

The Mother-Based Intervention: Policy, Social Work, and the Absence of Fathers in the Social Services in Israel

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The increasing scholarly interest in the absence of fathers from family-focused interventions by the social services tends to focus on the role of fathers, mothers, and social workers in this absence. The role of policymakers, however, has been neglected. This article examines the case study of policymakers in the Israeli social services to fill in this gap and examine the role of policy and policymakers in fathers' absence. The findings reveal that policy is based on the 'mother-based intervention' assumption—the services are built around the assumption that interventions include only mothers, and therefore make engaging fathers an exception.

Introduction: Social Work, Children's Rights, and Father Engagement

One of the main aims of family- and children-oriented welfare services and social work is promoting children's welfare through assisting and cooperating with their families. The International Social Work Federation states that "when the biological parents can provide care this is the best base for a child's development" (IFSW 2009). According to the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services \(2013\)](#), "The child welfare system is a group of services designed to promote the well-being of children by ensuring safety, achieving permanency, and strengthening families to care for their children successfully."

Thus, welfare systems worldwide and in Israel acknowledge the importance of working with families to ensure the rights of children. However, working with families is often interpreted as working with mothers, as fathers are often

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absent from interventions by the social services (Baum 2015b; Brown et al. 2009; Zanoni et al. 2013).

This absence stands in contrast to the emerging body of evidence regarding the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children in general and its benefit in child welfare intervention in particular. Father involvement in childcare benefits children on the cognitive, behavioral, health, and education levels (Tully et al. 2017), improves positive behaviors, self-concept, and self-esteem (Heinrich 2014), and reduces risk-related behaviors (Horn and Sylvester 2002). When examining interventions by the social welfare system, evidence shows that incorporating fathers increases the effectiveness of such interventions on various levels (Brewsaugh, Masyn, and Salloum 2018; Brewsaugh and Strozier 2016; Burrus et al. 2012; Malm, Murray, and Geen 2006; Velázquez et al. 2009).

The absence of fathers from welfare interventions is detrimental not only to children's welfare. It also abuses the fathers' rights to parenthood, by excluding fathers from aspects of their child's life, aspects that are sometimes central to their development (Baum 2015b; Brown et al. 2009; Featherstone 2013). It may also place an extra burden on already overburdened mothers, by depriving them of sharing childcare (Brown et al. 2009; Strega et al. 2008),

However, it is important to note that while many scholars emphasize the potential of father engagement to promote children's welfare, others point to the risk that may be associated with coercing contact with fathers who may be violent or otherwise abusive (Featherstone 2013). In reality, fathers may pose a risk to their children and, sometimes simultaneously, provide beneficial support (Brown et al. 2009). Therefore, a more complex view of fathers is needed, one escaping the risk–resource dichotomy.

Thus, it appears that although parent involvement is acknowledged by social services and welfare services worldwide as crucial to maintaining children's welfare and right, and although the absence of fathers in these interventions is detrimental to children, fathers, and mothers alike, the services fail to engage effectively with fathers.

In this article, we wish to examine the causes of this absence from the perspective of policymakers in the Israeli welfare system, in order to understand why the services fail to engage with fathers, although the benefits of such engagement are widely acknowledged.

Literature Review: Fathers in the Social Services

Interest in the participation of fathers in interventions by the social services is a relatively new phenomenon. Until the 1990s, services aimed at the welfare of children and families in the industrialized world targeted exclusively mothers, who were seen as holding sole responsibility for their children's welfare (Featherstone 2013; Maxwell et al. 2012).

Since the beginning of the new millennium, however, the importance of the participation of fathers has been recognized. Working with fathers is seen as a crucial tool in helping fathers, either to remove a risk these fathers pose to the family or to utilize them as a resource to help other family members (Featherstone 2013). However, understanding the importance of engaging fathers seems not to be enough, as services fail to raise the participation of fathers in family- or child-oriented programs (Zanoni et al. 2013; Veltkamp 2019).

The research literature has focused on the obstacles that hinder father participation and identified such obstacles on three levels: fathers avoiding contact with services, mothers posing a barrier between the social services and fathers, and elements in the social services themselves standing in the way of engagement (Maxwell et al. 2012).

Many fathers avoid contact with the social services, for several reasons. First, men tend to refrain from seeking help for psychological difficulties. Hegemonic norms of masculinity require men to be strong and independent and to adopt stoic behavior, and thus seeking help for problems—and specifically for problems in the area of mental health—is perceived as an unmasculine sign of weakness. This self-stigma often deters men from contacting help agencies in general, including the social services (Addis and Mahalik 2003; Baum 2015b; Seidler et al. 2016).

Alongside men's general avoidance of help-seeking, fathers avoid the social services because those are associated with childcare, which is still considered, mostly, a feminine domain. While women's participation in waged labor has risen dramatically in recent decades, men's participation in household labor has not followed suit and has shown only a minor increase (Bianchi et al. 2000).

Moreover, even the minor increase in the distribution of household labor did not extend to household responsibility. While, at least in some contexts, fathers do take a more substantial part of the chores related to household maintenance and childcare, the responsibility for those remains with the mother. The mother allocates the chores and is in charge of their completion, even when the father is the one actually doing the chores (Anabi 2018). Thus, the role of contact with aid agencies, and specifically with the social services, is perceived as part of the mother's role, and fathers tend to avoid it.

Other reasons that men tend to avoid the social services may be previous negative experience with the social services and their connections with the criminal system, concern over the reaction of a current spouse who is not the mother of those children, and more (Maxwell et al. 2012; Ewart-Boyle et al. 2015; Baum 2017).

Mothers often position themselves as gatekeepers between the social services and fathers. Mothers may be reluctant to bring fathers into the picture and may work against attempts by the services to engage fathers, sometimes going as far as refraining from identifying the father, even when asked

(O'Donnell et al. 2005). Reasons for this reluctance may be fear of a father with a history of violence toward the children or the mother, concern about losing custody to the father, or unwillingness to share responsibility for the children. Another possible reason is the desire to avoid losing benefits attached to single-parent status if welfare services identify a father in the household (Maxwell et al. 2012).

The third source of difficulties in engaging fathers, which is the focus of this article, is the social services themselves. One aspect of this difficulty is the lack of research on fathers. There is very little research in the social work discipline on working with fathers, and the research on families and parenting tends to focus on the role of the mother (Shapiro and Krysik 2010; Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer 2003). The focus on mothers and the lower representation of fathers as part of the family are also evident in social work textbooks on child welfare, which tend to present the mother as the primary, if not the only, caretaker (Brewsaugh and Strozier 2016). Besides textbooks, academic courses in social work also fail to include fathers when talking about families. In Canada, less than 5 percent of social work syllabuses on work with children and family were found to mention fathers (Brown et al. 2009). This lack of information is one of the reasons why social workers have insufficient knowledge of the unique aspects of working with men.

Men are socialized to express distress and pain differently than women, and we are culturally blind to these expressions. Thus, professionals often misinterpret fathers' expressions of distress, fear, pain, and other emotions, and fail to relate to those emotions and understand their consequences when working with those fathers and with their families (Baum 2015b; Brown et al. 2009). Another difficulty that social services experience when attempting to engage fathers stems from gender differences. The vast majority of social workers, and workers in the social services, in general, are women. When working with men, this gender gap poses several difficulties for the workers. 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 et al. 2009).

Female workers may also experience fear of working with male clients, either because those men are or have been violent, because they are suspected to be violent, or because men of low socioeconomic status, especially those from families in need, are stereotyped as being violent—while men also experience fear of social workers (Baum 2015a). Difficulties in working with men may also originate from unresolved inner conflicts of the social workers themselves (Baum 2015b).

Viewing the lack of literature on the positions of policymakers, it is not surprising that most of that literature does not focus on their role in promoting or preventing father involvement. However, some findings regarding that role do exist.

[Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) point to the organizational structure of the services as yet another cause of failure of the social services to engage fathers. How the services are structured drives workers to prefer working with mothers. Expressly, the researchers point to the role of managerialism in sidelining fathers.

Managerialism, manifesting in specific contexts as New Public Management, is an approach to the management of public services that seeks to improve public services by adopting practices and methods prevalent in the private sector, with a specific focus on efficiency and cost-reduction ([Newman and Clarke 1997](#)). Notable aspects of the managerial discourse are the use of measurable standards and norms; competition as the basic dynamic of action, motivation, and improvement; strict cost-effectiveness calculations; and entrepreneur-oriented thinking as a model for action ([Aucoin 1990](#); [Evetts 2009](#); [Pavolini and Klenk 2015](#)).

Research on social welfare agencies has shown how managerialism changes the rewards and incentives structure for workers, altering their behavior in ways that match these rewards and incentives. While professionals, and specifically social workers, do maintain some degree of professional discretion, the level of discretion is in many cases eroded, and their ability to base their work on professional principles, rather than adapt to the requirements of managerial demands, varies significantly according to institutional settings ([Altreiter and Leibetseder 2014](#); [Djuve and Kavli 2014](#); [Ellis 2011](#); [Howard 2012](#); [Nothdurfter and Hermans 2018](#)).

Research on managerialism in the context of the child protection system has shown far-reaching consequences. [Featherstone et al. \(2018\)](#) recount how using measurement, responsabilization, and audit to prevent child maltreatment have to lead to a focus on a (real or alleged) parental dysfunction, while severely limiting the ability of workers to identify the role of broader societal and structural causes for child abuse and neglect.

The literature on the effect of managerialism on father engagement is limited. [Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) note that managerialism is at odds with increasing father involvement. Including the father in the intervention would double the workload on workers without increasing the number of cases, thus dramatically decreasing the worker's measurable outcomes. Managerialism, therefore, affects workers' motivation to engage fathers.

The use of gender-neutral terms is often presented as the first step toward gender equality, but [Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) find it, too, to be detrimental to father engagement. Overloaded workers required to contact "parents" tend to fulfill this requirement by contacting the mother, thus fulfilling the requirement without affecting father involvement.

Another element found to affect father involvement is racism. When working with fathers belonging to cultures other than their own, workers tend to avoid confronting what they perceive as the different cultural norms about the role of the father ([Brown et al. 2009](#); [Gupta and Featherstone 2015](#);

Roer-Strier et al. 2005). Thus, cultural barriers are perceived as an obstacle to father engagement.

There is a dearth of comparative research on father engagement with the social services. Existing studies arrive mainly from anglophone countries, and specifically the United States (Brewsaugh, Masyn, and Salloum 2018; Brewsaugh and Strozier 2016; Burrus et al. 2012), the United Kingdom (Brown et al. 2009; Featherstone 2013; Maxwell et al. 2012; Scourfield 2014), and Canada (Dominelli et al. 2011; Strega et al. 2008).

In Israel, the subject of this study, there has only been scant research on father engagement with the social services. Notably, Baum (Baum 2015a,b) has looked into the interactions between social workers and fathers in the welfare system, elaborating on the intricate relationship and power relations between them. Other studies have reported on the situation of fathers in the social services, but mostly as part of larger studies without a specific focus on fathers (Baum and Negbi 2013; Peled, Gavriel-Fried, and Katz 2012; Roer-Strier et al. 2005). However, findings, to the extent that they exist, tend to mirror findings from around the world—mainly, the conflicted position of social workers toward fathers and a preference for working with mothers.

Thus, besides the role of fathers and mothers in the absence of fathers from the social services, the research has examined the role of the services themselves. However, as shown above, the focus was on the executing, street-level echelons of the services both in the empirical data collected and, to a lesser extent, in the analysis of the sources of father absence. This article aims to bridge this gap by examining the perceptions of policymakers and how these perceptions are reflected in the existing services. Thus, the research questions leading this study where:

- (Q1) What are the main obstacles policymakers identify to the engagement of fathers in the social services?
- (Q2) What are the underlying assumptions behind these obstacles?

Methodology

To examine these questions, we have adopted a qualitative research design, based on semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis.

The interviews were focused on top-level bureaucrats in the Ministry of Labor and Social Services (MOLSA), in charge of the Departments of Social Services (DSS), the frontline social service in Israel. Interviewees were selected via snowball sampling methodology—the researchers selected the first interviewees based on their acquaintance with the field, and each interviewee was asked to provide the names of additional contacts he/she believed could contribute to the understanding of the issue, and further interviews were based on these data. Snowball sampling was maintained until reaching saturation,

determined when both researchers and participants failed to identify additional relevant participants.

Interviews were conducted following a semi-structured interview methodology, according to an interview guide. Participants were first asked a general question regarding their views on fathers' place in the work of the social services. Later, a set of complementary questions was asked. Participants signed an informed consent form and were given the option of anonymity. Those that chose to decline anonymity reviewed their quotes before publication.

Overall, snowball sampling led to the inclusion of eleven participants deemed relevant to the policy issues at stake, most belonging to the top bureaucracy of the MOLSA (service managers, deputy service managers, and national inspectors). In addition, two bureaucrats on the district level and one outside consultant were interviewed. All interviewees were academically accredited social workers (as is customary in the Israeli social services bureaucracy), and most (nine) were women.

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic content data analysis methodology. Each interview was analyzed to find the main themes arising from the content. Two researchers have analyzed each interview to ensure validity. The themes arising from each interview were gathered to compile a full list of themes encompassing the entire body of data.

Empirical Analysis: Approaches Towards Difficulties and Challenges

In this part, we will describe the main difficulties and challenges in engaging fathers in the social services, as identified by the policymakers. These difficulties and challenges can be divided into external barriers, originating at sources outside the ministry and the departments, and internal ones.

External Barriers to Working with Fathers

The research participants identified three obstacles that were seen by them as external to the ministry and originating from sources that are not under their control: government policy and budgetary constraints, the lack of tools provided by academia, and hegemonic cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity.

The first barrier is government policy leading to budgetary constraints. Specifically, family social workers contend with notoriously high caseloads reaching 250–400 cases per worker, four times the ideal workload (Lavee and Strier 2018). Interviewees perceive this situation as a significant obstacle to engaging fathers:

Large caseloads per social worker effect how she works and with whom. For example, if she has a caseload of 200 families, and she has to

remove a child in danger from home, she may not have the time to invest in intensive intervention with the father, who has not been in contact with social services in the past. Instead, she may finalize the issue with the mother, who was the primary client. In my opinion, it is important to work with both parents, but we often do not enjoy the cooperation of the father, and as stated, active reaching out to the men adds much effort to the already over-worked social worker. (AA)

The interviewee describes a situation in which working with fathers dramatically increases the workload—as she aptly puts it in another place: “Caring for one is not caring for two. It’s two square, it’s not only two.” When faced with the option of involving fathers, workers who already suffer from high workloads will choose the option that reduces the workload, or at least does not increase it—and that option is working with the parent who is already present in the department, namely the mother. Thus, high workloads and budgetary constraints lead to fathers being ignored.

Others emphasized the complexity of the budgetary issue: “It is absolutely clear that with fathers we need to invest more time . . . but even under this burden, it is possible to do more” (BB). The impact of the DSS recent policy reform, which “[w]ill increase the view of looking at all family members” (CC), reexamines the question of caseload, since “the departments will no longer insist on someone who does not cooperate, they have no time and no ability” (CC).

A second obstacle is the lack of tools provided by academia. In the relationship between academia and the field, as interviewees see it, the role of the former is to provide data, knowledge, and practices that the field can employ to improve its practice. However, several interviewees find academic knowledge lacking in that respect, not supplying them with the tools they need in forming practices that will extend father engagement. Academia, in their view, has two roles: to produce knowledge and to train social workers. Concerning engaging fathers, it fails both:

I believe that helping men deal with their problems is extremely important. Unfortunately, social workers have not the knowledge nor the training in specialized intervention with male clients, who traditionally avoid social services. (AA)

While academia was seen as an obstacle in the current state of affairs, it was seen as having the potential to become an institution that can promote research and impart knowledge in the field:

How do you expect me to do something when no one has trained me on how to do it? With all due respect to myself, I’m a woman who started out working in the field. Today I’m a policymaker. In my

20 years' experience, I have read a few academic papers on the subject, heard a few lectures, but what is expected of me? Come, give me working specifications, some real knowledge. I will surely study. I will surely learn and adapt. (AA)

The third external obstacle, which is, to some extent, internal as well, are hegemonic cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity. All interviewees perceive masculinity as opposed to femininity, and identify emotional openness and the ability to address therapeutic and emotional language and help with femininity, and concrete unemotional communication with masculinity.

This gendered difference leads men to avoid seeking help, as seeking help is perceived as feminine:

Like, those who are perceived as weakest and most excluded. And men, first, do not want to be there. Women, first, allow themselves more to say – I need help. . . . Even to contact the social services, for a man, is recognition or a confession in his weakness. And no one wants to be there, surely not a man who was taught, from the moment he was born, to be the strong one, to be the hero. (Ayala Meir)

The division between femininity and masculinity refers not only to seeking and receiving therapeutic care but also to responsibility toward children. While interviewees acknowledge social changes in families and parenthood, as will be described below, they also state that the situation is still far from equal, and that childcare is still mainly a feminine task:

And even with all this revolution [of men entering childcare], many men do not rush to take responsibility for these things. In practice, the woman is the one staying with the newborn child; she stays with the need to care for him. Thus it's not only a question of the disregard of social workers, I think it's also sort of reality, that we wanted to view it otherwise, that men will have . . . will be equal to women in sharing responsibility, in the distribution of chores. But the situation is far from that. (DD)

Thus, a major obstacle to the inclusion of men in the social services are differing gender perceptions, which, according to interviewees, are still prevalent in Israeli society.

However, while interviewees see gender relations as an obstacle to father engagement, they also see a potential for improvement in current social processes that change these relations. Emerging perceptions of "new masculinity" and "involved fatherhood," coupled with changing family roles and structures, are seen as promoting an inevitable change that will affect the role of fathers in the DSS, regardless of the action (or nonaction) of the DSS or the

MOLSA themselves. As existing family structures and gender perceptions are seen as the major obstacles to father engagement, change in these structures and perceptions is seen as the principal promoter of change.

Even when you don't look at the welfare system, but on the general population. Father involvement in the past, in things that are related to children and education and family, on this level the woman was much more involved. Today you look at young couples, their involvement in the life of the children is much higher than in the past. In everything. Taking from the kindergarten, taking to the kindergarten, go to after-school activities, bring to that, and be at home, and change diapers, and give the food That's also a general development. (EE)

These findings indicate that there are structural failures that make it challenging to change systemic policy; that is to say, work overload creates a situation where if there is a lack of knowledge, tools, and academic training, there is no one to demand it. It can be assumed that these three external factors create a kind of blind spot on the issue, which is expressed in internal structural deficiencies, which we shall discuss below.

Internal Obstacles to Father Involvement

Besides the external obstacles discussed above, those seen by interviewees as coming from sources not under their control, policymakers identify several obstacles that originate either in the ministry itself or in the DSS—and thus open to change. These include the dominance of women in the social work profession; social workers lacking tools to work with men; the resulting negative image of the profession in the eyes of fathers; difficulties in reaching out for fathers; and the low priority given to engaging fathers by the MOSLA.

The first internal obstacle is attributed to the gendered composition of the workforce in the social services and the social work profession in general. Interviewees estimated that the feminine dominance deters men from receiving treatment:

You come to the welfare services, and you see only women. It can spur, for a man, something that can objectively not be correct, but some initial hesitation in this regard, especially if it's something related to, say, marriage conflict or something, and you have to go to treatment in this context, so an initial negative attitude, what's that, it's all women, of course, they relate to women and not to men. (EE)

As the services are considered to be feminine, men do not feel comfortable to access them. Many interviewees saw the solution to recruiting more male social workers. However, others saw the problem as more profound than the

gender of the workers and related to the nature of the services as feminine. Yair After, an external consultant, put the problem this way:

Now, you understand that once you create a service titled “center for the prevention of violence towards women,” that this is the title to which a man enters. . . . Ok, so take into account that men will not enter this place. And every time that they do enter they will enter with their left foot and not with their right. Because when they enter, they see this title. (Yair After)

Some sought to challenge these constructs while striving to understand “how the profession needs to improve its image, so that men can come more” and “see how to create the trust so that they really agree to receive any help from the system” (EE).

A second internal obstacle is that social workers are not equipped for emotional therapeutic work with men. Interviewees claim that men express emotions, and specifically distress, differently than women, and that workers, who are familiar with working with women, fail to recognize and address these differences. Ayala Meir relates to this phenomenon in treating depression:

With women, when they are in some process of depression, you can see it, that there are functional problems that are derived from it. With men, depression isn’t . . . it doesn’t have external expressions of functioning. For example, he can be in very high functioning, the man. You won’t see it there . . . it is more implicit, more suppressed I know what they say about it, but I think we don’t know enough about it. That is, we I mean the welfare services. (Ayala Meir)

The differences interviewees identify relate not only to the different expressions of distress but also to differences in the effectiveness of various therapeutic practices when addressing men: “The therapeutic discourse itself is a feminine discourse . . . because many times with men, talking does not address them”, thus, “a social discourse is created that marks women as suffering and men as not suffering from distress” (Yair After).

Interestingly enough, many interviewees show acquaintance with the academic literature on the subject of the different expression of distress between men and women, and on professionals’ difficulties in contending with these differences (although it is not always up-to-date literature on the subject, or giving a complete picture of that literature). Thus, they connect this internal obstacle to the failure of academia to supply knowledge and tools on working with men and fathers, discussed above as an external obstacle.

Interviewees saw several potential remedies to this obstacle. The first was learning from services and programs which succeed at engaging men and

fathers. All the interviewees mentioned other fields and services, related to the DSS, which succeeded in working with men. These include a unique service for men in violence treatment centers; emergency centers for children at risk, who try to integrate both parents in therapy; and specific concrete subject groups for men such as bereavement, addictions, poverty, occupation, or father-son relationships.

Another potential tool to overcome the services' lack of knowledge of working with fathers was the focus on content-focused, functional, and concrete treatment. Almost all interviewees agreed that such treatment is beneficial in recruiting men for treatment:

[A specific program] is very men-friendly, it could be described as a no-nonsense program. We won't "waste time" in a long term intense therapeutic process, to talk about "how are you feeling?". If you have a problem, lets meet and see if I can help you solve the issue. To my understanding, this practical approach in one to which men can relate better and accept. (AA)

This enabling factor can be seen as an answer to the lack of professional knowledge on working with men. In a way, interviewees are telling us that if we do not know how to interpret men's feelings and work with them, we will simply avoid these feelings.

Another enabling factor, also seen as answering this lack of knowledge, is the cultural issue, which has also emerged as a significant factor in the treatment of fathers. Cultural sensitivity is seen as able to promote an understanding of fathers: "In my opinion and according to the literature we should place some emphasis on the cultural issue and understand the messages of that culture, such as if the man openly expresses difficulty in general?" (FF). Interviewees believe that understanding how to work with fathers entails understanding the specifics of working with fathers from the various subcultures constituting Israeli society.

The combination of three obstacles mentioned above—the external obstacle of the gendered perceptions of fathers' and mothers' roles and the internal ones of the negative image of the DSS in the eyes of fathers and the lack of tools for addressing fathers—all lead to fathers not contacting the DSS. This, in turn, requires social workers to actively reach out to fathers to engage them in family interventions. However, workers find it difficult to reach out to fathers:

The target population that comes, and that came in the past, to the departments, are mothers. It's easiest to work with them. The connection to fathers, the different courtship that has to be there to bring them into treatment, wasn't the cornerstone of the work and was actually quite neglected. (EE)

Many interviewees relate to the lack of reaching out for fathers as a central obstacle to the engagement of fathers. However, many also point to reaching out as containing an ethical conflict:

You can sometimes lead the horse to the water, but you can't make it drink. So I'll say that maybe there isn't enough reaching out for men. It is easier to contend with the one that arrives, in the complexity of working inside the department, it's way easier for the worker to work with the one who comes, the one who cooperates, and [the worker] isn't going to look for the problems with the one who isn't looking. It's not necessarily proper, but on the other side, you know, how much can you court someone, and how much does it come on the expense of someone else who doesn't receive attention. Those are balances you need all the time. (CC)

This interviewee, alongside others, points to the fact that reaching out for fathers requires resources that have to be taken from somewhere else—many times, from investing in the very same family, through allocating time for working with the mother instead of reaching out for the father. In a situation of limited resources, as described above, the question of allocating these resources can be crucial.

The last internal obstacle is the low priority given to engaging with fathers. Most interviewees hold positions in the welfare bureaucracy in Israel, and each wields at least some organizational power. However, although all claim to view the engagement of fathers as important, organizational efforts to promote father engagement are minimal, as mentioned above. In most interviews, the low priority remains explicit. However, several interviewees frankly admit to that lack of effort:

I must say now: this is not our agenda. It isn't something we're busy doing all the time or check it . . . the policy is . . . we don't emphasize fathers, we talk about parents. . . . on the policy level it's worth considering if a unique policy towards fathers is needed. We don't do that. (Dalia Lev-Sadeh)

Another interviewee explains why father engagement receives low priority:

A blanket is a blanket. It is short and not always sufficient to cover everything. If tomorrow you tell me, recruiting and working with fathers is now going to be the central policy mission of Social Services in Israel, then we have to decide which subject we give up. Poverty, immigration absorption, disabilities, family-centered intervention?, . . . you can't sustain it all within the limits of the existing resources of time, knowledge, budget and manpower. (AA)

If we believe their explicit position echoes the implicit position of other interviewees, it seems that the main obstacle to engaging fathers is the lack of enthusiasm on the part of policymakers. They appreciate the importance of engaging fathers, but not enough to prioritize it over other relevant issues.

Discussion

This article, the first to examine the position of policymakers toward father engagement, shows that in some respects, those policymakers identify the same obstacles as those appearing in the literature; in other places, they identify new obstacles; and sometimes they view the same obstacles from a different viewpoint. Although on the explicit level policymakers strive for a gender-egalitarian structure of the family services, an analysis of their perceptions and views shows that it is implicitly based on the assumption of a normative household composed of a mother in charge of caring and an absent father. These assumptions are the basis for the way interventions are planned, executed, and funded, and therefore carry a heavier weight than explicit egalitarian positions.

From the examination of the findings alongside the literature emerges an organizing concept—the concept of *Mother-Based Family Intervention*. The interviewees, we will claim below, implicitly perceive interventions emphasizing and based on the mother as the default form of intervention, and any deviation from this norm is thus understood as an extra effort required from the services.

The implicit nature of the Mother-Based Intervention is central to the understanding of the positions of the research participants. This concept did not directly appear in interviews, and some participants expressed explicit positions and views that stand at odds with this concept—such as claims that the services attempt to cater equally to parents of both genders. One can assume that if the participants were asked about Mother-Based Family Intervention, they would deny its existence.

Our use of the term ‘Mother-Based’ for this family intervention type does not imply that these interventions are better for mothers or favor mothers over fathers. As the literature discussed above shows, family interventions that exclude fathers are detrimental not only to the father, by denying him involvement in his child’s life and his right to parenthood, but also to the mother, by placing the burden of childcare solely on her shoulders and reinforcing the unequal distribution of labor and responsibility in the household.

To demonstrate the mother-based nature of the services, we will begin by examining the issue of managerialism. [Brown et al. \(2009\)](#) relate the role of managerialism in preventing workers from engaging fathers from the perspective of the workers, who describe how it limits their ability to interact with

both parents. Looking at this issue from the viewpoint of policymakers allows a more complex and detailed view of the subject.

The findings described above show that managerialism affects the ability of the services to engage fathers in three distinct ways: professional, managerial, and financial. We will begin by describing the professional aspect of managerialism, as it leads to the other two. On the professional aspect, interviewees note that engaging fathers is far more complex than working solely with mothers. The worker not only has to work with two clients instead of one, but also needs to consider the interaction between the two, and to take into account the needs of each—which in the case of mothers and fathers could be drastically different.

Thus, when considering working with the mother as the default option, engaging fathers is seen as the more professionally challenging and time-consuming option. However, it is important to note that making the Mother-Based Intervention the default option is an active—albeit implicit—choice. The services were structured around the notion of Mother-Based Interventions, and as a result, any deviation from this standard is seen as burdensome.

As Featherstone et al. (2018) note, managerialism encourages workers to focus on the personal level and to avoid broader societal and structural elements regarding the problem at hand. While this study's ability to focus on decision-making by specific workers is limited, it appears that a similar phenomenon manifests here: the focus on measurable goals attainment and pre-structured work procedures severely limits workers' ability to identify the causes for their clients' complaints in levels that transcend their individual characteristics.

This choice of the Mother-Based Intervention as the default option affects the managerial and financial levels. On the managerial level, one can see that any attempt to deviate from the default, mother-based norm interrupts the structured work processes in the departments.

In the Israeli case specifically, the current reform in the DSS emphasizes predefined and uniform work processes and measurable outcomes. As can be seen in this quote, taken from *The Third Reform* book—a report on the aims and progress of the reform—the reform explicitly defines New Public Management as a cornerstone of the reform:

In recent years we witness new theoretical approaches, presenting the modern perception known as “New Public Management.” The basic principles of this “Management” are . . . turning the governmental units into organizational branches with executive capabilities measured by results and outcomes, presenting an appropriate criterion for resource allocation to the organizations achieving [those results and outcomes].

... I, like many others, the leaders of the reform among them, believe that this is a window of opportunity to employ third-level changes [in the work of the DSS]. (Schmid, [Moraly-Sagiv 2015](#))

Thus, managerialism and specifically New Public Management are presented as an ideal of the reform. The documentation of the reform, in *The Third Reform* book and elsewhere, further defines the importance of tightly defined resource allocation, time scale, and predefined processes for interventions, and specifically for family-oriented interventions, which stand at the center of the reform ([Moraly-Sagiv 2015](#)). Any deviation from those standards that could damage outcomes is frowned upon and may lead to detrimental effects for the worker and his organizational unit.

The DSS reform, as stressed in interviews, is gender-neutral, as it does not prioritize working with mothers over working with fathers. The reform (or, more specifically, the relevant part of the reform) does not refer to the content of the intervention, but rather to its framework and work processes: How long should intervention take? How many resources are to be assigned to an intervention? When should a case be considered closed, and when should the worker put more effort into it?

However, even though these work processes do not, by themselves, differentiate between mothers and fathers, the assumptions underlining them are based on mother-based assumptions, and therefore are biased to mothers. As demonstrated above, the convention on the resources needed for intervention, on the required amount of time, and other administrative aspects of the intervention, is based on the intervention that is considered normative—that is, the Mother-Based Intervention. Those work processes were optimized for work under mother-based assumptions, and different assumptions would have resulted in a different work process and different expected outcomes, promoting the ability of the services to engage fathers.

Thus, while the organizational and the managerial structure of the services does not explicitly favor Mother-Based Interventions, preference is given to interventions that are efficient in both time and resources. Because interventions are based on mother-based assumptions, efficiency is gained through compliance with those assumptions. Therefore, although managerialism is not explicitly mother-based, it strengthens the Mother-Based Intervention through its implicit assumptions.

The same phenomenon can be seen on the financial level. The added complexity of working with both parents translates to higher workloads, and thus to a larger number of workers needed to care for the same number of cases. In a reality of welfare austerity, where workers and managers have to contend with limited resources, increasing the resources for dealing with this issue is not an option (or at least, requires extensive political effort, which—as detailed above—is not prioritized). Thus, engaging fathers is shunned. However,

here too, the mother-based assumptions appear: the services were (implicitly) designed to suffice for working with mothers and, thus, cannot accommodate working with both parents.

Mother-Based Interventions are claimed to be favorable from a managerial point of view because they are more efficient, and enable streamlining work processes that allow more workers to care for fewer families. This claim appears to be true in the existing context, in which work processes are based on mother-based assumptions, but the situation could be different in a work environment that is based on different assumptions.

Even if we accept Mother-Based Interventions to be more efficient, however, efficiency does not equal effectiveness. As shown above, there is evidence that proves that interventions that engage fathers provide better results than interventions that exclude them and are better at achieving their predefined aims.

However, as [Brown et al. \(2009, 27\)](#) note, managerialism is known to prefer efficiency over effectiveness. While these interventions may be better at securing child welfare and rights, they require more resources and hinder the worker's ability to streamline the work and complete the expected workloads.

Thus, the financial considerations that favor the Mother-Based Intervention, in which this interaction type is favored because it is cheaper and more efficient, are reliant on managerial considerations, which formulate workflows and procedures that are adapted to mother-based assumptions. The workflows and procedures at the managerial level are in turn based on the professional level, which uses mother-based assumptions as a basis for interventions.

Another obstacle arising from the findings is the cultural perceptions of femininity and masculinity. Both existing literature and our interviewees identified these perceptions as a central obstacle, but their focus was different. The literature focused on the ways these perceptions are embedded within the services, and thus to a certain extent causing the absence of fathers in the family social services. In contrast, the findings show that the interviewees focused almost entirely on the effect of these perceptions on the behavior of fathers rather than on the services. Thus, most of the interviewees viewed cultural perceptions as an influence on fathers and mothers, dissuading fathers from accessing the services—by relating the gendered perceptions of fathers as the cause of avoidance of the social services by men and causing the unequal division of responsibility between men and women. Interviewees almost entirely fail to notice how these perceptions are also embedded in the social services themselves, a subject that is central to the discussion in the literature and the understanding of the absence of men from the family social services.

While the sources of this different attribution have not been directly explained by the research findings, they may be attributed to a variety of the actor–observer bias ([Jones and Nisbett 1987](#)). While the interviewees find it easy to identify prejudices and biases in the thinking of the fathers and

mothers, attributing the behavior of the services they are in charge of to outside factors is much harder.

These policymakers' focus on the role of the perceptions of fathers and mothers, while neglecting the role of the perceptions embedded in the services, strengthens the reign of the Mother-Based Intervention. On the one hand, focusing on the external cultural obstacles to father engagement serves to justify the use of mother-based practices, as they are presented as an adaptation to existing external circumstances; the neglect of the internal cultural obstacles serves to make the Mother-Based Intervention implicit, as the services are presented as gender-neutral.

The reasons for the participants' lack of political will to initiate policies that will increase paternal engagement are not self-evident from the findings of this study. However, one possible explanation is the extent of change needed to tackle Mother-Based Intervention which is rooted deeply within the structure of the services and perceptions of the nature of the intervention, and to mirror deeply rooted perceptions of the role of fathers and mothers in interventions and parenting in general.

Conclusion

The research questions that led this article referred to the nature of the obstacles to the engagement of fathers in the social services, as perceived by policymakers in the Israeli MOLSA and to the assumptions underlining these perceptions. We have described the various obstacles identified by the research participants, both external and internal to the services. Our analysis of the assumptions behind those obstacles identified the organizing principle of the Mother-Based Intervention—the services are structured around the assumption that interventions are on the mother, and therefore interventions that include both parents are perceived as an exception, requiring extra effort from the social worker and the system, and thus frowned upon.

The mother-based nature of interventions in the social services appears to have detrimental effects on the effectiveness of interventions, and therefore on the rights and the life chances of children, fathers, and mothers alike. As discussed above, interventions that do not integrate fathers abuse the rights of fathers, and minimize the contribution to children.

This structuring has detrimental effects both on fathers, who are denied taking a substantial part in their child's life, and on mothers, who are expected to take sole responsibility for children, and is in contrast to the core concept of working with families.

As mentioned above, research on father engagement in the social services has largely neglected policymakers and policymaking processes. The concept of the Mother-Based Intervention has the potential to fill that gap, uncovering the assumptions that shape the way the services are structured, thus allowing

another perspective into the reasons behind the absence of fathers from the social services.

Besides its academic contribution, the concept of the Mother-Based Intervention has the potential to contribute to a policy change toward more egalitarian services, services that include fathers in caring and ease the burden on mothers. Accepting that the services are built around assumptions that exclude fathers means that the actions needed to include fathers are far more radical than previously accepted methods of engaging fathers. If the problem stands at the root of the structure of the services, what is needed is not a specific father-oriented program or worker training; it calls for a rethinking on the basic structuring of the services, including a redesign of the basic intervention practice, of workloads and caseloads, and more.

In this article, we have identified a new organizing principle behind the perceptions of policymakers; its methodological structure does not allow us to examine its actual existence in the field. Further research is needed to analyze the actual structure of the services, and how they reflect (or do not reflect) the assumptions of the Mother-Based Intervention.

Focusing on the positions of policymakers and top bureaucrats has enabled us to uncover their mother-based assumptions. However, the interviews have only provided a glimpse of these assumptions. The assumptions are implicit, and interviewees are either not aware of them or did not share them with the interviewer.

Thus, to fully understand how these assumptions are embedded into the services and shape the work of the services, one needs a closer view of the workings of the services from the street level, a view not available using the methodology of interviews and the focus on policymaker. Instead, a more observation-oriented, street-level focused methodology is required to unfold the mother-based assumptions fully.

Notes

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