# *'Fathers are very important, but they aren't our contact persons'*: The Primary Contact Person Assumption and father absence from social work interventions

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## Abstract

Research on the low engagement of fathers in family- and child-oriented social work interventions has focused on obstacles originating on the level of the father, the mother, or the social worker. Much less attention has been devoted to the organizational aspects of the services.

This paper employs the methodology of organizational ethnography to look into family social services, by interviweingforty-one social workers in six municipal Departments of Social Services in Israel.

Our findings reveal that what characterizes the organizational treatment of fathers is the Primary Contact Person assumption – the organization’s assumption that one person should be designated as primary conatct in the routine course of an intervention. Together with gendered, political and cultural factors leading to the mother's preference, this results in a full or partial exclusion of fathers from family- and child-oriented interventions.

## Introduction

The low participation rates of fathers in child and family-oriented social work interventions have recently drawn scholars and practitioners' attention. While the importance of paternal involvement in childcare in general and social work interventions specifically has been acknowledged for decades, and despite efforts by the services to engage fathers, father participation in these interventions remains low.

Existing research has pointed to three central sources to father absence: fathers' reluctance to access the services; mothers' role as gatekeepers, preventing fathers' access to the services; and the role of the services themselves. The last has mainly focused on social workers' attitudes and perceptions as the cause of father absence.

In this paper, we wish to focus on an aspect that has hitherto received scant attention, if any: the role of the services' organizational apsects as a cause of fathers' low engagement. Therefore, the research question that we set to answer is ***what is the role of organizational culture, norms and structure in the social services in the low engagement of fathers in family and children-oriented social work interventions?***

To answer this question, the paper presents a new theoretical concept – *the Primary Contact Person* (PCP) assumption. This concept refers to the assumption that routine interactions within the interventions are made with one of the family members – the primary contact person- implicit in family-oriented interventions. While both policy documents and field workers claim that contact is made with people of all genders, in practice these contact persons are almost exclusively mothers.

The Primary Contact Person assumption, together with the preference for mothers, are central elements of the *Mother-Based Intervention* – a focus on the mother as the center of child and family-related interventions, previously described by the authors (The Authors, 2020; Forthcoming a; Forthcoming b).

In the first part of the paper, we will discuss existing research on father engagement in social services and point to the gap we find in this literature – the role of the services' organizational structure. After describing our methodological approach, we will describe our findings, documenting the Primary Care Person assumption and its manifestation in the routine work of social workers. In the discussion section, we will connect the Primary Care Person assumption to existing research on father engagement and show how together they create the Mother-Based Intervention. In the concluding section, we will discuss the answer to our research question, the paper's impact, and its limitation.

## Literature Review

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

However, research also shows that fathers' engagement has a substantial effect on the outcomes of interventions. Evidence shows that father engagement benefits family-oriented social work interventions, making such interventions more effective (Brewsaugh, Masyn, & Salloum, 2018; Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016). Systems-level efforts to include fathers reduce the time a child spends in the welfare system and foster care and provide better results of such care (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan, & Furrer, 2012; Malm, Murray, & Geen, 2006; Velázquez, Edwards, Vincent, & Rey, 2009).

Thus, evidence shows that, on the one hand, fathers are absent from social work intervention and, on the other, that this absence is detrimental to the outcomes of these interventions. The question arises, then – what are the causes of fathers' low engagement in the social services? And how can we overcome these causes and increase father engagement? Existing research identifies three primary sources of this absence: fathers, mothers, and the services.

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

More specifically, following perceptions of the father's role in the family, family-oriented services are often perceived as targeted at children and mothers and irrelevant to fathers (Baum, 2015b; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009; Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & Mccolgan, 2015). Other reasons may include negative past experiences with the services (Malm et al., 2006), the reluctance of the current spouse, who is not the child's mother (Maxwell et al., 2012).

A second source cause of father absence is maternal gatekeeping. In some situations, mothers posit themselves as gatekeepers between fathers and the services. They may refrain from bringing fathers into the picture and sometimes resist the services' attempts to engage them (O'Donnell, Jr., D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). Possible causes for this reluctance are fear of a previously violent father, concern about losing custody to the father, and a desire to keep full responsibility for the children. Another possible reason is their desire to avoid losing benefits attached to a single parent status if welfare services identify a father in the household (Maxwell et al., 2012).

The third source for this absence is the services themselves, as elements in the services deter fathers from participating in interventions. Existing research has focused mainly on elements related to individual social workers: their knowledge, training, perceptions, and attitudes.

Therapeutic knowledge on working with men in general and specifically with fathers is lacking. Men express distress and pain differently than women, and professionals' lack of knowledge regarding this difference often leads to misinterpretation of men's feelings and needs (Baum, 2015b; Brown et al., 2009). Regarding fathers specifically, research on families and parenting tends to focus primarily on mothers and neglect fathers (Shapiro & Krysik, 2010; Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003). This focus is reflected in social work textbooks, focusing on mothers and mother-child connection (Brewsaugh & Strozier, 2016).

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

However, much less attention was given to structural and organizational reasons for the low engagement of fathers. Brown et al. (Brown et al., 2009) list several reasons for this. The use of the gender-neutral term 'parent,' rather than 'mother and father,' may lead workers to choose to contact only one parent − the mother − and spare the time of contacting the father. Furthermore, the spread of managerialism across social services worldwide, emphasizing standardization and efficiency, works against engaging fathers. As working with fathers requires an extra effort from the workers, with the result that overworked professionals may be discouraged from the attempt. Also, micro aggressive acts of social workers towards fathers were found to be influenced from the norms and work routines in the organization they work for, that intend to supervise the parental functioning of the father more harshly than the mother (Authors, forthcoming a).

This rough outline of organizational and structural sources of father absence given by Brown et al. have not to date been given further consideration. In this paper, we wish to introduce the *Mother Based Intervention* and the *Primary Contact Person* assumption as key concepts providing a framework for understanding the structural exclusion of fathers from social services.

### Theoretical Framework: the Mother-Based Intervention

This paper is part of a larger project, mapping fathers' structural and organizational exclusion from social services. The hypothesis behind this project is that such exclusion exists – that the absence of fathers from social services is at least partly originates from the services themselves, in reasons that are beyond the level of the individual social worker.

Previous research has mapped the structural exclusion of fathers on the policymaking levels, identifying three conflicts that trouble policymakers in strengthening fathers' engagement in family-related policy: the professional, the ethical, and the political conflict. These conflicts dissuade policymakers from creating a father-oriented policy (The authors, forthcoming B).

In the absence of explicit policy, regulations and guidlines targeted at the inclusion of fathers, we have identified what we have termed *The Mother-Based Intervention*. While social workers sometimes identify the importance of fathers and may interact with them as part of family-oriented interventions, these interventions are built on the assumption that mothers stand at the center of the family and, therefore, should stand at the center of the intervention (Authors, 2020).

However, as previous research focused on the policymaking level, it was limited to the identification of the explicit existence of the Mother-Based Intervention, and unable to track its mechanisms and expressions in practical work. In this paper, we wish to examine the manifestation of the Mother Based Intervention in the day-to-day routine work of field social workers. Therefore, the research question that lead this paper is: **In what ways does the *organizational culture, norms and structure* of the social services affect the inclusion of fathers in family-oriented social work interventions?**

## Methodology

Following the research question presented above, the selected methodology was that of organizational ethnography. Organizational ethnography seeks to explore organizational life on a day-to-day basis, providing a look into the inner workings of the organizational structure (Neyland, 2008).

This paper focused on organizational ethnography of Departments of Social Services (DSS) in Israel, specifically on the work of family social workers, the frontline workers in charge of family-oriented interventions. In Israel, DSSs are departments that exist in every municipality. They are organizationally under the municipal authority's jurisdiction and professionally answer to the national Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA). They are commonly considered to be the mainstay of the Israeli welfare system. Family social workers are defined as primary professionals in charge of family-oriented interventions (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017). A family social worker is required to undergo a dedicated training for the position and serves as the key professional in the regional team entrusted with family interventions. is they are responsible for managing the intervention with the individual client or with the family, including all its members. Their role is to build, operate and monitor an intervention plan that will improve the family situation, this with the aim of promoting the goals set in partnership with the family (Winter & Morley-Sagiv, 2011)

The designated clients and the center of the intervention of the family social worker are, by definition, the entire family - including the interaction between its members, between the parents, between parents and their children, between siblings and between the family and its surroundings. Collaborative working relationships are the core essence of the intervention (Weisberg-Nakash, 2017).

While research on fathers' engagement with social services in Israel is not abundant, existing research shows a pattern similar to what is documented in other systems (and described above). Examples include patterns of workers' reluctance to engage with fathers (Baum, 2015a), the reflection of gendered perceptions of parenthood in the work of social workers (Davidson-Arad, Peled, & Leichtentritt, 2008), difficulty to identify feelings expressed by fathers (Baum & Negbi, 2013) and more. Therefore, the working assumption of this paper is that findings from the Israeli system are, to a high degree, relevant to other contexts and systems.

The research included ethnography in six DSS in Israel, representing various settings and cultures: one department in a low-income rural town, one in a high-income rural town, one in a low-income urban neighborhood, and one in a high-income urban neighborhood. A department serving mainly Jewish Ultra-Orthodox clients and one serving Palestinian clients was selected to represent these two groups' differing cultural nature.

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

Interviews focused on the description of day-to-day routine work with families. Participants were asked to describe their daily work, focusing on the role fathers take in this work. When needed, the participants were asked to provide examples of families that are typical (or not typical).

Ethnographies began with three family social workers in each DSS (except one, in which the entire team consisted of two workers). Following these interviews, researchers picked other workers deemed relevant to the project, following either participants' recommendations or analysis of interviews. Forty-three workers have been interviewed – most of them family social workers, but also intake workers, child protection officers, custody officers, team heads, department managers, and deputy managers.

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

## Findings

As described above, this paper's main argument is that the work routine of family social workers in the DSS prioritizes working with one person in each family – in contrast with the refulation and guidelines of the family social worker described above. Below we will describe the empirical support for this claim. We will begin by describing this assumption's implicit nature; we will then provide an account of this assumption's different manifestations – the focus of father engagement on complex situations, the preference for mothers-focused programs on the organizational level, and the engagement of fathers in the absence of mothers. We will then move to explore the reasons for the primary contact person assumption and its causes.

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

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

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

The outline stresses that the expectation for the social worker to be in contact with all family members. However, in doing so, it acknowledges that 'reality points to the fact' that this is the exception and not the rule.

Similarly, most research participants claimed, on the one hand, that they attempt to work with all family members equally; on the other hand, they testify that most clients are women. As Anat, a social worker from a low-income rural department describes her work:

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

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

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

However, looking into social workers' work routines leads one to question the meaning of the phrase 'father engagement.' In most cases, engaging fathers does not indicate an equal role for fathers and mothers. Even when workers include fathers in the intervention, they often receive a secondary role.

As will be demonstrated below, workers tend to build the intervention around a 'primary contact person' (PCP) as one of the research participants defines the role. Most of the social workers' contact is with this person, and contact with the other parent is much less common. While this primary contact person can theoretically be of any gender, it is a role reserved almost exclusively for mothers.

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

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

However, in most cases the assumption is left implicit. It surfaces through several mechanisms: first, the nature of father engagement, focused on engaging fathers only in 'complicated' or 'fundamental' situations; second, the organizational preference to mother-oriented programs; and last, the focus on fathers only in the absence or disfunction of mothers.

### 'We're in contact with whoever is in contact with us.'

One of the most basic manifestations of the PCP assumption is that workers find it vital to have one person they can work with in each family, but not to work with all family members. Tamar, a worker in a high-income urban department, describes how she decides who is she working with:

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

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

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

Both Tamar and Michal describe they're focus in work with mothers more as an outcome of the preference of the families themselves, choosing the mother as the contact person. Implicit in this reasoning is that while contact with one person in a family is necessary to conduct an intervention, contact with other family members is favorable but not necessary. This is the embodiment of the assumption of the single contact person.

### Father engagement necessary in complex situations

As discussed above, in routine situations, workers work exclusively or primarily with whoever initiates the department's application – mostly mothers. Not less indicative of the difference of roles between mothers and fathers and of the assumption of the PCP is the pattern of contacting fathers only in complex or problematic situations.; they approach fathers when interventions reach a critical point. This is how Michal explains in what situations she approaches fathers and in which she works only with mothers:

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

Michal stresses the importance of engaging fathers – but only in situations she sees as fundamental. In day to day situations, she is content to work with mothers only.

Another pattern of fathers' differential engagement is starting the intervention with only the mother and then recruiting the father only when deemed necessary. Oshrat, a worker in an ultra-orthodox, low-income department, unveils her perception of father engagement while describing a case she is currently contending with:

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

Oshrat describes her routine work with the mother as satisfying – until the intervention 'has some difficulties.' When the situation gets complicated, Oshrat plans to recruit the father to reach the child better. Hanna, from the same department as Oshrat, refers to a similar pattern when describing her work procedure with separated parents:

**Interviewee**: As a single mother she can tell me – I want to open a case, I won't start inviting the father. She's the one managing this unit. But when significant decisions have to be made like sending a child to a boarding school, or Intervention Planning Committees[[1]](#footnote-2)in general, we invite the father even if they're divorced.

**Interviewer:** but until then, up to this junction….

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

Hanna refers to the committees, specifically to the intervention planning committee, as a junction where essential decisions regarding the intervention are taken, and therefore as a point where fathers have to be engaged. The Intervention Planning Committees are a central element in the Israeli child protection system. They have the authority to recommend an intervernion plan, including allocating resources to such plans when needed or to initiate a process for a court-mandated out of home placemet.

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

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

Workers hold These committees to be a central decision point, and many workers see the importance of recruiting fathers specifically before them.The weight workers give to recruiting fathers cannot be separated from the mandatory requirement for father presence in these committees. The workers' insistence on recruiting fathers for the committees stems from the legal requirement. However, as demonstrated above, most workers describe this not only as a legal obligation but also as a chance to recruit fathers and provide better solutions for children (although some participants regarded this obligation as a bureaucratic burden).

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

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

Another indication of the pattern of prioritizing a PCP arises from examining interventions where fathers did take a central place. During the interview, workers were asked to recount cases in which fathers were involved to a high degree. In almost all cases, the workers described cases where the mother was absent or incapable. As , a family worker from an ultra-orthodox, low-income, urban department, recounts:

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

Lian, a team leader and family social worker from a Palestinian-Israeli low-income rural department, answers the question about engaged fathers:

**Interviewer:** Did you have a case with father engagement?

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

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

### Sources of the Primary Contact Person Assumption

This project's design – an organizational ethnography – is less suited to uncovering the origins of the primary contact person assumption than to describe it due to its unhistoric nature, focusing on the current organizational situation and not on past developments. However, one phenomenon arising from the findings may begin describing these sources: the difficulties workers describe in working with both parents. When asked to relate to cases in which they worked with both parents, workers usually describe it as effective – but also as consuming their resources, especially their time. This is how Michal, from a high-income suburban department, describes such a case:

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

Michal stresses the hardship of working with two parents and the human resources required. Moshe, from a high-income urban department, relates specifically to the needed resources and to their absence, as he describes a case in which the father was essential, on the one hand, and hard to reach on the other:

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

Several points arise from Moshe account. First, he sees the great importance in working with fathers; second, he sees the difficulty in doing so. Moreover, he connects the lack of organizational resources to the inability to work with fathers. In Moshe's account, we can see, on the one hand, the difficulty of working with fathers – specifically, their 'destructiveness' – and on the other, its importance.

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

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

The previous section has outlined the nature of the PCP Assumption and its manifestation and outcomes. We have demonstrated how social workers in Israel perceive interventions as focused around a PCP, how this perception manifests in work procedures and routines of the departments of social services, and how those lead to either the exclusion of fathers from the interventions or to their marginalization within it.

The PCP assumption draws attention to the structural and organizational characteristics of the services. When discussing the causes of the absence of fathers from social work interventions, this explanation focuses not on gendered perceptions of social workers, fathers, and mothers or the general public; instead, it focuses on work procedures and routines that are, at least, on the explicit level, gender-neutral. At least, at face value, these procedures and routines do not contain mothers' preference over fathers. They contain a preference for working with a single person, without stating this person's gender.

As discussed above, existing research on father absence in general, specifically on social workers' role in this absence, has mainly focused on cultural causes, specifically on lack of knowledge of social workers and their dispositions towards fathers. These explanations are cultural because they turn to broader cultural perceptions regarding gender roles to explain fathers' exclusion.

At first glance, the focus of the PCP assumption on the organizational level may seem contradictory to the existing literature's focus on cultural aspects. Attributing father absence to organizational factors can be seen as limiting the effect of cultural ones. However, a more in-depth look shows that rather than contradict each other, the cultural and organizational explanations complement each other. Focusing on the PCP assumption does not explain why this PCP is almost exclusively the mother. On the other hand, focusing on cultural explanations does not account for the high rate of father absence or its persistence in the face of changing cultural norms. Combining these explanations solves these two problems.

The Primary Contact Person receives its gendered character from the cultural causes of father absence. Because of the PCP, workers contact a single person per family. However, choosing the mother as this contact person originates in cultural causes. When choosing a primary contact person, the worker prefers the mother because they see her as a more competent parent, because she finds it easier to identify with her, because she is concerned about the father being violent, or any other cultural explanation. Thus, the workers' cultural tendencies lead them to choose the mother as the PCP, thus giving this assumption its gendered character.

On the other hand, the PCP explains the prevalence and persistence of cultural explanations. The focus on a single contact person per family aggravates and reinforces cultural perceptions and biases. The implicit assumption behind cultural explanations is that the decision not to work with the father is independent and based on the worker's willingness to engage with him. However, the PCP uncovers that the choice not to work with the father is not unrelated to working with the mother. When working with a primary contact person, the choice to work with the father is a choice to prefer him over the mother. Father engagement seems to come at the expense of mothers, creating a zero-sum-game (Featherstone, 2010 disucssed a similar issue).

As the PCP forces workers to choose between fathers and mothers, it aggravates existing prejudices and biases. Even a small preference for mothers on the cultural level will translate to a substantial – indeed, as our data shows, almost exclusive – preference in field practice. That happens because when PCP forces the choice of a primary contact person, a small difference in preference will translate to choosing the mother in the vast majority of cases, in a similar pattern to what theories of statistical discrimination describe regarding workforce gender discrimination (Fang & Moro, 2011).

Together, the interaction of the cultural and the structural create the Mother Based Intervention discussed above. The organizing principle of the Mother-Based Intervention is that services are structured around the assumption that mothers stand at the center of family-oriented interventions. The roots of this assumption can be found in the interaction of the PCP on the structural level and gendered biases on the cultural level, as discussed above.

Indeed, this interaction may provide a clue regarding both the sources of the Mother Based Intervention and its resistance to change. As discussed above, our data does not provide a historical explanation for the emergence of the PCP. However, a plausible explanation is that PCP originated in past periods when mothers' preference as carers was more prevailing and explicit. During the formation of the social work profession, in the mid-twentieth century, mothers were seen as holding sole responsibility for the care of their children. During this period, designing the services around a primary (if not single) contact person was a logical consequence of then-updated professional perceptions.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, gendered perceptions regarding parents' caring responsibilities have changed considerably towards a more egalitarian division of care (Lewis, 2001). However, these changes failed to manifest in fathers' involvement in social services because the Mother Based Intervention has been entrenched already as the preferred intervention method in social work. The changes served to the un-gendering of PCP, through the claim that the contact person can be of any gender. However, as shown above, the interaction of the PCP with structural elements prevents the un-gendering of the Mother-Based Intervention.

A reinforcement to the resilience of PCP in the face of cultural changes can be found in its prevalence throught various cultural contexts included in this study. As mentioned above, the departments in this project represented a variety of Israeli cultures - Jewish Ultra-Orthodox, Palestinian, low income rural towns ('Ayeret Pituach'), high income urban areas, and more. Despite the differences in the way different cultures in Israel perceive fatherhood (Strier, 2015), our research have not found substantial differences in the prevalence of PCP between these departments. Therefore, one may assume that PCP prevails despite changes in cultural norms regarding fatherhood, and that the relation between cultural norms and father absence from the social services is not that of direct influence, but is rather more complex.

## Conclusion

The question leading this paper was in what ways does the organization of the social services affect the inclusion of fathers in family-oriented social work interventions. To answer this question, we have introduced the Primary Contact Person assumption – the tendency of social services to focus on a single person as the contact person in each household.

In the findings section, we have shown how routine work is focused on one contact person – almost exclusively the mother. Fathers are considered to be significant only in vital decision points in the intervention process or when mothers are absent or unavailable. Thus, fathers receive a secondary place in the intervention process.

In the discussion section, we have connected the PCP assumption, which operates on the structural level, with factors operating on the cultural level. We have shown how the interaction of these two levels creates the Mother-Based Intervention – the social services' tendency to work primarily with mothers and sideline fathers.

Focusing on the organizational level, we have addressed a gap in existing research that focuses on personal attitudes, perceptions, and tendencies of social workers, fathers, and mothers. As we have stressed, the organizational focus is not posed as an alternative to personal or cultural explanations but rather supplements them.

Thus, the focus on the organizational level allows the expansion of the discussion on fathers' low engagement from the social services and the identification of complex exclusion mechanisms, incorporating structural and cultural elements. While explicit statements both in formal writing and by workers stress the gender-neutrality of interventions, are findings uncover the preference for mothers.

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

While this paper provides a novel insight into father exclusion's organizational side, it does so in a preliminary way. We have presented a case study on family social work in Israel – and as a case study, its scope is limited and requires expansion.

First, this paper has focused on a specific (although central) field – mainly family social workers. Other areas of social work with families and children may show a different pattern of organizational interaction with fathers, and further research is needed in a more diversified setting.

More importantly, the Israeli focus of this paper presents a limitation. As described above, research on father engagement in Israeli social services presents patterns similar to those described in other welfare systems. However, due to the substantial international variation in the organization of welfare services, the conclusions of this paper cannot be seen as applicable to welfare systems worldwide, but rather as offering a framework for further study, focusing on different welfare systems and, preferably, on comparative research.

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1. Intervention planning and assessment committees ('Va'adot Tichnun Tipul Ve'haaracha') are a required step in dealing with children at risk, as will be elaborated below. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)