***Fathers in the eyes of Family Welfare Services’ social workers in Germany and Israel: Feminism, ideals and disappointments***

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**ABSTRACT**

Despite the increasing discourse on the importance and essence of fatherhood, it was documented in several studies that in social work practice, non-hegemonic fathers populations, which many of are clients of family welfare services, are being undertreated in comparison with mothers. This paper is examining the issue from an angel that was not touched upon before: comparing perspectives of two allegedly culturally different groups of social workers and working spheres in Israel and in Germany. The aim is to understand the gender ideals, images and socialization which guides social workers in their work with fathers and how feminist ideology impact field practice within family welfare services in both countries.

7 in depth semi structured Interviews with German social workers were compared to 7 Interviews with Israeli social workers. Interviewees were selected according to a convenience sampling. All the interviews’ transcripts were analyzed according to a qualitative content analysis method, with the aim to trace the unique gender perceptions and world view of social workers regarding fathers.

The findings demonstrated that along the similarities and commonality in both countries in not involving fathers in comparison with mothers, unique aspects were found in each country – according to social workers’ idiosyncratic gender socialization, feminist approaches and world views, and the specific demographic and cultural climate of that country. This paper stresses the importance of understanding how all these factors influence fathers-social workers dynamics, and the importance of self-reflection among social workers in different countries on the ideals, images and stereotypes that might impact their practice.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Initially, in Western countries such as in north America and Europe, the notion of integrating fathers into welfare services treatment began in the 1990's, within the context of violence towards women, which led to the development of programs targeting violent men (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Featherstone, 2013; Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008). Another avenue was the rising divorce rates and changing family structures which led to concern about the effects fathers’ absence might have on the children’s welfare and development (Brown et al., 2009; Maxwell et al., 2012). Thus, by the beginning of the 21st century, the social services adopted a dichotomous view of fathers: as a risk to their families, or as a resource.

Fathers’ involvement in childcare has been found to contribute to their children on the cognitive, behavioral, health, and education levels (Tully et al., 2017). Children with present and involved fathers were found to do better in school and have healthy self-esteem and self-concepts, more likely to exhibit empathy and pro-social behaviors and avoid high-risk behaviors (Heinrich, 2014). Conversely, research suggests that children in households with absent fathers are more likely to use drugs, have increased educational needs, and exhibit more health, emotional and behavioral problems than children with present fathers (Horn & Sylvester, 2002). From a practical perspective, fathers’ greater engagement within the treatment benefits the welfare system and the social work discipline, as this also contributes to more effective family-oriented social work interventions (Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018; Malm, Murray & Geen, 2006; Burrus et al., 2012).

However, despite these consistent findings, fathers’ involvement with family welfare services remains low. Comprehensive statistical data are hard to achieve, but consistent findings from various welfare states show that almost universally, social work interventions rarely include fathers and focus mostly, if not exclusively, on mothers (Brown et al., 2009; Featherstone, 2004, 2013; Maxwell et al., 2012; Scourfield, Smail, & Butler, 2015). This was found specifically in Israel (Authors, 2021; Authors, 2020), and as it seems also in Germany (Sabla, 2009). However, transnational comparisons are still absent from research.

***Gender construction of fatherhood in welfare services***

As mentioned above, universally, welfare services are targeted at women and children. Welfare services are also incompatible with the traditional breadwinning roles of fathers, e.g. men’s long work hours are not compatible with the operation times of the services (Baum, 2015a; Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & Mccolgan, 2015). Men also often express distress, anxiety, fear, and depression differently from women (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Baum, 2015a; Brown et al., 2009). The vast majority of social workers are women, and as women, they experience a power struggle, in which the female worker, holding professional and regulatory power, faces the male client, who holds patriarchal power (Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson, & Hardiman, 2009). Even though there might be a difference between male and female social workers in including fathers, this paper does not deal with this aspect and refers to social work as a feminine profession. Therefore, a substantial part of social workers’ difficulty in working with fathers stems from gender differences.

On the other hand, men also have been found to experience fear of social workers (Baum, 2015b), who often hold sexist and stigmatic conceptions of fathers (Philip, Clifton, & Brandon, 2018; Authors, in submission). Also, mothers often position themselves as gatekeepers between the social services and fathers, sometimes going as far as refraining from identifying the father (O’Donnell, Jr., D’Aunno, & Thornton, 2005), based upon fear of a father with a history of violence, concern about losing custody to the father, unwillingness to share responsibility for the children, or avoid losing benefits attached to a single parent status (Maxwell et al., 2012).

***Transnational and intersectional aspects of fatherhood in welfare services***

The lack of transnational perspective is especially problematic considering the importance of ethnic, cultural, socio-economical and other intersectional factors when looking into fathers who are clients of family welfare services (Brewsaugh et al., 2018; Brown et al., 2009; Dominelli, Strega, Walmsley, Callahan, & Brown, 2011; Featherstone, 2013; Gupta & Featherstone, 2015). The substantial influence of intersectional elements, besides the category of fatherhood, requires a comparative study to understand these differences and their influence. Both Israel and Germany are countries with diverse demographic climate due to immigration, thus might be a significant comparison base.

The topic of gender and cultural construction of fatherhood, both in Israel and Germany is a well-studied topic, and will be only mentioned briefly since this paper focuses on fatherhood within the context of family welfare services. In Israel, minority groups of fathers are mainly Jews with an Arabic background, Palestinians, and Ultra-orthodox Jews, and are often stigmatized and judged for their parental skills, even though their distress should be attribute also to their structural position within society (Strier & Author, 2021). In Germany, scholarly on cultural aspects of fatherhood deals mainly with immigrants and refugees, mostly from Muslim background, and their encounter with German norms (Tunç, 2021).

It is also important to briefly compare social work in Israel and Germany. However, a comprehensive comparison and analysis of these differences with regards to fathers will be discussed in another paper (Authors, in preparation), since the focus of the current paper is the individual perceptions of social workers. In both countries, social workers are qualified via an academic, or an equivalent, degree. In Israel the focus is more on psychotherapy or community work, whereas in Germany on education (social pedagogy). In both countries, the social services are working under the Federal government and specific welfare laws aiming to protect children and helping families (Textor, 1995; www.gov.il/he/departments/molsa).

Finally, one should mention another gap in the existing scholarly on fathers and social work, which is the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework. While existing research has identified numerous elements that reduce fathers’ engagement, as well as sexist and gender beliefs of social workers (Philip, Clifton, & Brandon, 2018; Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018), as this paper touches upon, no explicit explanation, able to account for connections, mutual influence, and counter dependencies between transnational and intersectional elements, has been offered. Thus, this research is aiming to bridge those gapes, and to offer a new perspective on the well-studied topic of father's absence from family welfare services' interventions.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the professional and gender perceptions of social workers and what are their working habits, attitudes, and actual interactions (or lack of them) with fathers?

2. Are there any certain gender ideas or norms which guides social workers in their work with fathers?

3. What are the differences, or similarities, between two groups of allegedly culturally different social workers and clients – in Israel and in Germany?

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the findings changed the above-mentioned original questions and stressed the importance of understanding how feminist agendas influence fathers-social workers dynamics, and the importance of self-reflection among social workers in different countries on the unique ideals, images and stereotypes that might impact the practice in a particular cultural-psycho social climate and demographic sphere.

**METHODOLOGY**

7 in depth semi structured Interviews with German social workers were conducted parallelly to 7 in depth semi structured Interviews with Israeli social workers. Interviewees were selected according to a convenience sampling. Meaning, departments and social workers that were willing to take part in the research were chosen. In Israel, interviews were conducted in Hebrew, with 6 women and 1 man from three family welfare departments in Israel. In Germany, interviews were conducted in English (not the interviewees’ mother tongue) with 6 women and 1 man, from the equivalent service of the Israeli family welfare services: Der Allgemeine Soziale Dienst (ASD), in two different regions. These services in both countries deal with families that are in distress due to severe psychosocial problems and/or educational problems of children, and are provided by trained social workers. In Israel and Germany, most interviews were conducted online. The interviews aimed to understand both the workers’ perspective on involving fathers and their daily routines and actual practices.

In both countries, two interviews were conducted and analyzed first, and served as a pilot study. Thereafter, the rest of the interviews were conducted. All the interviews’ transcripts were analyzed according to a qualitative content analysis method, with the aim to trace the unique perceptions and world view of social workers regarding fathers. First, interviews were read and analyzed according to a qualitative-narrative method of categorization offered by Shkedi in his book "[Multiple Case Narrative: A qualitative approach to studying multiple populations](https://books.google.co.il/books?hl=iw&lr=&id=oY46AAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PR1&dq=ASHER+qualitative+research+SHKEDI&ots=JdI0oWhr9F&sig=Jbb5TLaMCJZLUYVJKKnlW_r-4dg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=ASHER%20qualitative%20research%20SHKEDI&f=false)" (2005).

Following, the German interviews were divided into categories that were found in the former analysis of the Israeli interviews. However, the regular category analysis did not yield sufficient or in-depth conclusions. Therefore, a 'second order' analysis was conducted with other researchers (Shkedi, 2004), in the spirit of the qualitative content analysis – QCA (Graneheim, Lindgren and Lundman, 2017). On the axis of two-dimensional model of QCA epistemological approaches: phenomenological description VS hermeneutic interpretation, the initial analysis of the interviews was more of the first one, focusing on the manifest content with concrete descriptions and deductive (concept driven) approach, whereas the second round of analysis adopted a distance approach from the text with more abstract descriptions and interpretations and abductive approach. For ethical considerations, texts relating to specific clients, also the social workers’ names and department’s location were anonymized, so that identifiable data was not exposed.

**FINDINGS**

**The ideal father images**

Social workers in both groups expressed, explicitly or implicitly, a certain image of the ideal father type, or ideal father’s characteristics, which were associated with positive expressions and high appreciation. Alternatively, social workers described, as concrete case descriptions or as general statements, an image of the common client father. The common client father mostly stands in contrast to the ideal father image, and in a very few and exceptional cases matches this ideal (therefore is classified as a “good client” or a “successful treatment”). The different father images’ characteristics concerned emotional, behavioral, and familial aspects, as well as economical function and general attitude towards the treatment, the welfare system or the social worker herself. In the following, we will elaborate the varied expressions of the different father images, and the differences between Israel and Germany in that regard.

**An egalitarian trend?**

An ideal father image was seen in both countries along the interviews, but with some differences. In Germany, the desired father client social workers described was as followed:

“They [the fathers that are more involved in the treatment] are softer, open minded, can talk about their own feelings, their own childhood, more kind in their marriage… the mother and father share it half to looking after the children and money” (Germany, 3).

The egalitarian idea of gender equality and men that are more adherent to feminine characteristics matches the sociological or social policy perspective of most interviews in Germany, regarding their wish to change gender roles and get fathers to be more involved. But along this wish for social progression, raises the reality where fathers clients are perceived as not able to fulfill this utopic wish, and are not keeping up with the new trend of increased fathers’ involvement, hence, are more old fashioned in their socialization:

“I think what changed in the last 20 or 30 years is that the fathers do more, for example, than my father, the fathers of the older generations… we have more and more fathers of course who want to take responsibility of their kids…but we have it quite often that they say "I can't do it"… because they are also socialized that fathers are not in this responsibility…” (Germany, 4).

In Israel this ideal image was similar but different. Social workers expressed policy change towards increasing fathers’ involvement:

“I think the policy [regarding fathers] has changed. If in the past the mother was more dominant in the Vaada [the treatment committee, or the Hilfeplanung], today the father has to be invited and present” (Israel, O1).

At the same time, they also tagged fathers clients as more old fashioned in their socialization, as in the German interviews. Nevertheless, there was a strong emphasize on the Machoistic tendency of the Israeli society as a hall:

“I think that masculinity construction in the Israeli society is… that a man has to be strong and Macho and then he won’t ask for help… the problem is in the education and messages in the Israeli society. That there is a certain type of masculinity and other options do not count… in the welfare clients population I don’t see any change in that aspect” (Israel, KY2).

Even when a father shares the maternal role with the mother, and follows the father ideal that was dominant in the German interviews, he is looked at by the Israeli social worker as unusual and suspicious:

“This father was… from the quiet ones… I do, I take, whatever [the mother] says… my impression was that this father cooks, functions at home… takes care of showers [for the children], he takes care of everything…but it turned out that there was a sexual abuse [by the father towards a child]… so I say, one father that apparently functioned, this is what he did?? ” (Israel, O1).

Additionally, if the German social workers graded a good father as a father who takes care of his children and shows active parenthood, emotional capacity, and equality in household with the mother, the Israeli social workers put much greater emphasis on the economical and materialistic capacity of the father, and his traditional role as the breadwinner of the family. Hence, contradicting the egalitarian model of equality between the parents:

“He bought them [his children] everything that is needed because the mother had no money and she said: ‘they have father with money, so he shall pay’… and he always said yes… he really bought to the children and gave them…” (Israel, A1).

**The disappointing common father**

The different ideal father images in both countries were compared, mostly as a contrast, to common fathers that are clients and are not very involved in the treatment. Most of them were judged negatively in opposition to the above images of an ideal father, or in opposition to the mother’s maternal functioning (this will be elaborated further on).

In both countries, only few interviewees acknowledged the stigmatic and judgmental approach of social workers towards fathers:

“Social workers judge the father all the time, perceive him as abusive, not caring enough… even when he did all the efforts he can” (Israel, A5).

I really do my best not to be stigmatizing but it's always a challenge… we, as social workers, we make the experience that they are, if you look at some statistics, they are more violent, they are more the perpetrator of domestic violence. But I think that is all in our head and we have to make sure that this is only… this is not always the case” (Germany, 6).

But also in that aspect there were some differences. In Germany, for example, the irony was that while expecting fathers to be emotional and soft (as women are?), the discourse towards them was at times harsh and judgmental, with much use of generalizations and very few expressions of empathy. The common father client was tagged as unsensitive, not intelligent, and unable to join the treatment process – quite the opposite from the ideal father image that was mentioned above in the German interviews:

“It's not possible for them to realize that it's not good for the children and it's not just the fault of the mother because it's also the fault of themselves when they are acting like idiots because they are very insulted” (Germany, 3).

“Like, they [fathers that are not very involved in the treatment] join the meeting, but they are not really open to change anything or they don't bring a requirement… and then the mother is the one who wants support, like find the meeting and the appointments at the youth office but the other person doesn't really care about that” (Germany, 2).

In Israel, social workers also tended to tag fathers clients as emotionally blocked and unmotivated to take part in the treatment:

“With fathers it is very hard to talk emotions, about the treatment or the process. The mother (eventually) will take the child to treatment… even when there is a crisis the mother will be there all the time… (but) the father will not be there… maybe it is something cultural especially in the welfare population we are talking about… that he is very busy with breadwinning or he is emotionally blocked" (Israel, A7).

Interestingly enough, when fathers did express emotions, they were also tagged negatively when theses emotions did not match their expected role. Hence, fathers should express emotions only in a way that is convenient to the social worker:

“I think about the fathers that I am in contact with… they are very unbalanced, they are overwhelmed and flood you with information and very manipulative" (Israel, B4).

But the main gap was between the ideal father image of a potent man and a full breadwinner, and the common father client who is economically impotent:

“In many cases it is a matter of poverty so the father does not pay alimony… and then he either disappear or in jail or he just doesn’t care enough about the children… there was a case of a father that we tried to involved him about the daughter and he did show up but with regarding the payment [for the daughter] he refused" (Israel, KY2).

Paradoxically, even in cases where the father does work hard and functions as a breadwinner (but still a poor breadwinner), in the social worker’s eyes there is no need to make an effort to involve him, since he is fulfilling his main task as a father:

“I have a couple that when I come [for a house visit] the father is sleeping because he did night shift… so he won’t be interested to sit and talk (Q: and do you try to involve fathers?) A: In this case it won’t do any good… he won’t cooperate, he was not interested in me" (Israel, O2).

**Non powerful fathers**

Not surprisingly, women within the family welfare system hold great power over men. ~~This is a well-studied issue that is not innovative.~~ However, in our findings we can see the different ways of this power imbalance in each country.

In general, and not surprisingly, in both countries interviewees depicted women within the sphere of the family welfare services as more powerful. Firstly, as feminine professional power, where most practitioners, as well as the leadership, are women:

“Four men and sixteen women [in the team]. Yes. And also the women in the leadership, so lot of women power” (Germany, 2).

“There is a lot of awareness among the social workers that there is a biased in favor of the mothers, because it is easier for us as women to identify with the mother” (Israel, KY1).

In Germany, as it seems, the legal aspect of custody plays a major role in enhancing and expressing feminine power over fathers. Mothers have a preliminary advantage when it comes to custody, as described in the interviews, whereas fathers are being included mostly when they share the custody. So mothers usually have the custody, have the legal power, and are the gatekeepers who decides if the social worker could know the father or not. Eventually, social workers in Germany were afraid to challenge or appeal mothers and their ultimate power:

“In Germany you have to think about the custody, and in this case the mother has the… sole custody. That she is entitled to custody and the father, he doesn't have any rights” (Germany, 6).

“Because it's more often that the child stays with the mother… and if the mother doesn't want to involve the father, it's also for us hard to involve him” (Germany, 2).

The only exceptional are refugees’ families, where the father is described as the more dominant and power holder in the family:

“I would say if there is Muslim background they are more stick to cultural… and also, yea, these old ideas about family and about the man being the head of the family. I think the Muslim fathers, this is more important. It's not always the case but I think in my majority of the cases and the cultural factors are more important for them” (Germany, 6).

This will be further discussed in the next sections. But even with regards to the cultural gap, mothers were treated with greater respect:

“I had huge difficulties with Caribbean mothers, and I had criticized their parenting. I mean, that it the worst thing I could do to this particular culture group. And you know, it was about me finding a way to reach these women without making this a cultural issue. So you have to find a way, because they feel they are being discriminated everywhere…” (Germany, 7).

In Israel, however, the custody was not such a central issue. This could be due to the fact the family social workers do not deal with divorce dispute as German family social workers do. It was found in another analysis of the Israeli interviews that non-married fathers are less involved than married ones (Perez, Mizrahi and Halpern, in submission). Nevertheless, the excessive use of feminine power over men was more prominent when they did not fit the expected financial role:

“It was hard to handle him [the father] because it was obvious that he doesn’t function… he was not a working man… all those years he and his wife made a living from income support payment… but she was working and he didn’t” (Israel, KY2).

Moreover, fathers were being seen and treated fully only when they “bended head” and aligned with the social worker’s expectations, and accept the professional setting where the social worker has the knowledge regarding the fathers’ problems, motives and even feelings:

“The father felt that there was a big misjustice that was done to him… that only his wife was being heard… eventually I treated him for 6 years [after this crisis]… and it was quit an amazing therapy… he also said it… first we recognized that when he screams it means he is afraid… he feel threatened…he is a big man… and he shouts… but actually he is dying of fear… ” (Israel, KY1).

**To educate them**

This leads to another aspect of educational work with fathers. In Germany, it seems that the expectation of full responsibility from fathers leads to certain type of intervention, which is less therapeutic and more didactive. The social worker is trying to fit the client father into the ideal father that she has in mind. Meaning, she encourages fathers to follow a certain model:

“To give them something like a ‘Vorbild’. You know what a ‘Vorbild’ is? They learn something from someone else. Like modeling… because many fathers, they don't have a model like this” (Germany, 7).

“There are some cases where fathers need an explanation to understand that if the child doesn't feel comfortable to meet them ,~~that~~ they have to be patience and that there is going to be a process” (Germany, 5).

The educational method of work with fathers, has some nuances and differences when comparing German and Israeli social workers. In the German interviews, there was a cultural-ethnic element in the father-client image – the aspect of immigration, hence being non-German (mostly ~~Muslim~~ From Arab countries):

“I think in old fashioned Arab families, it's very hard for the father when they arrive to take the children and meet them… I think that they are not very flexible… We got 70 percent immigrants… Sometimes I think when they've got a Turkish background or an Arabian background it's harder for them because they never had the contact with their children… On the Arabs side it's very old fashioned, and very hard to find new solutions for families” (Germany, 3).

Accordingly, the cultural-ethnic affiliation does not stand in line with the ideal father type, that is more equal to the mother and caring for the children:

“I think there is a group that is more involved because they say "O.K, then I care for the children and what I can give is in family care so I do it in family care", and there is a second group, they say "No, it's not my job". In our region we have a lot of people from Arabic countries and from African countries. They are socialized that it's not the father's job to care for the family and to go with the kids to the doctor or things like that" (Germany, 4).

In the Israeli interviews, the element of immigration was less prominent, perhaps due to the different demographic climate of the welfare clients in Israel. Mostly, Arab populations are treated by Arab social workers. This group was studied in our research but was not part of the current paper’s sample. However, as mentioned above, the financial functioning of the father was significant in his worthiness in the eyes of the social worker. Hence, his ability as a breadwinner. Accordingly, the educational task of the social worker, in order to adjust the client-father to the ideal-father, was to help him being a better breadwinner. This clearly contradicts, in a way, the egalitarian expectation of social workers for equal parental participation.

“If I [the father] come and ask for a fridge so probably the financial management is not so good… so we want to see how we can improve [the father] to be better financially” (Israel, O1).

And finally, there was an interesting point seen among the Israeli social workers, which closes the circle of the finding chapter and touches upon the initial category of the ideal father image and expectations from fathers clients. In Israel, in addition to the breadwinner ideal, there was also an ideal of the all-known and strong father, who simply knows how to be a father and holds great parental authority. Those who do not match these ideals and require mentoring and help, as some clients are, are seen very negatively as weak and pathetic:

“He [the father] received a lot of parental mentoring… a very weak, hesitantly and knowledge-less father, was very afraid talking to the children… I felt some kind of dependency on his side that I will tell him what to do and how… something in being a father naturally was not there” (Israel, B4).

“Our difficulty as women [social workers] to stand against cry and strong emotions of men. There was [a father]… he just sobbed on the phone… and it turned my stomach inside out… because he is a man” (Israel, KY1).

In Israel social workers were allegedly more therapy oriented in their interventions, but in actual fact they also demonstrated pedagogical practice. This paradox where social workers perceive their role in educating the father, or conducting an emotional therapy with him, but at the same time despise the neediness of those fathers, corresponds with the already above-mentioned findings in Israel: the suspicious towards fathers that are less “masculine” and more emotional, and the machoistic model in the Israeli society. Dependent fathers, either economically or emotionally, are either being scorned or being scale down as dependent irresponsible children. The following quote, describing an intensive and close relationship with a father who share his needs and distress with the social worker, might demonstrate:

“So I call him [the father] and tell him – what are you doing? What is this nonsense?... I went to them for a house visit, I explained why he needs to calm down, and that this is not a way to behave” (Israel, O1).

**DISCUSSION**

The current paper analyzed social workers’ perceptions on working with fathers in family welfare services. In addition to understand the beliefs and world views with regards to gender and interventions with fathers, the paper compared two culturally different groups of social workers and working spheres. Following the above literature review which opened this paper, this study aimed to bridge the gap in existing scholarly and to study comparative and intersectional aspects in working with fathers clients of family welfare services in two different Western welfare regimes countries: Israel and Germany.

The findings demonstrated that along the similarities and commonality in both countries of not involving fathers and undermining fathers’ significant in comparison with mothers, unique aspects were found in each country – according to idiosyncratic gender socialization, cultural influences and most interestingly, different feminist approaches among social workers which depictured different images of the ideal father and different attitude towards the common father client of that specific country. The findings demonstrated the barriers and potential reasons for fathers disinvolvement in fit with the above-mentioned literature review: The mother-based intervention tendency of social workers and the gender biased of welfare services.

However, via looking into the intersectional prism and comparing between two culturally different environments of social work, this study also provided a deeper analysis and theoretical explanation for fathers’ disinvolvement: The presence/lack of presence of feminist agendas and ideals, the gap between the ideal father image and the common father client in each unique demographic climate, and the relations between the feminist approach and the professional practice and intervention with fathers. In contrast to the existing scholarly which claims that the less sexist social workers are. The more they involve fathers (Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018), this study offered a more complicated picture which involves other intersectional elements. Feminist, or non-patriarchal attitude itself, is not sufficient for a radical change towards increasing fathers’ involvement. This could also be attribute to the fact that the feminist ideology was more traditional and less radical.

The popular hegemonic discourse on fatherhood among feminist scholars (excluding disciplines such as men studies) was up until recent years oriented according to the second wave of American Feminism, or the feminist liberation movement, which focused on equality between men and women and fought against discrimination of women (Silverstein, 1996). Feminist theorists identifying with that stream related mostly to the importance of sharing the parental duties within the private sphere of the family unit and household, and the importance of the bonding between father and child (Ruddick, 1983).

This can be seen as pro-fathering scholarship that encourages fathers’ pro-activeness and coheres with feminist goals of gender equality and positive outcomes for men, women, and children (Palkovitz, 2002; Woo & Raley, 2005; Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). However, these ideas related mostly to middle class, heterosexual and white families and fathers and ignored other forms, different shades and marginalized representations of masculinities (Inhorn, 2004), as only recent studies are trying to expose with regards to fatherhood (Strier & Author, 2021; Randels, 2020). As Doucet and Lee’s paper on Feminism and fatherhood (2014) articulates – there are still gaps among Feminist thinking on fatherhood with regards to intersectional prisms, such as colonialism, state policies, racism, and class-based inequalities – as this current study was trying to touch upon.

And indeed, these aspects were very much prominent among the interviews in this study, in Germany as well as in Israel, but in varied forms. In both countries, there seemed to be an inner contradiction regarding the expectation from fathers, which is adherence to the general society’s contradictive myth of masculinity: The ideal man must be aggressive but not violent, sensitive but not too emotional, healthy, feminist and also a breadwinner, active and smart (Shor, 2000).

In Germany, the main expectations (and followed disappointments) from fathers clients concerned being emotional, communicative, caring for their children and sharing the duties with the mother. This fits very well with the above-mentioned liberal-feminist agenda of parents’ equality, and contradicts, in a way, the image of the non-German fathers, mostly immigrant from ~~Muslim~~ Arab countries. In Israel, the main expectations (and followed disappointment) from fathers clients concerned being breadwinners and mentally resilience.

The common fathers clients, who most of them are dealing with poverty and hard life circumstances, do not fit that ideal. Hence, Israeli social workers were less affiliated with the liberal feminist stream of egalitarianism, and sticked more to the traditional patriarchal model between the sexes. However, even though the two groups of social workers hold an opposite gender socialization and expectations from fathers, the results are quite similar: an uninvolving and often disrespecting approach towards fathers, which leads to minimal reaching out after fathers and sticking to the preference towards working with the mother. Poverty or ethnicity, as it seems, plays a similar role in undermining fathers within the family social workers.

It was found that poor fathers who are also ethnically not hegemonic, are often seen as a failure: either as fathers or as non-masculine men (Collins, 2000). -Negligent black fathers, for example, were stigmatized as promiscuous, predatory, and violent—and therefore blamed for the social ills of communities of color (Battle, 2018). Additionally, it was found that certain welfare programs targeted at fathers, were derived by a discourse that characterizes them as worthy fathers—and by implication worthy men—for providing role models rather than money for children (Randels, 2020). This literature matches very well with the study’s findings with regards to the German social workers’ expectations, and less with the Israeli ones, who emphasize greatly the breadwinner role, as described above. However, both groups of social workers are adherent to the essential father discourse, claiming that fathers are essential to positive child development and therefore encourages responsible fathering. And indeed, the common fathers clients in this study were blamed for not being responsible enough.

This could be also explained via the notion of **fear**, which is related to power. Lorber (1994) defines hegemonic masculinity as economically successful, racially superior and visibly heterosexual – very similar to the ideal fathers’ expectation of social workers in both countries. Nonetheless, this study demonstrated that hegemonic, as well as non-hegemonic masculinity, is also a cultural-relatively and fluid term.

In the German social workers’ eyes, non-hegemonic fathers are dominant-patriarchal men, culturally and ethnically different, mostly from ~~Muslim~~ Arab countries. Paradoxically, in the Israeli social workers’ eyes hegemonic fathers are closer to the ~~Muslim~~Arab-Patriarchal image German social workers deters from, whereas non-hegemonic and “less worthy” fathers are closer to the German hegemonic fathers, those who expressed their weakness and feelings. Cheng (1999) continues and argues that the dominant group needs a way to justify its dominance by making other masculinities inferior. Any alternative masculinity is a threat to hegemony and the status quo.

Social workers in this study were afraid or recoiled from fathers, either when it came to violence, or the other way around – the fear of weakness among men (either emotional or economical). In Germany the fear from dominant men was more prominent, in relation to the reservation from culturally and ethnically non hegemonic fathers, mostly from ~~Muslin~~ Arab countries, who were tagged as more patriarchal. In Israel the fear was mostly from those who express their weakness, but also from fathers who were “too aggressive”. This could explain the excessive use of power over them and the use of educational approaches - in order to overcome the threat social workers felt, as the following quote can demonstrate:

“I agree that there is a biased in favor of women in family welfare services… this is a feminine profession, and also women are coming more often to ask help, and there is a common language with them… **the man is the other, the threatening one**” (Israel, KY1).

However, this feminine power encompasses an inherent trap. Women have the power only because they are adherent to their traditional gender role: Either as social workers (care givers), as mothers, as the ones who ask for help (helplessness), or as cooperating with the social worker (obedient to the regulatory and authoritative system).

To conclude, in both countries it seems that social workers are only allegedly owns the power over fathers. In actual fact, they are missing significant professional knowledge which can improve their working skills, treatment outcomes, and self-confidence. Social workers lack the understanding of the different challenges clients fathers, who intersect with other excluded affiliations (such as being immigrant, being poor, etc.), might face. For example, do social workers understand the tension between the breadwinner ideology and new father ideals that emphasize how fathers should be emotionally present for their children? That immigrant and refugee fathers experience disruption to the provider role as detrimental to their identities (Este & Tachble, 2009)? Or that low-income fathers demonstrate that both breadwinning and nurturing are motivations to be good fathers (Edin & Nelson, 2013)?

**CONCLUSIONS**

As it seems, Liberal and second-wave feminist ideas of how a father should act, feel, and talk nowadays, shape and influence the attitudes of social workers towards fathers and the working relationship with them. This conclusion was found in two different Western countries. In Germany, the ~~Muslim~~ immigrant client is perceived as patriarchal, and thus opposite to the ideal of the new father who shares the parental role with the mother. In Israel socio-economic characteristics play a major part in defining client fathers: living in poverty mark fathers as less functional and thus opposite to the ideal of the full breadwinner father.

The result of this study shows explicitly that social workers fail to understand these complex and meaningful nuances of their clients’ intersectional affiliation, even though working in a varied cultural and demographical climate. They did not acknowledge how ethnicity, poverty, and affiliation to a certain class impact men’s access to resources and opportunities, and therefore their parenting abilities. Moreover, they did not acknowledge how being constantly judged by the social worker, and being part of an unequal power relationship with the social workers, might impact their parental self-esteem. So even though holding different gender perspectives and feminist approaches, in Israel and in Germany social workers are lacking self-reflection of their gender approaches, and specifically on the gap between the ideal father image and expectations they have and the “real” fathers they work with.

These findings stress the importance of acknowledging the unique perceptions, expectations and apparently inevitable disappointment, as well as hinder feminist ideals and images, that shape the power imbalance between social workers and fathers clients within family welfare services, and the importance to expand the understanding and knowledge of social workers on the unique characteristics, challenges, and difficulties the specific fathers they work with, with their specific ethno-cultural background and socio-economic status, might experience.

Hopefully, undercovering and understanding the unique expectations of social workers from fathers, and the hinder ideologies that might influence them in each different demographic and cultural climate, could increase self-reflection of working habits with fathers, and improve the father-social worker relationship. Moreover, the importance of comparing two different countries lays in the findings, which demonstrated different approaches in relation to different client groups. It is important to further expand the comparative research on fathers in family welfare services to other countries, Western as well as non-Western ones.

And finally, it is important to note this study’s limitations: The German interviews were conducted by a culturally outsider researcher and not in the interviewees’ mother tongue, whereas the Israeli interviewees and interviewers shared the same mother tongue and culture. This could create a gap between the two groups in the ability to open up and feel comfortable to express oneself. Additionally, the analysis of the German interviews was lacking a comprehensive familiarity and understanding of the family welfare services system in Germany, unlike the familiarity with the Israeli family welfare services system. Also, the sampling of social workers in both countries is not fully reliable and representative, since specific social workers were chosen by the departments’ managers. Hence, further studies are required in order to encompass a larger group of social workers and cooperate with a local German team.

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