, they acknowledged that most clients are women. Anat, a social worker in a department in a low-income rural community, describes her work this way:

**Interviewer**: How do you see, in your perception and in the field, the place of fathers in your work as a family social worker?

**Interviewee**: In general, they are full partners. Like, they're partners and [if] they're available, they're welcome. We do not close the door. The problem is that most of them are at work, when they work, if they're in the picture at all. We have many single mothers.

Anat makes claims similar to those made in *Outline for Family Social Worker Intervention*: the services welcome both fathers and mothers, but fathers tend not to accept this invitation. Fathers' absence is due to their reluctance to approach the services.

However, looking into social workers' work routines leads one to question what they mean when they use the phrase 'father engagement.' In most cases, even when social workers claim they are 'engaging' fathers, this does not result in an equal role for fathers and mothers: fathers often play a secondary role in interventions.

As shown later in this section, workers tend to build the intervention around a primary contact person (PCP), with whom they have most contact. Although this primary contact person can theoretically be of any gender, it is a role reserved almost exclusively for mothers.

The assumption that the primary contact person is the mother is typically left implicit, because the professional ethos is that of equal treatment of both parents. However, workers sometimes make it explicit, as Moshe, a child protection worker in a department in a middle-class urban community, states:

In each family under our care, so, they tell you who's the significant contact person. So, the significant contact person [in the described case] is the mother, with the father there was this introductory meeting to know who he is.

In most cases the PCP assumption surfaces through several mechanisms: the organizational preference for mother-oriented programs; the nature of father engagement, in which fathers are involved only in 'complicated' or 'fundamental' situations; and the focus on fathers only in the absence or dysfunction of mothers.

### Organizational Preference for Mothers: 'We're in contact with whoever is in contact with us’

Although family social work necessarily involves working with multiple clients in each case—parents, children, other relatives, and sometimes educational professionals—most family social workers find it important to have one person they can work with primarily in each family. Tamar, a worker in a department in a high-income urban community, describes how she decides who that primary contact will be:

Once there's a figure that's more in contact with us it's something that's reciprocal! I mean, it's not that I can't address him and make a phone call, but I have less of a talk with him, like… I don't have, he doesn't see fit to…. And many times he might say ‘ask my wife’ or something like that.

Michal, a department manager and family worker in a DSS in a rural, high-income community, describes how the starting point of interventions dictates this work pattern:

In most of the cases, unless there's some info on risk for children, most applications are the family's initiative. So we're in touch with whoever contacts us, actually. Usually the ones contacting us are the mothers, not the fathers. We aspire more and more for contact with the fathers but it doesn't really happen, I'll call it an excuse. In the excuse that the father works, [it is] that he couldn't come, I [the mother] am more available, I'm more, I can come more.

Both Tamar and Michal describe their focus on mothers in their work as a result of the preference of the families themselves and of mothers’ greater availability. Implicit in this reasoning is that having primary contact with only one person in a family is necessary to conduct an intervention; contact with other family members is beneficial but not essential. This is the embodiment of the assumption of the single contact person.

### Fathers’ engagement necessary in complex situations

As discussed, in routine situations, workers work exclusively or primarily with whoever initiates the department's application, who is usually the mother. Just as indicative of the different roles of mothers and fathers and of the PCP assumption is the pattern of contacting fathers only in complex or problematic situations. Family social workers seem to involve fathers only when interventions reach a critical point. This is how Michal describes the difference between those situations where she approaches fathers and those in which she works only with mothers:

[I approach fathers] If things are more fundamental, like family therapy, and less the economic or monetary parts—like after-school activities, or clothing for the children, or other matters; there it's less relevant to meet the father. I'm OK with talking only to the mother, and I get a general sense of the family. When it's actually concerning therapy, and in fundamental issues, like child protection, there the father has, of course, 100%, I say that each parent has 100% influence on the children, so it's not even a question.

Michal stresses the importance of engaging fathers—but only in situations she sees as critically important. In routine situations, she is content to work with mothers only.

Another pattern of fathers' differential engagement is beginning the intervention with just the involvement of the mother and then recruiting the father only when deemed necessary. Oshrat, a worker in a DSS in an ultra-Orthodox, low-income community, reveals her perception of father engagement while describing a case she is currently working on:

Say, we have a mother who's cooperating all the time, and now we want to transfer a child from one institution to another, and he has some difficulties with this […] so a mother is one thing, but I am going to invite the father and tell him—'we're going to do this together.' It's very important that [the child] hears both voices.

Oshrat describes her routine work with the mother as satisfying—until the intervention 'has some difficulties’. When the situation gets complicated, Oshrat feels the need to involve the father so as to better reach and help the child. Hanna, from the same department as Oshrat, refers to a similar pattern when describing her work procedure with separated parents:

**Interviewee**: As a single mother she can tell me—I want to open a case, I won't start inviting the father. She's the one managing this unit. But when significant decisions have to be made like sending a child to a boarding school, or Intervention Planning Committees in general, we invite the father even if they're divorced.

 **Interviewer:** But until then, up to this point….

**Interviewee:** Not in the intake [meeting]. If the father really does not live in the house, and the mother comes to open the case, and she's managing the family unit, then no, we won't make efforts to locate the father at this stage. Only later, when there are decisions [to be made]. It's not like we're making decisions at the intake.

Hanna refers to the Intervention Planning Committee ('Va'adot Tichnun Tipul Ve'haaracha'), the group that makes essential decisions regarding the intervention; when the case is brought to that committee, that is the point where fathers have to be engaged. The Intervention Planning Committees, a central element in the Israeli child protection system, have the authority to recommend an intervention plan, including allocating resources to such plans or initiating a process for a court-mandated out-of-home placement.

These committees are mandated by regulation and comprise the family social worker, the child protection officer, and additional social workers and other professionals relevant to the case. The participation of both parents is mandatory, and the committee cannot meet if one of the parents is missing and has not signed a waiver:

The committee shall not meet without the participation of the parents. The parents are the legal and natural guardians of the children, and they have parental rights and obligations. As a rule, in cases of separated/divorced parents, the meeting will also be held in the presence of both parents. (Article 17A, Regulation 8.9, Social Work Regulations)

Because of these committees’ decision-making powers, social workers are legally mandated to ensure that fathers participate in them. Yet most workers describe this duty not only as a legal obligation but also as a chance to increase fathers’ engagement, thereby enabling better solutions for children (although some participants regarded this obligation as a bureaucratic burden).

The obligation to recruit fathers for the committees demonstrates simultaneously both the potential of promoting father engagement through regulations and its limitations. On the positive side, the mandate for fathers’ participation in the committee leads many workers to create a substantial connection with fathers, usually for the first time. However, this effect is limited to the mandatory requirement and does not seem to spread to other aspects of the intervention, stressing the limited effectivity of regulatory action.

### Father’s engagement in cases of the mother's absence or dysfunction

In some cases, fathers played a central role in the interventions, and we asked each worker to recount examples of cases in which fathers were involved to a high degree. Almost every time, the workers described cases where the mother was absent or incapable. As XX, a family worker from a DSS in an ultra-Orthodox, low-income urban community, recounts:

Where there's more contact with the father and not with the mother, it's because it's a mother with postpartum depression, or she's using drugs, or she's diagnosed with some mental disorder and she's not in remission, but usually it's with the mothers, less with the fathers.

Lian, a team leader and family social worker from a DSS in a Palestinian-Israeli low-income rural community, answers the question about engaged fathers this way:

**Interviewer:** Have you had a case with father engagement?

**Interviewee:** Sure, of course there are. There's a case where the mother has cancer, and the father is always in contact with us regarding the woman and the children. He even comes here more than the woman. The woman—I think because of her illness she can't come.

Thus, most of the examples that workers give of engaged fathers are where the mother is not functioning, ill, or missing—which reveals the workers’ reliance on a single contact person. This person is usually the mother, and workers seek to engage fathers only when mothers are not available and the need for an alternative primary contact person arises.

### Sources of the Primary Contact Person Assumption

This project's choice of method—an organizational ethnography—is less suited to uncovering the origins of the primary contact person assumption than to describe it, because of its focus on the current organizational situation and not on past developments. However, one interview trend may reveal the reason for the PCP assumption: the difficulties that workers describe in working with both parents. When asked to discuss cases in which they worked with both parents, workers usually describe the interventions as effective but also as consuming their resources, especially their time. This is how Michal, from a DSS in a high-income suburban community, describes such a case:

It was a very, very complex case, and we always insisted on hearing them both. It was draining. Listen, today, in retrospect, I don't know how I could, for each event, open it to both of them. I don't know. It took two people […] it took two people and sometimes three and sometimes our secretary was involved in this too. We had to, around the clock, check what was really happening in these cases.

Michal stresses the difficulties of working with two parents and the extensive human resources required. Moshe, from a DSS in a high-income urban community, discusses the needed resources and the problems caused when they are not available. In this case, the father was essential but was hard to reach:

So really, it was quite a feat. It really wasn't simple. [The father] was a focus, he was very important, it didn't work, [the intervention] was stuck for so many years, and here, somehow, we made some contact with him. Can I say there's the availability and the time and the procedures to do it? Not at all. Parents are very… fathers are very important, and they are also very destructive many times, they aren't our contact persons.

Several points arise from Moshe’s account. He sees not only the great importance in working with fathers but also the difficulty in doing so. Moreover, he connects the lack of organizational resources to the inability to work with fathers. In Moshe's interview, we can see both the difficulty of working with fathers—specifically, their 'destructiveness'—and its importance.

Thus, even workers like Michal and Moshe who identify the importance of working with fathers see the complexity of doing so and identify the lack of organizational resources as a barrier. Interestingly enough, in both cases described, the workers describe father engagement both as crucial to promoting a complex intervention and as difficult and challenging.

## Discussion: from the primary contact person assumption to the mother-based intervention

The previous section outlined the nature of the PCP assumption and its manifestations and outcomes. It showed how social workers in Israel perceive interventions as focused around a PCP, how this perception manifests in work procedures and routines of the DSSs, and how those lead either to the exclusion of fathers or their marginalization within the interventions.

The PCP assumption draws attention to the structural and organizational characteristics of family social work services. When discussing the causes for the absence of fathers from social work interventions, this article focused not on gendered perceptions of social workers, fathers, and mothers or the general public, but instead on work procedures and routines that are, at least explicitly, gender-neutral: these procedures and routines do not specify a preference for working with mothers rather than with fathers but only for working with a single person, without stating this person's gender.

Existing research on the role of social workers in exacerbating father absence in interventions has focused on cultural causes, specifically female social workers’ lack of therapeutic knowledge of male clients and their dispositions toward fathers. These explanations use broad cultural perceptions regarding gender roles to explain fathers' exclusion.

At first glance, the PCP assumption’s focus on the organizational level may seem contradictory to the existing literature's focus on cultural aspects. Attributing father absence to organizational factors can be seen as limiting the effect of cultural ones. However, a more in-depth look shows that, rather than contradicting each other, the cultural and organizational explanations complement each other. Focusing on the PCP assumption alone does not explain why this PCP is almost exclusively the mother. Nor does focusing on cultural explanations alone account for the high rate of father absence or its persistence in the face of changing cultural norms. Combining these explanations solves these two problems: the primary contact person assumption receives its gendered character from the cultural causes of father absence.

Based on the PCP assumption, social workers contact a single person per family. When choosing the PCP, workers prefer the mother because they see her as a more competent parent, because they find it easier to identify with her, because they are concerned about the father being violent, or for any other cultural explanation. Thus, the workers' cultural tendencies lead them to choose the mother as the PCP, thereby giving this assumption its gendered character.

Conversely, the focus on a single contact person per family reinforces cultural perceptions and biases. Theoretically, the decision to work with either parent should not be colored by bias or cultural norms; workers should be as likely to work with fathers as with mothers. But in the real world, the PCP assumption reveals that the choice to work with one parent limits working with the other parent. Therefore, choosing to work with the father means the worker cannot interact with the mother: it is a choice to prefer him over the mother. Father engagement seems to come at the expense of mothers, creating a zero-sum game (Featherstone [2010] discussed a similar issue).

By forcing workers to choose between fathers and mothers, the PCP assumption exacerbates existing prejudices and biases. Even a small preference for mothers on the cultural level will translate to a substantial—indeed, as our data show, almost exclusive—preference in field practice. This is a similar pattern to how people’s prejudices translate into workforce gender discrimination (Fang & Moro, 2011).

The interaction of the cultural and the structural creates the mother-based intervention: its organizing principle is that services are structured around the centrality of mothers in family-oriented interventions. This interaction may provide a clue both to the sources of the mother-based Intervention and its resistance to change. As discussed earlier, our data do not provide a historical explanation for the emergence of the PCP assumption. However, a plausible explanation is that it originated in earlier periods when mothers' role as caregivers was more dominant and explicit. When the social work profession developed in the mid-twentieth century, mothers were seen as holding sole responsibility for the care of their children. During this period, designing the services around a primary (if not a single) contact person was a logical consequence of those professional perceptions.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, gendered perceptions regarding parents' caring responsibilities have changed considerably, moving in the direction of a more egalitarian division of care (Lewis, 2001). These changes should serve to un-gender the PCP assumption. However, the mother-based intervention remains entrenched as the preferred intervention method in social work. As shown earlier, the interaction of the PCP with structural elements prevents the un-gendering process in family social work.

That family social work is still guided by this intervention method is supported by its similar high prevalence in the various cultural contexts included in this study. As mentioned earlier, the DSSs included in this project represent a variety of Israeli cultures: Jewish ultra-Orthodox, Palestinian, low-income rural towns ('Ayeret Pituach'), and high-income urban areas. Despite the differences in the way different cultures in Israel perceive fatherhood (Strier, 2015), our research did not find substantial differences in the engagement of fathers between these departments. Therefore, one may assume that the PCP and its preference for mothers prevail despite changes in cultural norms regarding fatherhood, and that the relation between cultural norms and father absence from the social services is not that of direct influence, but is rather more complex.

## Conclusion

To answer the question of how the organization of social services affects the inclusion of fathers in family-oriented social work interventions, we introduced the primary contact person assumption: the tendency of social services to focus on a single person as the contact person in each household. In family social work, that person is almost exclusively the mother. Fathers are considered to be significant only in vital decision points in the intervention process or when mothers are absent or unavailable. Thus, fathers have a secondary place in the intervention process.

The PCP assumption, which operates on the structural level, interacts with factors operating on the cultural level to create the mother-based intervention: social services' tendency to work primarily with mothers and to sideline fathers. Although policies, guidelines, and best practices stress the gender neutrality of interventions, work in the field engages mothers primarily, as a result of complex exclusion mechanisms that incorporate both structural and cultural elements.

On the policy level, the main conclusion that may be taken from this study is that the engagement and inclusion of fathers should be a continuous, service-wide effort. Current attempts to engage fathers tend to focus on specialized father-oriented programs (see, for example, Sicouri et al., 2018; Zhang, Scourfield, Cheung, & Sharland, 2018), but this focus neglects the routine intervention process, which forms the central part of the work.

Although this article provides a novel insight into the impact of organizational factors on fathers’ exclusion from social work interventions, it does so in a preliminary way. As a qualitative case study on family social work in Israel, its scope is limited by its focus on the specific (although central) field of family social work. Other areas of social work may show a different pattern of organizational interaction with fathers, and further research is needed in a more diversified setting. In addition, it is limited by its Israeli focus. Although father engagement in Israeli social services presents patterns similar to those described in other welfare systems, because of the substantial international variation in the organization of welfare services, our conclusions may not be applicable to welfare systems worldwide. R, it offers

## References

Addis, M. E., & Mahalik, J. R. (2003). Men, masculinity, and the contexts of help seeking. *American Psychologist*, *58*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.1.5

Baum, N. (2015a). Gender-sensitive intervention to improve work with fathers in child welfare services. *Child and Family Social Work*, (2005), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12259

Baum, N. (2015b). The unheard gender: The neglect of men as social work clients. *British Journal of Social Work*, *46*(5), 1463–1471.

Baum, N., & Negbi, I. (2013). Children removed from home by court order: Fathers’ disenfranchised grief and reclamation of paternal functions. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *35*(10), 1679–1686. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.07.003

Brewsaugh, K., Masyn, K. E., & Salloum, A. (2018). Child welfare workers ’ sexism and beliefs about father involvement. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *89*(April), 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.04.029

Brewsaugh, K., & Strozier, A. (2016). Fathers in child welfare: What do social work textbooks teach our students ? *Children and Youth Services Review*, *60*, 34–41. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.11.015

Brown, L., Callahan, M., Strega, S., Walmsley, C., & Dominelli, L. (2009). Manufacturing ghost fathers: The paradox of father presence and absence in child welfare. *Child and Family Social Work*, *14*(1), 25–34. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2008.00578.x

Bundy-Fazioli, K., Briar-Lawson, K., & Hardiman, E. R. (2009). A qualitative examination of power between child welfare workers and parents. *British Journal of Social Work*, *39*(8), 1447–1464. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcn038

Burrus, S. W. M., Green, B. L., Worcel, S., Finigan, M., & Furrer, C. (2012). Do dads matter? Child welfare outcomes for father-identified families. *Journal of Child Custody*, *9*(3), 201–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/15379418.2012.715550

Clapton, G. (2009). How and why social work fails fathers: Redressing an imbalance, social work’s role and responsibility. *Practice*, *21*(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503150902745989

Davidson-Arad, B., Peled, E., & Leichtentritt, R. (2008). Representations of fathers and mothers in court petitions for dependent minor status for children at risk. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*(8), 893–902. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.12.016

Davies, L. (2016). Are young fathers “hard to reach”? Understanding the importance of relationship building and service sustainability. *Journal of Children’s Services*, *11*(4), 317–329. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCS-03-2016-0007

Ewart-Boyle, S., Manktelow, R., & Mccolgan, M. (2015). Social work and the shadow father: Lessons for engaging fathers in Northern Ireland. *Child and Family Social Work*, *20*(4), 470–479. https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12096

Fang, H., & Moro, A. (2011). Theories of statistical discrimination and affirmative action: A survey. In *Handbook of Social Economics* (Vol. 1, pp. 133–200). Elsevier B.V. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-444-53187-2.00005-X

Featherstone, B. (2010). Writing fathers in but mothers out!!! *Critical Social Policy*, *30*(2), 208–224. https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018309358290

Gupta, A., & Featherstone, B. (2015). What about my dad? Black fathers and the child protection system. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, *4*(1), 77–91.

Haworth, S. (2019). A systematic review of research on social work practice with single fathers. *Practice*, *0*(0), 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2019.1575955

Lewis, J. (2001). The decline of the male breadwinner model: Implications for work and care. *Social Politics*, *8*(2). https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/8.2.152

Malm, K., Murray, J., & Geen, R. (2006). *What about the dads? Child welfare agencies’ efforts to identify, locate and involve nonresident fathers*. Washington, D.C.

Maxwell, N., Scourfield, J. B., Featherstone, B., Holland, S., & Tolman, R. (2012). Engaging fathers in child welfare services : A narrative review of recent research evidence. *Child and Family Social Work*, *17*(2), 160–169. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00827.x/abstract

Neyland, D. (2008). *Organizational Ethnography*. Los Angeles, California: SAGE Publications.

O’Donnell, J. M., Jr., W. E. J., D’Aunno, L. E., & Thornton, H. L. (2005). Fathers in child welfare: caseworkers’ perspectives. *Child Welfare*, *84*(3), 387–414. Retrieved from http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=c8h&AN=106529189&lang=pt-br&site=ehost-live&authtype=ip,cookie,uid

Shapiro, A. F., & Krysik, J. (2010). Finding fathers in social work research and practice. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, *7*(1).

Sicouri, G., Tully, L., Collins, D., Burn, M., Sargeant, K., Frick, P., … Dadds, M. (2018). Toward father-friendly parenting interventions: A qualitative study. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, *39*(2), 218–231. https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1307

Strega, S., Fleet, C., Brown, L., Dominelli, L., Callahan, M., & Walmsley, C. (2008). Connecting father absence and mother blame in child welfare policies and practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *30*(7), 705–716. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2007.11.012

Strier, R. (2015). Fathers in Israel: Contextualizing images of fatherhood. In *The father’s role: Cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 197–226).

Strug, D., & Wilmore-Schaeffer, R. (2003). Fathers in the social work literature: Policy and practice implications. *Families in Society-the Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, *84*(4), 503–511.

Velázquez, S., Edwards, M., Vincent, S., & Rey, J. (2009). Engaging fathers with the child welfare system, phase I of a knowledge development project: What does it take? *Protecting Children*, *24*(2), 5–22.

Weisberg-Nakash, N. (2017). *An outline for family social worker intervention in the departments of social services*. Jerusalem.

Winter, M., & Morley-Sagiv, D. (2011). *The project book: social services reform*. Jerusalem.

Zhang, M. Le, Scourfield, J. B., Cheung, S. Y., & Sharland, E. (2018). Comparing fathers and mothers who have social work contact. *Social Work Research*, *42*(2), 131–136. https://doi.org/10.1093/swr/svx027

## Funding

This work was supported by Israeli Science Foundation (grant number 1269/17).