***“She told me: You’re being violent... So I kept quiet”:***

**Micro-aggressive dynamics between Social Workers and Fathers
treated in Family Social Services Departments**

**Abstract**

This article examines how the dynamics between fathers, who are clients of Israel’s Family Social Services departments, and the social workers who treat them, contain expressions of micro-aggression, in various forms and manners.
In-depth interviews with both fathers and social workers, analyzed via qualitative methods, revealed several themes that clarify how such micro-aggression is created and expressed.
The article’s conclusions explain the complexity of dynamics in this therapeutic relationship, in which a complex and dynamic power hierarchy is involved, while offering a theoretical and practical framework for dealing with this complexity.

**Introduction: Fathers in Family Social Services Departments , as reflected in micro-aggression**

Much has been written about ‘the new masculinity’ and its influence on the socialization of the role of fatherhood over the past decade. Consequently, studies in the field of Social Work have sought to understand the father’s identity and its effects on the treatment relationship within the various social services.

Literature tells us that until the 1990s, the prevailing perception was that mothers were the primary and usually sole caregivers of children, and therefore Family Social Services Departments worked primarily with and vis-a-vis mothers in family care.  Since the 1990s, the discourse has changed to emphasize the importance of working with fathers for the good of the family.  Fathers were perceived either as risks, stemming from the growing discourse about domestic violence, or alternatively, as resources, from a managerial-type perspective, in which fathers are viewed as objects that can act as a resource for the family’s care.  All of these maintained the neglect of fathers as subjects and as consumers in Family Social Services Departments , and the burden of communicating with them was done mainly via the mothers.
Thus, an additional strain was created on the mothers who filled two roles vis-a-vis the various social services, in which they are also asked to serve as supervisors and managers of the fathers.

This situation has also caused harm to fathers’ parental and human rights as subjects, and thus they remain a population whose voice has not been heard in the research thus far.

Therefore, it is of increasing importance to give voice to those fathers, and to understand the quality of their relationship with social workers.  Understanding the oppressive experiences of fathers in social services will enable improvement in the care given to them, and there is evidence in many studies that this helps improve the mental well-being of fathers and of their entire families. (Burrus, Green, Worcel, Finigan & Furrer, 2012; Coakley, 2013).

Observation of the fathers’ experience via the prism of micro-aggressive expressions makes it possible to understand their negative experience from treatment, an experience which is often not directly visible.  As detailed below, micro-aggression makes it possible to understand the latent and indirect ways in which certain groups experience insults, injuries, and even oppression and discrimination.

Therefore, the question of the current study is whether there are micro-aggressive expressions in the therapeutic dynamics between social workers and fathers who are treated in Family Social Services Departments, and if so, how these manifest themselves and what their consequences are.

This article joins a series of individual studies (Ross-Sheriff, 2012; Spencer, 2017), which seek to include the concept of micro-aggression in the field of Social Work. These have focused on social workers learning to recognize expressions of micro-aggression from which their clients suffer and to curb abuses of authority and power, even if they occur unconsciously or deliberately by the social workers.

The innovation found in this article is that, thus far it has been customary in Social Work to look mainly at fixed categories of oppression – based on ethnicity, class, or gender - where women are the oppressed category. The current article challenges this view and innovates by suggesting an uncommon category: men - specifically fathers - who are treated within Social Services department; those for whom the social status of ‘male clients of Social Service departments manifests as a unique status that shakes up the normative social order, producing a complex and different system of power relations.

Similarly, this article is innovative in that micro-aggression, which until now has been attributed primarily to marginalized populations based on ethnicity or female gender, is also relevant to men treated by Family Social Services Departments , regardless of their ethnic background. Therefore, being a person treated within a department of Social Service is a discriminatory category for men.

This article will open with an extensive description of the concept of micro-aggression. Next, the methodology used in this study will be described, and the key findings will be presented. Finally, we will discuss the various aspects of these findings while drawing the main conclusions from, and implications of, this study.

**Micro-Aggression**

The term micro-aggression was coined by psychiatrist Chester M. Pierce in 1970 to describe repeated cases in which he witnessed non-black Americans’ expressions of insult and invalidation toward African-Americans.  He referred to this behavior as a subtle form of racism, often not conscious (Pierce, 1970). This concept also originated in the studies of Gaertner and Dovidio (1977), whose study of latent racism, of the kind that is found within seemingly good intentions and egalitarian statements of middle-class white people in the United States. They were found to be, in fact, subconsciously behaving in a racist and discriminatory manner, especially in unclear situations.

In later reseach, micro-aggression was also expressed in terms of the casual humiliation of any group that suffers from social exclusion, including people from the LGBTQ population, those who live in poverty, and those with disabilities. In effect, micro-aggression includes expressions of humiliation, hostility, or contempt that are quick and short, which occur routinely and daily. These expressions can be expressed in a verbal, behavioral, or environmental way, may be communicated deliberately or not deliberately, and may include hostile prejudices, name-calling or negative references towards a particular social group and, especially, as noted, toward culturally marginalized groups (Nadal, 2013).

Micro-aggression may be seen as a subtle form of discrimination that conveys negative and scornful messages towards a variety of people and groups.  However, people who act micro-aggressively can also be well-intentioned; they are often not aware of their expressions’ potential influence and do not mean to harm others.
For example, social workers are a clear example of (mostly) female professionals who are usually motivated by altruism and a desire to improve things for others. Nevertheless, even micro-aggressions that are activated subconsciously and without bad intent can have a negative or even devastating impact on the people with whom they are interacting.  Meyer calls this “minority stress” (Meyer, 2003) and refers to the unique state of mind that results from having to deal daily with the consequences of exclusion or inferiority experiences.  Thus, expressions of micro-aggression have an emotional impact and even an impact on one’s health.  Moreover, some people see their everyday experience of discrimination as rife with micro-aggression, social trauma, ‘insidious trauma,’ and even post-traumatic stress disturbances that an outsider may not even notice, thus producing an ongoing traumatic mechanism (Robinson & Rubin, 2016).

Sue (2010) expanded the concept into a research paradigm and referred directly to the presence of micro-aggressions in therapeutic relationships. He distinguished between three categories of micro-aggression that differ in terms of their directness.
The first category, “micro-assaults”, deals with direct, discriminatory, hurtful expressions regarding an individual from a minority group, for example, curses, overt and deliberate discrimination.

The second category, “micro-insults”, refers to insults that can be said casually or hinted at, for example: saying to a Palestinian “You don’t look Arab at all,” or “mansplaining” – when a man explains something to a woman that she allegedly does not understand because she is female, such as car mechanics.

The third category, “micro-invalidation”, refers to a lack of attention experienced by minority members from a ruling group, culture, or system that leads to a feeling of transparency. Invalidation can be expressed, for example, in ignoring or refraining from interaction with a person following his affiliation with a specific group, or from non-provision of educational, welfare, or health services to a particular group.

Sue (2010) illustrates how micro-aggression can be intertwined with the smallest nuances of human communication, such as glances, body movements, and statements that have micro-aggressive expressions. People who make such expressions are not necessarily fully aware of the consequences of what they say or of their accumulated destabilizing effects. Conversely, these people may be convinced that since their intentions are good, they are ‘immune’ to racism and discriminatory or hurtful behavior. Thus a confusing reality is created by micro-aggressive conduct of overt messages that are at odds with the implicit messages, leading to embarrassment and mistrust between the two parties involved in the interaction. When confronted, people displaying micro-aggressive behavior may react in two distinct ways: they may either assume a defensive stance, or learn the lessons and increase their awareness of the issue (Tsalach, 2016).

Instances of micro-aggression can also be seen at a broader level in educational, economic, and political systems that broadcast hostile, negative, or degrading insults toward people from the margins of society in a variety of ways, such as hostile bureaucratic procedures or the lack of aid to specific populations, solely due to their social status. Accordingly, micro-aggression will be examined in this article at both the systemic level of organizations’ procedures and culture, and at the interpersonal level of the relationship between social workers and their clients in Family Social Services Departments that provide care services to families. In recent years, awareness is increasing regarding the importance of understanding displays of micro-aggression in the field of Social Work (Spencer, 2017).

This article, therefore, joins a number of individual articles that seek to include micro-aggression in the educational, practical and theoretical-research awareness of Social Work. Thus we will base our work on the definition of micro-aggression for Social Work that has been proposed by Ross-Sheriff (2012):

“Micro-aggressions are communications perpetrated by individuals or organizations that convey disrespect to the target individuals or groups.
They may be overt or subtle. The conveyed hostility and the hurtful effect may be intentional or unintentional. They may be one-time or part of a pattern. Their effect is often to marginally reduce the confidence, self-esteem, or effectiveness of the target persons” (p.234).

**Methodology**

The current research approach is qualitative. Accordingly, the study subjects were studied in their natural surroundings to find meaning, and to interpret the data according to their language and subjective truth. Qualitative research differs from quantitative or positivistic deductive research that assumes an objective reality that can be viewed, measured, and quantified. Qualitative research is inductive, argues that there is not a single absolute and objective reality, but rather several possible truths. There is an aspiration not to begin with basic assumptions in advance, since things cannot be measured in a ‘sterile’ manner of uniform findings, but rather via careful and critical work with the material being investigated, the text, and attempts to understand the unique experience that comes forth from among the words (Shkedi, 2003).

The micro-aggression variable has been defined operatively as: expressions of humiliation, hostility, or quick, short contempt, which occur routinely and daily.
These expressions can manifest in a verbal, behavioral, or environmental way and are deliberately or unintentionally communicated with hostile prejudices, insulting names, or negative references towards a particular social group and, in particular,
as noted, towards culturally marginalized groups (Nadal, 2013).

Participants. The sample is homogeneous, representing a particular segment of the population: 18 fathers treated at present within the Israeli Family Social Service department - by a social worker. Moreover, there was no demographic direction regarding age, ethnic origin, or socioeconomic status.
Approximately five fathers were from departments in Arab communities and the rest from Jewish communities. Three fathers belonged to an ultra-Orthodox population.

The sampling method. Samples were taken via purposive sampling following specific criteria, via an e-mail request with standard wording sent to Family Social Services Departments and relevant groups via social media.
In practice, we employed a theoretical/purposeful sampling methodology based on the candidates’ ability to provide information regarding the research questions.
In the second stage, a preliminary phone conversation took place with candidates who expressed readiness to be interviewed, in which initial acquaintance was made, and the research was explained, including the objectives, rationale behind it, and a promise of anonymity.
In the third stage, after the candidates expressed their willingness to be interviewed, they were asked to sign an agreement form on which instructions regarding the interview were listed, it was emphasized that they may quit at any time, and that their anonymity was protected.

The research and data collection tool. This study used in-depth interviews.
Due to the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic in the course of the study, all but two of the interviews were done via telephone.  All interviews have been recorded and transcribed. Aliases were given, and identifying details were anonymized.

The structure of the interview. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured so that on the one hand, there was uniformity in the interview topics, but on the other, there was room for the interviewee to express himself, his opinions, and his attitudes in a free and associative manner. The rationale behind this decision stemmed from the recognition that underlying the interview is the desire to understand people’s experiences and the significance they attach to them. An in-depth interview provides access to social and personal contexts of behavior and perceptions, and the meaning given to them by the interviewees (Seidman, 1991). Additional ‘probe’ questions were added to the main questions that allowed for spontaneously broadening or focusing following the conversation.

Analysis of the data. The chosen form of analysis was thematic-categorical, identifying topics relating to the interviewees’ words and theories reflected by their feelings, thoughts, beliefs, and knowledge. The topical analysis focused primarily on what the interviewees raised as a window that enables a look inside the human experience (Shkedi, 2003). In this initial stage, open coding was done via observation of a text and identifying general directions and codes for each sentence in the interview, following the research questions.
The analysis was performed using the Atlas.ti software to ensure an orderly and accurate research process. Subsequently, categorization was done via grouping lists of the codes and their frequencies into categories. The coding process occurred several times using raw material to develop additional codes and find new relationships (surfacing, bridging, and extension). The objective is finding common meaning in the information in an intentional, not random, manner.

**Findings**

**Micro-aggression in a well-intentioned but patronizing guise**

Micro-aggressions may be invisible and difficult to detect, but they are almost always felt.  A social worker may not openly express personal feelings, but a facial expression, specific questions, or lack of attention may be enough to expose a whole world of attitudes. Thus, even social workers who consider themselves as having a gender-neutral approach may occasionally perform micro-aggressive expressions. Many social workers claimed to support the father’s inclusion and acknowledged their inappropriate treatment, while also employing micro-aggressive expressions.

Sometimes “the child’s best interest” approach, advocated by departments of Social Service, which is ostensibly a gender-neutral approach without a preference for a mother or father, comes at the father’s expense:

*“The gap is, for example, that today secularism says... it very highly advocates for the rights of the child and equality between the parent and the child, let’s call it.  But at least, that we should always… listen to the child every time, to what they say, what they want .. To constantly be at attention, and pay attention, pay attention. But that attention really is: that what the child wants, is what matters. Now... I was in communication with the psychologist,
I spoke with her. And she agreed with me again, too, about not needing to ask the girl everything and sometimes that… deciding something [that is good for her] is against her will… and this is all right.  But that’s the kind of parenting that I thought is right, yet when I spoke about it at the time, they disqualified it.” (Interview 3).*

Powerful actors who act micro-aggressively are not necessarily fully aware of the consequences of their actions or their destabilizing and accumulated influence.
Their intentions may even be good - for example, a lecturer who wishes to compliment a dark-skinned student by saying “Your English is excellent!”.
As overt messages are at odds with the latent messages, **confusion, embarrassment** **, and mistrust** can be expected.

An example **of a patronizing but well-intentioned act is** the project ‘University for the People’.  As the interviewee pointed out, it is like a special activity:
*“We had a University for the People [meeting]; it’s a kind of thing that in the evening, you can learn things, because it’s kind of an introduction to all kinds of activities once a week. Like, there was already an introduction to law, an introduction to something I don’t remember, psychology, and something else” (Interview 4).*

He goes on to explain why this assistance does not actually help but instead gives the feeling that the client’s efforts are not matched by the social worker:

*“If I’m doing everything, I mean, for example, we’ve been referred to activities and all that. So we’ve gone to great effort to go and use it on our part, [so] then on the part of the social worker [she] can also make an effort... to solve problems according to the needs of that same father... It’s not something that can be determined like this: that’s what you give everyone, and that’s all, even though everyone’s problem is fairly similar, a problem that’s economic or whatever, but even within the economic problem, they could find us the way that it better suits us to solve the problems,
so things should also be on [the social worker’s] part.”*

Moreover, it is about **giving help (with good intentions) but in a way that the social worker decides, and not in the way that the father needs and asks for**:

*“On the other hand, it seemed she understood what was going on and that she...
I felt like she understood me, but I didn’t feel like she had any influence.
Afterwards, I contacted her and spoke to her, but she had no influence on the process.” (Interview 2).*

No matter how well-intentioned, a therapeutic discourse that ignores the father’s unique needs and paternal identity is micro-aggressive and can have devastating consequences. The following quote demonstrates how the basic need to exercise paternity does not get the place it deserves on the part of Social Services, and therefore the solutions that social workers provide are not adapted and constitute a micro-aggressive act:

*“(Q: Hey, but you talk a lot like it really was a very, very difficult time.  And then they offered you psychological assistance. That is, psychological to some extent. So why didn’t you take it?)
A: “I wasn’t interested in any psychological assistance, because there was no problem. Basically, I told you again, it’s a stage where you don’t even want your own mother, you don’t even want her.  You want your son. You don’t want the Child Protection Officer, however pleasant, or sweet she may be; what’s the good of the child protection officer for you now? You’re not looking for consolation, you’re only looking for the main thing, and that’s your paternity --being a father.” (Interview 1).*

Occasionally, there were also unstable attitudes by social workers, who initially supported the father, but then changed their attitude, leaving the father confused and frustrated:

*“I’ve experienced, a few times, the... Like attention and listening (by the social worker), but then just the opposite. Something else. Like they told me one thing and then something else.
(Q: After that, they did something else, actually?).
A: Did. Said. Wrote. Yes.” (Interview 3).*

*“At the second meeting with --- Suddenly there was something else... I was late. Uh.. When I got there, I saw them sitting and chatting. Uh.. I felt unpleasant about that actually... My ex now has an opening and she can say things without me hearing and without me responding.  Now actually, from the moment I sat down,
I saw a change in the atmosphere... She had spoken to [the social worker] for a few minutes before and the ‘mood’ that came to me was completely different from what had been in the previous meeting. That is, the conversation of a few minutes, the “small talk” when I wasn’t there, made all the difference.” (Interview 2).*

*“I’ll say to the credit of [social worker Z] , I felt that she was putting limits on my ex. like when she brought up unrelated things, Z scolded her, and when my ex spoke about the visitation arrangements and she talked about Saturdays, she said
“One Saturday they’re with me and one Saturday I have freedom”, so Z told her
‘Well done; we don’t care about your freedom, we care where the kids are”.
Uh… I finally felt some kind of positive attitude on the social worker’s part, but it was um... very little because on the other hand, when I called and told her I have…..
The house, a house that belongs to both of us, that I could come in when my ex was away, I told her I was going into the house, [and] there was a complete refusal to hear recordings and see pictures, even when I came and told her, “Listen to the children’s hardship in an unmediated manner; here I am playing for you what the child is saying to me on a phone call”, and Z did not agree to hear.” (Interview 2).*

**Automatic micro-aggression as part of the professional discourse
and socialization**

These messages’ uniqueness is in their character, which can be casual, day-to-day, and sometimes automatic and covert. They do not necessarily refer to blunt statements directed at a specific minority group but instead to routine, daily utterances or expressions that are not explicitly meant to hurt or discriminate.
These actions manifest in professional constructs, practices, and discourses which adopt a hostile climate toward fathers and shunt them to the margins of treatment under the guise of professional priorities.

This automatism can be seen, for example, in the constant examination of the **parental functioning of the fathers,** ostensibly a routine activity and within the defined role of Family Welfare. However, in practice, it conveys judgment and constant examination, specifically towards the father.
*“(Q: Is there something that the social worker asks, like: How are you with the kids? What kind of father are you?)
A: Yes, absolutely...
Q: How was it when she asked you the first time?
A: I don’t know how to explain to you, but yes, they are interested, they check with us how the children are doing in school, for example, and how we release them,
for going out or things like that. (Interview 4)*

The considerable weight the father gives to the opinion of the social worker concerning his parental functioning, be it negative or positive, indicates an unequal balance of power, so the excessive power of the social worker affects paternal self-worth:

"My social worker, who I have now, if you ask her (and I can give you her phone number), you’ll see what good things she says about me. She came here for a home visit twice, and wrote a report that everthing is just great: How beautifully the kids play with one another, what great synergy there is with the kids, how [well]
I function at home, how I help. She speaks with my childrens’ teachers to see how
I am with them, and she only hears good things from the teachers.” (Interview 8)

Some have described this diagnosis of parental capability, an activity that stands at the heart of the family social worker’s job,as a real **investigation**. This type of micro-aggression leads, as will be discussed further in the section on consequences, to a direct impact on the father’s identity and self-worth.

*“(Q: So basically, what’s the interaction you had with the social workers?)
A: Just uh... a kind of police investigator […] of some kind, [in] the form of a police investigation. I mean, it’s not just that it’s a police investigation, there’s also no… there’s not really any listening to my answers either. I mean, my answers are irrelevant... I’m the one they’re investigating.  It was always me they questioned.
I mean, you’re trying understand the interaction and you realize there’s no interaction. It’s one-sided. They’re interrogating you. You don’t know anything. You’re not reponsible for it, you don’t control anything. You just have to deliver. That’s the interaction.” (Interview 3).*

*“With the social worker, I felt more like... [she was a] police investigator umm…
And even worse, I felt like someone who was wrong for complaining about my ex. God forbid you say something against a woman who …hurts the kids. And… I felt like [she thinks]: ‘Why are you putting me in a situation where I have to sit across from you, and I’m not going to deal with this. Like: you’re a nuisance, you’re a pest, you’re lying, you’re just complaining with no reason. Uh.. it certainly wasn’t acceptance.” (Interview 2).*

The automatic organizational-professional response is also reflected in **a meritocratic** **discourse** which claims that everyone can succeed if they work hard.
This perspective manifests in relation to fathers as an expectation that they will be breadwinners, a message that is strongly internalized among the social workers*.*

*“We were referred to all sorts of, for example, like I told you: it’s “shoulder to shoulder”, it’s some form of coaching, for the two years we were with them, and
it advanced us nicely... All the activities they sent us, we made every effort to make good use of it and use it, and not to be absent from any meeting or anything like the ‘University for the people’ and stuff, and also the coaching and everything; we tried very hard to come and...****If we didn’t make an effort, then it wouldn’t help us at all****- this coaching.  It’s not something that we come and they tell you, for example, with the help they are giving us, say to buy something. And it, it helps a lot, but it doesn’t solve; that is, it doesn’t bring us any closer to solving the problem because all this coaching, for example, it’s just a rod for fishing with” (Interview 4).*

Alternatively, one can see that a non-patronizing approach, one that doesn’t necessarily come to help, but one that is simply ‘being with’ and ‘listening’,
is **the antithesis to patronal micro-aggression**:

*“(Q: Do you think because he’s a man, this is more… Does it help you more?)
A: He’s not helping me, he’s just watching me, like, he understands me more than the women... He’s like, I’d say, he says things next to me; I want quiet.” (Interview 9).*

*“This social worker has a very senior position. And then she really saw me, she said to me: ‘How can I ease your suffering a bit?’  It’s the first time I’ve seen a good person in this stinking system... It’s the first time someone looked me in the eye;
you don’t know how much I needed this, because for me it felt like I got out of here;
it was like the equivalent of winning the lottery.” (Interview 1).*

*“I felt like she was just umm… Understood what I was going through... She didn’t actually do anything, but at least she, she understood me. She identified with, with me being concerned about what was going on with my children.” (Interview 2).*

**Destructive consequences of micro-aggression for fathers**

Micro-aggressive expressions, which by nature can appear in a wide variety of inter-personal relationships, can cause shame, impair one’s sense of self-worth, and taint interactions and encounters.

At face value, micro-aggressions may not seem to cause substantial harm. However, their weight and burden are key components of the interactions of those who experience them (Solórzano, 1998). Furthermore, the context of the absence of fathers from Social Services can be fertile ground for eye-opening learning about the father’s experience for policy-makers. Laura Brown (in García, 2015) compares these to small drops of acid that fall on a stone: Sometimes the acid is diluted enough that the sting is hardly felt, but other times the sting is evident and painful. Each drop of emotional acid like this causes little damage by itself, but it hurts enough to make the touch of the next drop more destructive. Victims of micro-aggression feel humiliated, abnormal and not-good-enough, or sub-par, from an intellectual perspective. Micro-aggression reminds a person of his/her status of not belonging, and this is done by shaking up one’s basic sense of well-being. Sometimes a small expression can echo for hours and even days.

Micro-aggressions’ implied nature makes them a trap, leaving the victim with mixed feelings and constant self-doubt. They may continually asking themselves, “What just happened?”, paired with persistent wondering whether something actually occurred in the incident (García, 2015). Micro-aggressions are particularly harmful when they strongly resonate with hurtful discriminatory experiences in other places and contexts.

As will be seen below, each type of micro-aggression identified in interviews has unique implications.

Following the meritocratic discourse of Family Welfare Services and the pressure placed on fathers to provide financially, set within the framework of managerial and capitalist culture, which is micro-aggressive in itself, many fathers **feel their self-worth as breadwinners have suffered harm**:

*“I was in a downward spiral that kept getting worse and worse, and I already thought I didn’t know how to continue to subsist here. Here and there things were deteriorating – it stopped for a little while, so as a result of this, that’s it. Here and there are stages of ups and downs, yet I’m still in a situation that I can’t make a living on my own.” (Interview 4).*

As a result of the social worker’s constant examination of the father’s parental functioning*,* there is a need to justify paternal functioning and prove normative and acceptable fatherhood. This attitude can be experienced as brutal and degrading and lead to harm of **the parental-paternal self-worth**:

*“I told him, listen, I am a father to 5 kids, I know what kids are. Me- my wife too,
I explained to him [the male social worker] that I had also functioned alone with 5 children when my wife was in a mental hospital for close to two years. I functioned totally alone at home, and I know how to take care of children, and one of the things my second wife loved was that she saw my care of the children. And she so loved seeing this care that she decided to marry me with 5 children even though she was single. My second wife so loved to see that, and now* ***all of a sudden she says I’m a dysfunctional father? All of a sudden I’m one who does not know how to do anything?****” (Interview 8).*

In more extreme cases, a sense of **dehumanization** arose regardingpaternal identity from an aggressive therapeutic process:

*“What usually happens is that the man stands alone in front of these systems and then uh .. when you are alone, then you are alone. And then .. so also .. if you are alone, it’s a sign that you are not ok, and then you already have the spotlight on you, so it’s over. You become a patient. I mean it’s not me saying this. That was already done it to me in the process. They did this dehumanization to me and I experienced it. Of course the* ***cancellation of my fatherhood, the cancellation of my humanity,*** *just cancellation... Like, I experienced everything right then... They just tried to destroy every uh .. essence, any humanity in me and my parenting… in my fatherhood.” (Interview 3).*

Such processes can lead **to self-destruction**:

*“So because… because if they lie, then when I say it, if they lied, they [the social workers at Family Welfare] do not believe me. They are close there and like a family, as if guarding them; no, they are not listening to me, to me; no one would listen to me at all. It was something that always annoyed me and [so] I would drink a lot.” (Interview 9).*

Denial of validity and the discourse of silencing leads to **de-legitimization of hard feelings and the necessity of cooperating with Family Welfare services***:
“Despite the limitations of what Family Welfare can give us, I think we should try and accept the maximum of what they give by cooperating and not with anger, even though there is a lot to be angry about. Like: why I did not receive things, and why did I not get other things. But if I am angry and so on, then I lose what I can get.
If I cooperate, then I will be able to get much more than [with] some response like ‘Why, why, why?’, and so on. Somehow, there is no shortage of things to complain about because no one will give me everything I need, but that’s that. If people come and want to help me, then I think I need to know how to accept it in the right way, and that will help me a lot.” (Interview 4).*

*“Apart from the fact that she agreed with what I asked for, even then I acted like a kind of sheep that didn’t open its mouth and got nothing. Even then they came down on me and I kind of… I did not fight”. (Interview 3).*

*“Here in [the participant’s home town], it’s as if I was close to them, and I come on time, and whatever they say, I do. And it’s easy now, not like I was with them at first. I underwent treatment there, like, against drinking and so on, and also a treatment for how the family acts with my daughter, how I can behave with my daughter, how it is… I went through everything there.” (Interview 9).*

Another consequence is **a breach of trust with the authorities, and the Family Welfare system** in particular, leading to a suspicious, negative stance:

*“If anyone asks me if he should go to Family Welfare, I will answer yes, but you should know that you need to examine them first. Like, I mean, it’s you examining [the social worker]... I say yes because in the end you can run into… [issues].
But, here is what I say: I do not trust either the court or the Family court or the Family Welfare system, or even the Knesset (the national government). I do not trust almost anyone else either; it’s not my problem, I think, it’s a problem that was created.
Like, I just... But I do tell everyone that we have no choice. I mean you have to come, to have some kind of interaction, so you must, yeah. It’s like you have to trust a little. You must yes .. uh .. give trust. But if you see that trust is being damaged, then check it very carefully. That is, do not be too naive.” (Interview 3).*

This lack of trust leads to **avoidance of contact with Family Welfare services**, even when it is necessary, even essential:

*“[A friend] told me to take him [my son] to Family Welfare now. I told her I would never go... because in the end I would find myself in custody. They will say that I.​​.. They’d accuse me of telling lies about her [my ex] and say that I am involving the children by bringing them in to report.” (Interview 2).*

*“Like, if it wasn’t for the huge reason that my son is there, I would have been gone long ago, like gone. I don’t think there is any other reason in the world that I would be willing to go through this. I would get up and leave everything. Even if you gave me a very large amount of money, I would not stay for all of this. They humiliate people, and I think, like...This is what’s called ‘Family Welfare’.” (Interview 1).*

**Finally, it seems that fathers who experienced micro-aggression from social workers may also develop micro-aggression back toward them.**

The literature tells us that men are socialized to express distress via aggressive expressions. It is clear these expressions, whether resulting from distress rooted in the lives of the fathers, or as a result of their relationship with Family Welfare, are often experienced as expressions of actual violence. Furthermore, the system may be unable to recognize warning signs for subjective distress experienced by fathers.

We must emphasize that this conclusion does not justify fathers’ aggressive behavior, but rather highlights power struggles relating to status, due to the complexity of the position of fathers treated by Social Services, who are of marginal status.

This issue is manifested in several ways, including contempt and even verbal violence towards social workers. In accordance with the theory, the more the victim of micro-aggression identifies with a particular identity, the more sensitive s/he is to micro-aggressions related to it, and their impact will therefore be more harmful and powerful. This will then likely lead to micro-aggressive behavior on his part. Thus, for example, it was found that in interviews where fathers belong to the Men’s Rights movement or identify more with the suffering of fathers who are treated by Family Welfare services, there was more awareness and vulnerability to micro-aggression, and they reacted similarly to social workers specifically, and the Family Welfare system in general (Interviews 2 and 3).

*“It’s only .. Just so you understand, ... beyond my own opinion, my impression, that except for one social worker, all of them have a low IQ. These are people uh... at a level that... at a very low level personally and cognitively, and people like this are easy to influence ... This one social worker is the only one in Family Welfare that I felt I was talking to eye-to-eye, in mental terms, but she is just… Well, that simply makes her more evil” (Interview 2).*

*“Think… what the Family Court thinks when it sees that two social workers, say… that those who are supposed connect us, tell both of us not to communicate.
Like they came out looking like such idiots but that was a game for me; at some point I started to get some kind of sick pleasure from the… uh... from playing with them. Because they are so uh... pathetic that it’s easy, it’s easy to just play with them.
At some point it became entertainment because I realized that... benefit, in the usual form of help, I will not get from this, but I can actually benefit a lot from them just uh... because they are so stupid. I also enjoyed abusing them because they actually say so many things that are stupid... Anything they say, I can turn around on them”. (Interview 2).*

*“Once, once I thought they were people... good women (most are women there),
in the end. Yes… that they are motherly, that they are loving, that they are accepting, that they ah … are all sorts of things like that (laughs) ... If you happen to fall upon a good one, it’s a miracle. All the rest... [are like] Satan (laughs)”.
(Interview 3).*

Alternatively, micro-aggression exists in the form of sexism, or the undermining of boundaries and even of the social worker’s sense of personal safety:

*“She is actually sweet, I know her, she is this cute Yemenite who is amazing. Charming, sweet like nothing else, like no-one else. After that, they stuck me with another one who the Yemenite connected me with. Sorry, the Yemenite one is just the clerk... A lovely, sweet blonde, also very pretty. It’s nothing…” (Interview 1).*

**Action and Resistance of Fathers in the face of Micro-Aggression**

When micro-aggression occurs, one has to decipher the latent insult inherent in it, then decide whether to respond and how (Davis, 1998).

Critical studies give preference to personal voice and experiential knowledge as a way of knowing and naming various forms of oppression and resisting micro-aggression (Yosso et al., 2009\*; Solorzano and Allen, 2001\*; Solorzano et al., 2000\*), both from a place of recognition that such knowledge is not only worthwhile but essential to understanding and analyzing discrimination.

Contending with micro-aggressions is essential both for the victim and for the perpetrator. It reveals a layer in which fathers’ experiences can be distinguished and helps to understand some of the ongoing consequences of gender inequality inherent to intersections of other marginalities - ethnic, economic, and/or mental
(i.e., mental health, addictions). Micro-aggressions inhibit fathers’ integration into Family Welfare services as clients who are significant and therefore worthy of broad and critical analysis. **The first, challenging step on the way there is to name these ‘injuries’ and to identify their sources.**

One response that was observed in response to micro aggression has been **resistance to, or even war on Family Welfare**, from a belief in the fairness of the father’s way, sometimes with the assistance of other professional sources:

*“In terms of Family Welfare... There are things I explain to them and no one believes me until a lawyer comes, and she treats fathers as if she knows how to talk them; they tell me something, I talk to a lawyer, then the lawyer talks with them”.
(Interview 9).*

*“Like it was the day I said, ‘That’s enough’, I was in… enough. Like I didn’t know how it would all end. But I went there as if I was going to see the mayor. I went to tell the mayor what’s going on in his city: ‘Let me show you what they are doing to me’.
Do you understand?” (Interview 1).*

This opposition is evident even at the level of direct and interpersonal conversation with the social worker, revealing the occasional **ability to revolt** against micro-aggression.

*“My ex-wife writes to the Family Court that the other social worker who sat with her has ordered her not to call me. This has meaning regarding the children, so I asked her... why? So uh... so she said... We are showing that... uh... we do not cooperate with violence, and you were violent towards her on the phone. I said to her, ‘Did you inquire with me about what happened? Maybe I wasn’t violent and she just says so?’ She says ‘We are uh... We advise a person according to his or her experience; we are not the police. If a person experiences violence, we tell him or her not to cooperate with it’. Then I* ***told them: ‘Ok, do you know that now you are being violent?’*** *So she said ‘Who do you think you are?’ And I said to her ‘****Yes, I’m experiencing violence from you****. You said that .. that you actually accept if someone tells you he’s experiencing violence, you do not check it, so now I say that you are violent towards me. Do you want me to complain as well that you are violent towards me, and then they will tell me that because I am experiencing violence, it really is violence?’ “(Interview 2).*

One of the actions that seemed to help, if only a little, in dealing with micro-aggression was **finding explanations for the social workers’ behavior**. One of the explanations was the problematic professional socialization of social workers:

*“The [social workers] probably got some kind of ‘mold’ at the university, like a program for dealing with a computer. ‘If this happens, do that. If that happens, then do this’. Naturally all of the...* ***Everything they learn is something that is against men,*** *and it gets to the point that ‘in order to protect the children’, they continue this way. For example, the social worker says that he, the man, is the weak one… something that may be true in some cases, but you cannot come and just apply that thing to an event. There are two sides, and you have to check them both, in order to know what is really going on. This social worker actually used a kind of mold that said that every time a child ... umm .. refuses to communicate with a parent, it must be the fault of the parent. That’s it. She doesn’t examine what really happened...
So that’s how it is, and if so, well we don’t need you. Give us the list of rules, and we will manage on our own. There is not actually a real attempt to find out the truth, for one thing. Two, there is really no heart in this work. So go and work with computers. If you work with people, you have to have a heart. Do you understand there are children here who are suffering? I felt like they actually* ***have some kind of mold or pattern that they stick to for each case*** *like... If the child disconnects from one parent, then the other parent is the... he is the one [whose fault it is] and somehow it always goes against the men. So my feeling is: This is what the social workers were taught. There is a presumption that for young children, mothers are the [best] parents and fathers are not, and... All along the way, for example, that women are not violent, because when she complains about violence from me, they come and check with me, [but] when I complain, they are not even willing to talk about it...
I have close friends who are social workers, and they told me unequivocally...
there is a bias against the male gender in their studies”. (Interview 2).*

**Discussion**

This study’s findings have demonstrated the multitude of expressions, aspects, and implications of the micro-aggressive dynamics between social workers and fathers treated in the Family Welfare services. In the discussion below, we will see how these various dynamics can be sorted into different layers.

The introductory section describes the three types of micro-aggression:
micro-assaults, micro-insults, and micro-invalidation. In these interviews, it appeared that the latter type, micro-invalidation, was the most common. This may be related to the identity of the side that engages in the micro-aggression. It is likely that social workers, by virtue of their gender and professional identity, will not be likely to make broad use of overt and direct attacks. At the same time, assaults and insults were found to be significant and made in a more covert, indirect way, anchored in ‘professional correctness’ and seemingly justified within the professional rationale,
as will be detailed below.

**Micro-assaults**

These are mainly seen in attacks surrounding the issue of parental-paternal ability, an area with which the social worker is supposed to help, but in practice this is not experienced [by fathers] as help.

For example, the **expropriation of a child to foster care without the father’s knowing\*** was perceived as a real assault:

*“In terms of my fatherhood, that I am a father, it’s really hard, well hard and, not hard... Like, when they take the girl and put her in a foster family, with someone else, no one will help you; I am here alone, in Israel, I have no family here, and it’s hard. I have had a hard time from the beginning, I had a very hard time. Family Welfare, when they took my girl to a foster family without me knowing, not even (to) my wife’s family, my ex-wife, on her father’s side... The social worker and the relationship with them, really, what they do, they do according to one side only.
They don’t listen to you or care about the father; So they only see that a mother, like… What they say is like what the foster families say; and [the social workers] listen to them. Everything they say is right; what you say is not right”. (Interview 9).*

*“But they stand there and don’t succeed in convincing the mother to show you your son. Say, at the beginning, in the first stage, when they don’t know you… But then even after they already know you and everything… So then they release your child to you –and this is the most jarring thing, at least for me… That Family Welfare, on this issue, has contempt for men. I mean that you [as father] can be okay for two hours; after that the father is only good for four hours, and after that he’s good for six hours, like some kind of stupid grading system. Like I understand I need to go gradually, but well, it’s your son, blood of your blood, and they ‘allow’ you to take him, you know; it’s really, really disgusting. So of the four hours you’re with him,
you have to be at the contact center for an hour. After that, they let you take him out, say with your mother, the child in a stroller, [with] some supervision, and all kinds of limits. In short, any normal person, like a person with some self-respect and so on [wouldn’t agree to this]; really, not everyone is built to go through these kind of things”. (Interview 1).*

*“Now you are supposed to, in this situation, try to create an interaction with your daughter who you hardly meet anyway, right? And under the conditions of the woman who has tried to cause alienation and... has succeeded, by the way.
I mean the alienation is in the middle of a certain process but... maybe also...
In short, she [my daughter] is alienated from me, in a way… uh… and under these conditions where you know that they met earlier with the social worker, the Family Welfare agent, and that anyway what you say doesn’t interest her. And also that she [the social worker] doesn’t make contact with you; that is, she only calls the mother. And so this is the situation in which you find yourself”. (Interview 3)*

It also appears that there is an element of accusation in acts of micro-attacks,
in terms of a father’s paternal capability:

*“On the way, Sigal calls me (she is the Family Welfare manager here). She tells me that – ’Your kid, you have to take care of him’. So I told her: ‘What do you think am I doing? I’m on my way there now.’ It became clear to me that my ex, Efrat had written an e-mail to them again, but if I wanted to contact them, to tell them what was going on, I had no way to contact them, but she does. Click, click, click, she writes an e-mail, and they come along and phone me. She’s at home with them, the kid locks her out, what does that have to do with me? The social worker called me... I didn’t understand what they wanted, I was actually just so shocked by the conversation that I didn’t know what to say. I never expected that, I expected them to call me and invite her to a clarification meeting about what happened –yet nothing happened!* ***They blamed me.*** *They told me: ‘You, as a father, have to take care of the child’. I said I was going back to him. They told me ‘That’s fine’ and that was it, they hung up the phone.” (Interview 2).*

Sometimes these attacks are reflected in **actual punishment**, **a practice that is supposedly considered a therapeutic act for the benefit of the child, and the father’s education, for improved fatherhood**:

*“Today they are punishing me; you see, here I am not coming on time, so they give me a week or two-week punishment, of not taking my girl or seeing her... That’s what they did to me. Or if they heard that I drank, or I got high, and told him (the male social worker) said: ‘Look if you weren’t high, no one [would] be interested’.
And sometimes I would find, that she [my ex] would speak to him too. While being annoyed, angry, I am explaining –like what I am saying is that no one explains things to me and no one listens to me, and sometimes I don’t bring my daughter, like, for treatment to Family Welfare, it’s these things -there are things I don’t understand”. (Interview 9)*

**Micro-insults**

Micro-insults, which may be said in a ‘by-the-way’ or hinted manner, and also may be connected to the father’s parental ability, thus this category of automatic micro-aggression may be expressed as part of the professional discourse and socialization.
As mentioned above, insults may take the form of accepted organizational practices such as constant examination of fathers’ parental functioning, which may turn into a real investigation and meritocratic discourse that encourages fathers to provide financial support as part of fulfilling this gendered role. In addition, organizational assumptions see the role of Family Welfare as protector of the woman from fathers who are violent by nature:

*“So my wife turned to them the first time, and I don’t recall how, but I remember they rejected her, telling her ‘If your husband doesn’t hit you, you have nothing to gain here”. (Interview 4).*

In this example, we see an indirect insult since the assumption is that the man is the one who hits and is violent, and if he doesn’t, then treatment is not justified. This quote demonstrates the expectation that men who come to departments of Social Service will be aggressive and aggressors. This expectation also leaves both the woman and the man in a cycle in which they cannot be helped if they do not meet Family Welfare service’s expectations.

However, sometimes insults are direct and personal:

*“With the first social worker, I remember that she insulted me all the time but I don’t recall exactly… Again I don’t recall the conversation, I just recall that the atmosphere was um… As if what I said had no meaning, uh… Also like my personality wasn’t okay; that I wasn’t a proper father, and other things like that”. (Interview 3)*

*“And they actually referred us to… whoever is the …Child Protection officer and um… She called me immediately, for the record, but I met her and… she was very, very cold to me, very. The feeling I got was… like: ’Why are you wasting my time? The letter from your lawyer was very, very extreme and I don’t see what happened here…’* ***She dealt with me cynically****.* ***She…degraded… really… what I said, about what I felt regarding what’s happening with the children****. She asked again and again ‘Why… we are making our expressions about… the Family Welfare lawyer’s request more and more extreme’. She said she didn’t see it as so terrible and why are we making a big deal of it.* ***She was degrading in that I was the… what I said. I told her that I was the significant parent in my children’s lives*** *and that I take care of them, and I told them that I… I am now trying to remem… and… that I raised them... in the past and also after the divorce. I told her that it is exceptional that… uh… the father is the one with sole…custody of the children.
Well, I am the primary custodian in any case, and she told me ‘No, it’s not special. Most men do so’”. (Interview 2)*

 *“I won’t forget that when we went to the (male) social worker, my ex said to her (female) lawyer, ‘Come bring me to him so he (I) won’t do anything’, like.
Now in my whole life I never did anything to her, but as if to gain their empathy,
the female lawyer told her to say that…* ***But the [male] social worker immediately understood that there was no basis [for complaints about violence] here and that he… I had arrived a bit earlier, and he spoke with me a bit, and he saw that there was nothing, really nothing going on there. But anyway I saw in his eyes, from the moment they started the interview with him, that it’s like the mother was right…*** *[So], it’s still in his head: No, you are a second-rate father,
the mother is first-rate. Or about the kids, that I approve of the huge distance that she has moved, or more like run away. And so that’s it, and now I am the one who will take the consequences, and I am the one who will have to figure out how to get there and how to take them… They are examining you every time with a magnifying glass, and they are not at all sure that you are worthy of this, you know. Do you see, more or less the direction that I’m going? … And the social worker also, who was in my house, is there; you can speak with her, and she’ll say the same thing…
A decision was made that you, the father, are not worthy [of having custody of the kids]; the mother is the one who is worthy; that’s the end of the story”. (Interview 8)*

**Micro-invalidation**

Micro-invalidation refers to various experiences of individuals from minority groups when they are ignored. For example, a person is not given any attention or experiences or is made to have a feeling of invisibility (i.e., “feeling like I am air”).
In the case of fathers within the Family Welfare system, occasionally there are cases of direct avoidance leading to a lack of treatment:

*“It’s true that the mother here is sick, but the mother is usually the one who takes care of the children, so let’s say a request comes to you, as a social worker, from a family who is dealing with this problem, yes? Now you understand that the mother is sick and needs some help, support, and the children, there is no one to take care of them, so they need all kinds of things organized, fine. But don’t forget that there is a person here, a husband. Now I am not drowning right now, I don’t need help ASAP, so don’t send me a support person. I didn’t say not to send me support but don’t forget that there is someone… They like coming in, focusing on a specific problem. So say I have a problem now and I am dealing with it, [but] no, the problem also has other causes surrounding it. If she [the social worker] knows, do they understand that I, I am actually running the house and I should get some respect, yes?
So where am I in this picture? Not a word was said about me, all these years, and also during the tough period. One word; I was not mentioned there at all; me, me who provides everything that is missing, you see?” (interview 10)*

Within invalidation, we also find the micro-aggression category of ‘under the guise of good intentions, yet patronizing.’ Included here may be gaps between statements about equality and actual functioning, offers of help given in a way the social worker decides, and ‘the good of the child’ – a seemingly neutral attitude which in fact often comes at the expense of the father. All of these examples are expressions of invalidation.

Another element of invalidation is the blocking of intense emotions and the act of silencing people. Silencing is an act that in the feminist literature is directed toward women, but in this case, we can see that the shoe is on the other foot.

*“For example, the (social workers) have tactics and it was amazing, on that day I was faced with X and… I don’t remember her name, um… and both of them used the same tactic against me… They dealt with me in a way that was very not nice uh… then at some point um… I spoke from the depths of my heart about the pain of the children, that I actually see… and that I worry about them, so I spoke in this emotional way. So one social worker said ‘I feel attacked’ because I had spoken loudly… Here I am speaking straight from my heart but ok, I will now lower my voice. After, when I talked about something that annoyed me, she raised her voice and so I also said: ‘I feel attacked’. But then she was so afraid because it was so easy to pull the same trick on her, like: Whoever points out… the person who gets upset, wins.
The one who isn’t able to understand that the other is upset, somehow ends up being the one who is hurt. So, she said that, but it is very easy to turn it around and do the same thing back to her. And she told me: ‘****You are being violent’ ...So then I kept quiet”.***  *(Interview 2)*

In Krumer Nevo’s paper “Reading a Poor Woman’s Life: Issues and Dilemmas” (2005) the author tells of a mother who was so desperate when faced with the insensitive Family Welfare system that she offered to leave her baby on the table of the social worker who was refusing to help her. This act, extreme as it may seem, forced the organization to find a way to help her. In complete contrast, most of the stories about men and their desperate acts to push the system to help them lead to rejection, firm invalidation, and a lack of understanding regarding symptoms of men’s distress.

In addition, over-generalization and a lack of individual and personal attention are invalidating acts: *“A social worker can listen very carefully to what is being asked of her, and that way, she can help in a more fitting way to the, to the specific request, and not to say something kind of general, like ‘Everyone gets the same help’,
but to make it a bit [better]… Not everyone needs the same thing”. (Interview 4).*

Furthermore, sensitive treatment needs of fathers may be ignored while other family members do receive help. Alternately, there can be a focus only on the instrumental needs of fathers, from within an incorrect concept that ‘This is what men want and need because it is hard for them to talk about their feelings’:

*Q: “And did you get some kind of support, such as emotional support, from the social worker? Did you have some other kind of relationship with her as well?
A: “Not emotional support. The kids got some, but I didn’t get any, I don’t recall that, I don’t know, like I never asked for psychological treatment, so no I don’t remember anything like that. They did offer help to the children…”
Q: “So you are describing a relationship with the social worker at the time as a ‘relationship’ that is called more ‘instrumental’, that is: if you had some kind of need then she could bring you a response to this need”.
A: “Right”.
Q: “But you didn’t have any emotional relationship, like, you didn’t tell her about difficulties you were having or... that is, not that kind of thing”.
A: “Of course I told her that … there are difficulties. These difficulties were that, like, you need to buy a table and you have nowhere to buy it from. And that you …
You have financial difficulty, so you sit and tell her what’s with you, what the problem is, and then, you tell her ‘I am barely making it financially and so on, so, can we get anything?’”. (Interview 8).*

Here we can also see the mother-based intervention as the ‘invalidation’ type of micro-aggression vis-à-vis the father:
*“There were things that were meant more for her or something like that, for example, she also got something, for parents of children or something. She went with the kids to all kinds of activities but I think it was intended for women…
Q: “Were there also meetings between just you and the social worker?”
A: “I don’t recall anything like that; it could be that there was but a very long time ago, so no I don’t recall anything like that”. (Interview 4).*

*“I got to [the mother’s town], to the social worker who was there, and he looked at me like, ‘The mother is the one who now decides, and the kids will be with her…’
And he kind of didn’t know how to explain why that was, but it was as if a decision was made in his heart that the mother should be with the children, and that I need to be the “Saturday dad”. And he tried to explain to me why the mother should be with the children and why it’s like that, so I asked him: ‘Can you give me a reason why the mother should be with the kids and not with me? Why can’t it be equal? Why can’t I be the father, just like she is the mother? At the present time I am in the role of, the position of, father and mother”. He didn’t have a specific reason to give me but he just said that the children would be with their mother and less with me”. (Interview 8).*

The preference for the mother is related to a lack of trust in the father and suspicion towards him, which is also a kind of invalidation:

*“The meeting with Family Welfare was with all kinds of low-level workers. And there, I recall there were all kinds of negative things. That is, lies, bias, umm… a lack of a relationship, that is, it didn’t matter what I said, I could send messages or phone, but there was not much of a connection, and usually none… It’s hard to catch them but… Well there was a person with whom I did finally have some connection then… umm… In short, she was in contact mainly with the mother. Everything I said to her went via the mother. Ah… so what should we call that? A lack of trust? A lack of loyalty… I don’t know. In short, I would also call it a lack of professionalism”. (Interview 2)*

Another example of invalidation can be seen in ignoring language and/ or cultural differences regarding the father treated within Social Services:

*“Like, within the care given by Family Welfare there are things that, I have things I don’t understand, after living here 15 years, so there are things that are kind of hard and Hebrew is not so easy for me. Like, in treatment, maybe someone could understand me more easily. It was hard for me from the beginning”. (Interview 9)*

*“A female social worker sits here… She is secular, and doesn’t know the way of life in which you live, she doesn’t seem to understand, I don’t know, like in terms of [religious] social life … and she does the minimum... Like you have no real interaction with her, she seems far away, like yes, she is on a chair next to you, but she is just writing down the details, you know: She asks, you answer”. (Interview 3)*

*“Not only do they not… It’s people… who are disconnected. There are many secular people I know who do know the Ultra-Orthodox population well. Here I felt like they totally do not understand… There is no specific example,it’s just some [lack of] understanding and this causes issues… So my ex-wife can also ‘sell them’ all kinds of things and they always believe her because they don’t know this religious group but it’s related to all of this. A person, a person who studies [in a yeshiva], who is a smart person, who sees his role as holy work… studies. There is 30% of the population here that is Ultra-Orthodox and 30% that is religious, so someone who is here a year or two understands the nuances. I know this is true in all areas of life, people who I’ve sat with… I saw, they don’t have the kind of… They are not the kind of person I could count on with my life”. (Interview 2)*

This issue of cultural differences leads to an additional aspect of micro-aggression –based on marginal intersectionality - the marginalization and discrimination of individuals or groups based on their concurrent belonging to several social categories (Cho, Crenshaw, Williams and McCall, 2013).  Micro-aggression of an intersectional nature is a subtle type of discrimination affected by more than one identifying characteristic of a person. Thus, how a person deals with identity groups can influence how they perceive and are affected by micro-aggressive acts.
The more they identify with a particular identity, the more they will be sensitive to micro-aggressions related to it. Lewis and colleagues (2018) coined the term ‘gendered racial intersectional micro-aggression,’ meaning acts of micro-aggression that are discriminatory both on gender and ethnic background. This has been based mainly on the experience of black women. However, this study shows that the intersection with masculinity, that usually gives power and high social status, together with belonging to an ethnic group or socially marginalized group, may create an experience of discrimination and expressions of intersectional micro-aggression that are related both to the gender and origins of the person affected.

Finally, in terms of the consequences of micro-aggression, these findings fit well with the different micro-aggression layers described earlier. The findings demonstrate how a micro-aggressive assault, for example, may lead to further assaults. Mistrust in the Family Welfare system leads fathers to adopt a suspicious, negative view, leading to fathers’ micro-aggressive responses toward social workers. Invalidation could lead to fathers’ avoidance of treatment. Thus a vicious cycle that fuels itself is created, since social workers feel and state that fathers are hard to reach and are not interested in receiving treatment (Authors, 2019).

**Conclusions**

Our original research question was: Do expressions of micro-aggression exist in the treatment dynamic between social workers and fathers treated in Family Social Services Departments , and if so, how are these expressed, and what are their consequences. The answer appears to be that micro-aggression expressions do indeed exist, their forms are varied and changeable, they are often indirect or latent, and they exist even under the guise of good intentions. It was also found that micro-aggressive expressions are also embedded in organizational culture and work routines of departments of Social Service which are more directed at working with mothers, and therefore are often judgmental and suspicious towards fathers. These expressions have detrimental consequences on fathers’ self-worth, their trust in Social Services, and their willingness to participate in the treatment, and to benefit from it.

Thus, these findings help identify the unintentional micro-aggressive expressions by social workers toward father-clients, and their varied and destructive consequences for fathers’ treatment. These findings have the potential to improve the relationships between the social workers and the fathers, and give a voice to these fathers’ distress and frustration from their treatment by Family Welfare services.

Ross-Sheriff (2012), writing about micro-aggression in therapeutic relationships among social workers, calls upon the social worker to reflect upon several levels of micro-aggression: of the victim, the perpetrator, and herself.

Therefore, this article sees the importance of generalizing understanding and learning about micro-aggression in social work, from the perspective of the profession’s values, seeking to fight discrimination and oppression. Thus social workers need to learn to identify expressions of micro-aggression affecting their clients and help them cope with these, but also to learn from the professional pitfalls, seeking to raise awareness of the possible abuse of authority and power by social workers.

Moreover, when social work focuses on gendered oppression, it tends to see women as the oppressed. Ross-Sheriff’s (2012) point of departure was that women are the ones who suffer from micro-aggression. This article challenges this perception and is innovative in that it offers an unusual category: men who are fathers treated by Family Welfare services. These men can be seen as a category that is in a unique position vis-à-vis family social services –they may be victims of micro-aggression, and this in our opinion, is an essential reason for the lack of fathers cared for by the Israeli Family Welfare system.

Similarly, this article innovates in that micro-aggression, which until now dealt primarily with marginalized populations on an ethnic or female gender basis, also exists vis-à-vis men treated within the Family Welfare system, unrelated to their ethnic background. Thus, being a person treated by Family Welfare may, for men, constitute a discriminatory category by itself. This article also exposes another form of potential abuse of authority and power by social workers in Family Welfare, in an unintentional or not deliberately harmful manner.

This understanding is challenging, yet vital at the broader professional level, for social work students, for social workers in the field, and for those senior members of the Ministry of Welfare. The profession of Social Work should engage in self-examination, and some professional self-reflection must be done while also recognizing “the impossibility of acting in the world without ever causing harm” (Wilson, 2016, p. 14). For this reason, it is important to honestly consider both the harm and good that may be done in this profession simultaneously.

Micro-aggression is often latent and implicit and can be hidden behind good intentions. Thus it is important to expose it, allowing social workers to identify their own micro-aggressive behavior.

In summary, this article seeks to raise awareness of the destructive consequences of micro-aggression in the treatment of fathers and to offer tools to prevent the micro-aggressive dynamic.

Practical suggestions for coping with micro-aggression among social workers and father can include:

1. Stressing the importance for social workers of treating fathers for the welfare of the entire family and for broader societal change (that is, social workers both at levels of policy-makers and those in the field).
2. Teaching social workers about work with men and fathers early in their professional training, and for those who already work in the field, via training sessions, courses, and workshops, but most importantly – via the fathers themselves in focus groups, by taking an interest in individual fathers’ experiences and so forth.
3. Encouraging reflective examination by social workers regarding their biases in terms of concepts and gender, in an honest and forgiving manner, without self-judgment.
4. Teaching social workers the concept of micro-aggression and encouraging critical examination of unitentional treatment dynamics that tend toward micro-aggression.

This study suffered from several limitations which must be considered:
Firstly, as this is a qualitative study with a relatively small number of interviewees,
it has limited possibilty for generalizing to the entire population of fathers or social workers. Similarly, it may be that the sample was biased, as those who chose to be interviewed may have wanted to express difficulty or criticism of the care they received from Family Welfare services, or alternatively, did not feel comfortable exposing criticism of the social workers who had treated them.
Also, almost all interviews took place by telephone, which could reduce their depth and quality, but which may have ensured greater freedom of speech due to a feeling of anonymity.

From this study, we learn that it is crucial to continue to study this issue via additional means such as quantitative research, and to reach as many fathers as possible.
It is also important to transfer these findings to highest levels such as the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services for further consideration of polices concerned with care and treatment of fathers in Family Social Services Departments .