**Cultural competence’s encounters with political conflict: Social workers’ construction of cultural competence in polarized cities**

**Abstract**

*Summary*

Mixed cities are ethnically diverse cities located within a turbulent context of intensive on-going intergroup political conflict. As such, they may pose serious challenges to social workers’ efforts to develop culturally competent practices, especially in the public services sector. This article examines social workers’ constructions of cultural competence in the social public services 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 opportunities and limitations of the cultural competence approach, especially when applied in the context of varying degrees of political conflict.

*Findings*

Findings show three constructions of service delivery competence among the participants: (1) the “universal” construction, corresponding to universal and egalitarian value-based approach, by which social work professionalism is claimed sufficient to ensure equal treatment for Israeli Arab and Jewish clients; (2) the “indispensable” cultural construction, indicating that cultural competence is a vital and unavoidable approach to address the ethno-diversity needs of Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities; and (3) the “critical” construction, critiquing the cultural competence and universal approaches as lacking the complexity to address the problematic nature of ethno-politically contested settings.

*Applications*

The study proposes to adopt an integrated cultural competence approach that puts vital elements of each discrete construction together to guide social workers’ practice in mixed-cities. Context-informed priorities may occasionally enforce some elements and mute other. An institutional support and training is necessary for the proposition to work.

Keywords: Cultural competence; Public services; Multiculturalism; Mixed cities; Social Work.

**Introduction**

In recent decades, due to globalization and demographic changes, we have witnessed an increased evolvement of highly multicultural societies worldwide. Correspondingly, the social work profession has become increasingly aware of the ethnic-cultural diversity of social workers’ clientele (e.g., Nadan, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2015; Sue & Sue, 2003). Responding to the needs of a growing diverse population, the cultural competence approach has gained a central importance in social work theory and practice. Cultural competence has guided the development and deployment of multicultural competent 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 social work, but it commonly refers to the ability of social workers to provide culturally appropriate and adjusted social services to diverse populations in terms of language, class, religion, ethnicity, culture, and nationality (e.g., American National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Harrison &Turner, 2011). Models of cultural competence, originated in psychology and extrapolated to social work, are based on the principles of cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills detailed by Sue and Sue’s theorization (2003), and the intrapsychic processes of intersectionality and self-reflection involved in the acquirement of cultural competence (Garran & Rozas, 2013). However, the approach is still seen as a ‘black box’ which raises some theoretical and methodological discourses. One of the current debates focuses on the opportunities and limitations of the approach to contend with issues of political conflict, power relations, oppression, and majority-minority tensions. The present study contributes to understanding cultural competence practice in social work within political conflict-ridden settings. Based on the analyses of extensive qualitative data, the present study endeavors at answering the following research question: *How Israeli social workers construe and experience the meanings of cultural competent services in their context of ethno-political tensed conflicts*?

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

To illustrate, with the increase of violence during the second Intifada in Israel high level of anxiety was experienced by Jewish therapists, resulted in a considerable strain to their relationships with their Arab clients and fellows (Baum, 2010; Ramon et al., 2006). Likewise, Arab social workers experience the encounters with Jewish clients as characterized by hostility and lack of trust (Kadan et al., 2017). Although the interference of interethnic conflict-related emotions of fear, anxiety, stress, mistrust, and disloyalty in the therapist-client relationship are well studied, less is known about the challenges that interethnic conflicts pose to cultural competence practice in social work. Relatedly, scarce research exists about cultural competence practice in the particular realities of multiethnic-tensed mixed cities. The context of mixed-city can contribute particular insights into the opportunities and limitations of cultural competence practice. This study extends the literature by examining the theoretical and practical validity of the cultural competence approach in the troubled setting of mixed cities in Israel as reflected in the narrative of social workers in the social public services.

For the purposes of the present study we follow the definition of a mixed city as 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 center of an ongoing intense political conflict as manifested in the cities of Belfast, Mostar, Nicosia, Beirut, Quebec or Jerusalem. In such instances, mixed cities are characterized by a multiplicity of tensions between groups, open competition for public space and resources, issues related to municipal management, urban justice, and an ongoing conflict over the hegemonic definition of the cultural, religious or national character of the city (Kallus & Kolodney, 2010; Solitsiano & Gofer, 2009).

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

As noted by Smyth (2009), ethnically mixed cities raises among other things critical questions related to multiculturalism, cultural competence, urban justice, and distribution of resources. Extrapolating this notion to the Israeli context, we presume that the nature of Israeli mixed cities pose certain challenges and consequences to social work practice and would give rise to peculiar cultural competence adaptation strategies that deserve illumination. The present study thus 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 which 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) residing mainly in segregated neighbourhoods. Haifa social services department provides mixed-integrated services for both Jewish and Arab residents. Haifa is conceived in the general Israeli society as, relatively, a city of Jewish-Arab coexistence but tensions and hostility do still exist (Kallus, 2013). *Acre* is one of the world’s ancient cities. It has a population of 48,930 with About 32% Arabs (Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019). The two populations mostly live in separate neighbourhoods, and Acre's welfare department provides separate services to Jewish and Arab residents. The city experience multiple ethnic tensions, more observed than in Haifa, and is affected by several acts of intergroup violence (Zeitzoff, 2018). *Jerusalem* too is one of the world’s ancient cities and considered holy by the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The city counts 901,300 residents with about 38% being Arabs (Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019) who live mainly in the Eastern part occupied in 1967. East Jerusalem Arab residents have residency status rather than Israeli citizenship (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2010), and their neighbourhoods are characterised 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 hot Israeli-Palestinian conflict and experience 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, since it enables to develop theoretical insights that evolve inductively from the body of data. Moreover, it emphasizes researchers' and participants' positions, subjective multiple realities and the situated contextual nature of knowledge. The approach also enables to provide an interpretative emic analysis while 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 which represented both Jews (46 participants) and Arabs (34 participants) and consisted of 60 front-line social workers and 20 pursuing managerial positions. Most participants were linked to one of the following three strategic domains of social welfare services in mixed cities: children at risk, domestic violence, and social work with the elderly. The interviews addressed participants’ perceptions of the experiences, issues, dilemmas, and challenges that characterize the work of social-welfare services in Israeli mixed cities in their response to the needs of culturally diverse and ethnically-tensed Arab-Jewish populations. Moreover, in order to enhance reliability of the participants’ perceptions, individual interviews were followed by a focus group (8 participants) conducted in each of the three cities. Individual interviews and those with the focus groups 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. Authors have extensive experience involving work and research with social services in Israel, a matter that assisted the research team in receiving access to the interviewees, who voluntarily consented to partake in the study.

***Data analysis***

Interviews with the individual social workers and managers, and with the focus groups 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 (children at risk, domestic violence, and elderly) and cities (Haifa, Acre, Jerusalem). In addition, inter-field and inter-city analyses were also conducted to search for nuance differences. Data analysis was performed in four main stages. First, through an inductive stage of open-coding, the researchers identified 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 support trustworthiness of the analyses: Findings from the different sets of analyses were presented to and discussed with focus groups of interviewees to finally draw the overall theoretical perceptions regarding cultural competence emerging from this research.

***Ethical aspects***

To maintain anonymity, research participants were given pseudonyms and any of their identifying information was omitted from the final report. Moreover, research participants signed an informed consent form to partake. 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. The emergent universal, cultural competence, and critical constructions are clarified in what follows.

***The Universal Approach***

For many participants in the study, social work practices in mixed cities are non-different than social work practices in any other city. In a growing ultra-ethnically heterogeneous world, any city today is becoming a mixed city. Therefore, in their opinion, cultural competence even in their challenging settings means treating differences with equality. Basically, any social worker should respect diversity by professionalism. According to this view, 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 core value of social justice, unrelated to cultural, national, religious, or ethnic affiliation. Moreover, they perceive universalism as the most efficient and protective way of the profession core values while serving Israeli Arabs citizens experiencing structural discrimination in Israel. In other words, their outlook values universalism as an expression of social work professionalism and commitment. For example, for many social workers in the area of elderly services, the main question is being professionally competent with the elder, regardless of their clients’ ethnic affiliation. The following quotation of an Arab participant from 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 service that takes into account the cultural-national or ethnic context might detract from the professionalism, neutrality, and universalism of providing the welfare services. Some even explained that this approach is consistent with the values of the social work profession, which advocate an equal attitude to different groups. This approach is evident in the words of a Jewish participant in the area of 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 elders, children, and battered women does not necessarily require any unique cultural adaptations or reference to the urban context. A Jewish participant working with families in a violence-ridden Arab neighborhood explains why cultural competency of the Arab culture in 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 misunderstanding of the Arab culture but rather of misunderstanding 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 conspicuous among participants who work with elders. Some of the participants were of the opinion that the nature of services provided to elders dictates a need for a universal approach devoid of cultural adaptations, since these services mostly do not 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 to Ethiopian, new immigrant, Arab, veteran Jew ..…I offer them the same service, implement it exactly the same way ..…it's the same nursing companies".*

However, some of these participants are aware of some of the tensions that challenge 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 these services. These settings usually operate in the Hebrew language and are western-culture oriented. Therefore, some of the Arab research participants who share the universal view admit having some dilemma: is it necessary, despite the desire to provide universal and equal services, to create separate and culturally adapted settings? The following quotation of an Arab participant illustrates 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 right awarded to Jews, here they missed out because they won’t open another day care center for Arabs”*

Furthermore, analysis of the interviews indicates that participants who support the universal approach strive to provide welfare services that tend 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 occupation with politics should be kept away from the welfare territory. In the following quotation, a Jewish participant, working in the area of children at risk 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, not to be influenced by my own stance."*

In their opinion, this distancing from the political conflict protects their ethical professionalism. 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 citation, a Jewish participant working with the elder 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 feel that the professionalism and the ethical basis of the social worker provide an extensive foundation for dealing with diversity and the national conflict, and distancing from political conflicts at times of escalation is their strategy to keep up with the universal approach.

***Indispensable Cultural Competence Approach***

According to this approach, welfare services in mixed cities must obviously 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 for culturally sensitive, professional, and non-judgmental intervention. Many of the research participants, Jews and Arabs from the three cities, supported this outlook. This approach was particularly conspicuous among participants who treat battered women and children at risk. In the following quotation, a Jewish participant speaks of the significance of providing culturally sensitive service in a mixed city:

*“A mixed [welfare] department is unique particularly for its cultural sensitivity. Thus, everyone working in a mixed department must be culturally sensitive, […] respect any culture that differs from your 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 are also of the opinion that, side by side with culturally sensitive treatment, welfare services in a mixed city must form a bridge between different cultural groups and bring them closer to each other, including between Jews and Arabs living in the 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 admit that they having insufficient knowledge regarding the cultural codes of the Arab recipients, nor tools adapted for working with these clients. They point to a lack of professional training in the area of cultural competence and, in particular, with regard to the Arab population. In order to deal with the difficulty, participants related that they rely on personal experience and also consult with social workers from the other nationality. These feelings were particularly prominent among participants who work with women affected by domestic violence and children and teens at risk, who related that 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 domestic violence:

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

In addition to lack of familiarity with the 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 would judge them for violating cultural codes or expose their personal information.

Jewish participants also admit to have some service-delivery difficulties based on language barriers. Arab service users’ command of the Hebrew language varies considerably. On the other side, Jewish social workers have no knowledge of the Arab language and often find it hard to understand their Arab clients and thus utilize body gestures, intonation, and use of interpretation services. In addition, in sensitive situations Arab service users sometimes speak in Arabic and the social worker does not understand the meaning. This situation is experienced by Jewish social workers with a sense of ambivalence. A number of the participants related that it makes them feel distant and not in control. But for others, they were of the opinion that using their first language enables service users to maintain an authentic dialog and therefore accept this with understanding. In the following quotation, a Jewish social worker describes a situation that occurred during children-at risk family meeting with Arab mothers:

*“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 indicate 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 the clients’ first language is detrimental to the quality of the therapy. As 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 raise the question of tensions between welfare regulations and cultural norms of the Arab community. These workers operate in light of western child protection laws and are required to work in the Arab society, 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 this culture produces a professional ethical dilemma, as illustrated by the following quotation of a Jewish participant:

*“We don’t accept beating and violence, no way. But it would be grasped differently … Then 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, data analysis shows that participants tend to play down the impact of the ongoing- Israeli-Palestinian violent conflict on the professional arena. In practice, however, the interviews show the difficulties aroused by the escalating conflict. Jewish and Arab participants from Haifa and Acre indicated that in times of escalation some of them are concerned of traveling to clients from a different national affiliation to do home visits, and even experience emotional tensions between their professional practice and national identity. This matter becomes 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 recognize the need to adapt the welfare services to different cultural groups. However, they are aware of the difficulties sitting on the way including unfamiliarity with cultural codes, language barriers, and impact of the conflict on their practices.

***The Critical Approach***

Some participants consider that the cultural competence falls short to match the complexity of political issues at stake, especially in cities with high level of political conflict. Accordingly, the role of social services cannot ignore the structural and political inequality suffered by the Israeli Arab minority. Most of the participants espousing this approach were Arabs, mostly working 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 are of the opinion that the welfare services take an active part in preserving the discrimination towards the Arab population, as reflected among other things by the small number of services available for the Arab population and the heavy workload of Arab social workers. In this context, a major example that arose in the interviews is the small number of services intended for Arab children at risk. Most of the services designated for them are located outside the mixed cities and are perceived as services of poor quality and supervision compared to those provided to the Jewish population. In the next citation an Arab participant from Haifa demonstrates this perspective:

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

In addition, participants from East Jerusalem are of the opinion that the political conflictual nature of the mixed city shape the welfare services and harm the quality of services provided to the minority population. An example of this is brought by a participant who relates that she was not able to hold home visits for the purpose of submitting an expert opinion to the court, as service users live in a criminal violence-ridden area with no public transportation:

*“One of the things that a juvenile justice social work has to do to provide her assessment to the court is to visit the place of residence of the teenager and to look at and the residential environment in general, but since there are areas of East Jerusalem that are defined as dangerous, have no police law enforcement …and a lack of public transportation to these areas 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 advocate this critical view approach see the political conflict as an undividable component of 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’ job. 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 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 the clients’ trust in social workers is undermined as they are seen as State agents:

*“What was most conspicuous in the project in states 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 follow this approach hold the opinion that the welfare services cannot just think in terms of cultural competence and universal applications of social work principles; a minimization or ignorance of the political conflict, especially at times of escalation, does not help the clients.

**Discussion**

This study analyzes Israeli social workers’ perceptions of the experiences, dilemmas, and challenges they encounter over the course of their social-welfare service in Israeli mixed cities, looking particularly at the intersection of the cultural competence practice and ethno-political conflict. The study found three main constructs of cultural competence among the participants, as discussed below.

The first construction we labelled “*universal*”, which corresponds to universal and egalitarian value-based approach by which social work professionalism is claimed sufficient to ensure equal treatment for Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities. The social justice values of the profession, as perceived by those social workers, can easily translate into universal social service principles that by virtue guarantee equality for the groups in conflict and minimize feelings and acts of discrimination. This view undermines the cultural fragmentation and tailoring of services. Cultural competence in social work is thought redundant among those social workers, can even detract from their claimed professional practice, and thus should be kept out or in other words silenced. Those self-contained social workers believe that they are not destined to conduct erroneous decisions about their client of a different cultural background. A professional Jewish social worker can successfully serve an Arab client the same way a professional Arab social worker can serve a Jewish client. Just professional merit matters here and only minor cultural adjustments might occasionally be necessary according to this view such as making some services or activities available in the client’s native language. This universal perception of the profession adjusts to ethno-political conflicts during periods of escalation by political-distancing and silencing. Otherwise, disruption to professional service will be destined. This view’s adoption accords with study findings that criticized the cultural competence practice (e.g., Danso, 2018; Johnson & Munch, 2009) arguing that some cultural competence aspects contradict major concepts of the social work profession. Oversensitivity to cultural factors, it is contended, may facilitate privileges of a group’s rights and that this contradicts the principal social work’s value of individual’s self-determination. Does cultural competence silencing coupled with ethno-political silencing during times of tensed conflicts helps social service delivery out? We do not have sufficient evidence to answer either way with confidence. However, the emergence of the other two views among fellow social workers, as illustrated below, indicates some difficulties in practicing universal social work with negligible cultural and political adjustments.

The second view we labelled “*indispensable*” cultural construction, indicates that cultural competence is a vital and unavoidable approach to address the ethnic diversity needs of Israeli Arab and Jewish clients in mixed cities. Social workers holding this view, recognize the ethno-cultural diversity of Israeli mixed-cities and stress the need to acquire culturally appropriate knowledge and skilled to deliver culturally competent service. The emphasis on cultural competence practice among those participants is in perfect consonance with the growing body of literature stressing the importance of cultural skills acquiring in 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 social welfare service’s cultural competent strategy in Israeli mixed cities. There is an obscured presumption here that culturally matched social worker-client would lead to more culturally competent and efficacious service (e.g., Sue, Fugino, Hu, Takeuchi, & Zane, 1991). This perspective has a merit. Yet, what happens when the welfare recourses are limited or when an ingroup member prefers to be served by an outgroup social worker for private reasons? Actually, this occurs quite frequently in the welfare services in Israeli mixed cities, as noted by the participants. In such cases, ethnic mixed-matching is rendered imperative.

Despite the genuine endorsement of the cultural competence approach among Israeli social workers here, they interestingly admitted insufficient institutional support to consolidate and develop their cultural competence in ethnically mixed-matching settings. Fears thus arises among those workers to conduct erroneous decisions due to three interconnected reasons. Firstly, misunderstanding of the cultural codes and cultural display rules of the client which may lead to misinterpretation of the responses, thoughts, and emotions expressed by the client. Secondly, stereotypes and schemas of social workers might consolidate their expectations about the typical responses and difficulties of the client, leading to service distortions. A range of studies, in fact, indicated that schemas shape what we perceive and the manner in which we perceive it (Heine, 2015). Put differently, more than social workers’ believing what they ‘see’, they might tend to see what they believe. In response to the cited two issues and with limited institutional staff development support, social workers in mixed-matched service conditions invented their personal make-up strategy of private-learning and peer-consultation with outgroup fellows when serving an outgroup member. Notwithstanding this effort, they still felt insufficiently culturally equipped to handle some situations.

*Thirdly*, language barrier appeared a challenge to social worker-client ethnic mixed-matching setting. Social workers indicated that language reflects culture, belonging, and identity. Consequently, cultural competence service that does not take place in the clients’ first language can be detrimental to the therapy quality, as indeed reported in other research (e.g., Fuertes, Potere, & Ramirez, 2002). Even when the social worker develops a good command of the clients’ language, his status and competence might still be devaluated altogether, unless being served by an outgroup social worker is a genuine request of the client.

Interestingly, also adopters of the indispensable cultural competence approach, respond to ethno-political conflicts in Israeli mixed-cities during periods of escalation by political-distancing and silencing. Otherwise, disruption to their cultural competence will occur. They even perceive 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 do admit that at times of conflict escalation, they become to some degree concerned about home visits to their outgroup clients, and experience emotional tensions between their cultural competence professional practice and national identity, issues that were also highlighted in previous research (e.g., Baum, 2010; Kadan et al., 2017).

The last view we labelled “*critical*” construction of cultural competence, which critiques the cultural competence (and universal) approaches as lacking the complexity to address the problematic nature of ethnically and politically contested mixed cities and advocates the need for a *critical approach* to service delivery. Accordingly, the role of social services cannot ignore the structural and political inequality suffered by the Israeli Arab minority. Welfare service’s oblivious of the ethno-political reality of Israeli mixed cities is proclaimed to deteriorate, sustain, and reproduce discrimination, structural inequality, othering, and unequal power relations between the minority and majority, as generally noted elsewhere (e.g., Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010; Garran & Rozas, 2013; Herring, Spangaro, Lauw, & McNamara, 2013). These issues become clearer during periods of conflict escalation, resulting also in clients’ loss of trust in social workers and perceiving them as state agents and oppressors. With the absence of a clear social welfare’s policy on how to constructively handle conflicts, advocates of the critical approach feel somewhat limited, frustrated, and helpless.

The call for critical practice of social service delivery here intersects with other critical views of cultural competence (and universality), being portrayed as tokenistic (e.g., Furlong & Wight, 2011). In our case, social services delivered with a cultural competence and universality views are characterized by de-politicized professionalism, even in the presence of clear practices of political oppression (e.g., Nadan, Weinberg-Kurnik & Ben-Ari, 2016). We envisage that a social worker with mastery of the universal principals of the profession, and who are culturally-competent and politically (critically)-competent will be better equipped to quality-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 any of the approaches 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 clearer in the field of elderly across cities and ethnicities; the cultural competence approach was clearer in Haifa and Acre in the field of domestic violence and children at risk; and the critical approach was clearer in Jerusalem across fields and among Arab social workers mainly. Thus, some context-informed decisions might require, for instance, the main activation of the universality-attached discrete skills.

We do not pretend to be the first to call for some sort of an integrative cultural competence approach. For instance, Nylund (2006) called to embrace 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 cultural competence practice among Israeli social workers in mixed cities appeared in this study. The universality approach with very slim cultural competence and responsiveness to ethno-political conflicts; the indispensable cultural competence approach with minimal ethno-political responsiveness; and the critical approach with a major consideration of ethno-political conflicts’ 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 effective social service in mixed cities require a special type of social workers. Particularly, workers who professionally integrate vital aspects of the universality principles of the profession with culturally-competent and politically (critically)-competent approaches to problems, and are capable of interchanging between these informed by context-risen priorities. An institutional social welfare support for such a model is unequivocally necessary to make it work in theory and practice.

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