

Fathers and Israeli Child Welfare Services: The Forgotten Client?

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[There is] a tendency to overlook the father as a client. The reasons for this are varied, ranging from the organization and demographic make-up of the social work profession to stereotypes about fathers and a lack of knowledge about ethnic groups.

IT is not our purpose here to make a case concerning the importance of fathers and their role in child care and family life. This task has been done by various writers in different countries and we will not review their work.¹ However, it is interesting to note how little has been published about fathers in social work and child welfare literature.² Israel is no exception to this pattern. This author recently examined all articles published since the inception in 1957 of *Saad* (recently renamed, *Society and Welfare*), the Israeli quarterly journal of social work, and not a single article was found dealing with fathers *per se* as welfare clients. While one article discussed the subject of family therapy, including divorced fathers, this was a Hebrew translation of an article published earlier in *Social Casework*.³ Despite the paucity of discussion of this subject, it is surprising and ironic that social workers quite readily

accept axioms and precepts about the importance of the father role, almost as lip service. When one looks closely at the organization of the social services: the manpower which provides the services and the nature of the services themselves, a pattern emerges which verges on *de facto* discrimination against fathers as a social service client. Despite lip-service, social services do not take the father's role seriously and are not geared to accommodating fathers. Unfortunately, a good deal of the social work literature on fathers focuses on crises around the absence of a father due to death,⁴ (Alexandrovitz, 1969; Grossberg and Crandall, 1978), desertion and non-support⁵ (Snyder, 1975) and separation⁶ (Keshet, 1977), and on irresponsible, problematic fathers who have had incestual relations with daughters⁷ (Spencer, 1978; Gentry,

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¹ Michael E. Lamb, ed., *The Father's Role in Child Development*. New York: Wiley Publishers, 1981.

² Martin Wolins, "The Father Dilemma in Social Welfare" in M. E. Lamb and A. Sagi, eds., *Social and Legal Issues Pertaining to Fatherhood*. New York: Erlbaum Associates, 1982.

³ Arthur Leader, "Family Therapy for Divorced Fathers and Others Out of the Home", *Social Casework*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (1973), pp. 13-18.

⁴ Dov Alexandrovitz, "Children's Reactions to Loss of A Parent", *Saad*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (1969), pp. 36-40. (Hebrew); S. H. Grossberg and L. Crandall, "Father Loss and Father Absence in Preschool Children", *Clinical Social Work Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1978), pp. 123-134.

⁵ Lillian Snyder, *The Impact of the Criminal Justice System of Baltimore City on the Deserting, Non-Supporting Father in Relation to His Role as Provider*. Doctoral dissertation. New York: Columbia University School of Social Work, 1975.

⁶ Harry F. Keshet, *Part-Time Fathers: A Study of Separated and Divorced Men*. Doctoral dissertation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan School of Social Work, 1977.

⁷ J. Spencer, "Father-Daughter Incest: A Clinical View From the Corrections Field", *Child Welfare*, Vol. 57, No. 9 (1978), pp. 581-590. C. E.

1978), are abusive⁸ (David, 1974; Hindman, 1977), single⁹ (Mendes, 1976; Todres, 1975; Fast, 1979), or have asked for or taken custody of children¹⁰ (Bartz and Witcher, 1978; Russell, 1969). Thus, while normative attitudes value the father as an important social service client, social work literature and actual practices tend to stereotype "welfare fathers" as problematic, hard-to-reach clients as compared to mothers and children who are usually the primary clients of child welfare workers.

Why have fathers, despite lip-service to them and to their role in child rearing and family life, become "forgotten" clients? What are the implications of this oversight or neglect for social work practice? What do we mean when we talk about father's roles? Which aspects of fathering are we referring to? The following presentation will try to explore some of these issues, and hopefully, open a broader discussion among child care workers and researchers concerning fathers and child welfare services.

Mothers and Children As Handy Clients

A large number of the selective, personal social services, unlike the more universal social insurances, were created specifically for the purpose of coming to the aid of mothers and children in distress. More important, however, is the fact that the clinically-oriented treatment services, adopted by social work from the psychiatric and medical professions, gravitated to assisting a relatively cooperative, motivated, and paying clientele. Outreach work with unmotivated, even hostile clientele, has only developed in recent decades, but unfortunately, never had a major impact on mainstream social work practice. In the same tradition, the working hours of the majority of social workers, particularly civil service and welfare department employees, do not include evening or night shifts which could enable working fathers to take off from work to meet social workers. Home visits, when made, are daytime visits, planned to see the wife and children. Social workers rarely schedule visits to the father's place of employment to see him during his lunch break. When this author served as director of the Jerusalem Municipality's Department of Family and Community Services several years earlier, the municipal welfare office branches were encouraged to institute evening reception hours (for appointments and walk-ins), and the number of male parents who showed-up increased dramatically. But barring these outreach attempts, the father client, especially the lower-class father, because of their work routine or lack of interest, is often unfairly labelled as "hard-to-reach". Welfare service organization, "normal" working hours, and father's employment tend to reinforce the subtle stigma of uncooperativeness

Gentry, "Incestuous Abuse of Children: The Need For An Objective View", *Child Welfare*, Vol. 57, No. 6 (1978), pp. 355-364.

⁸ M. Hindman, "Child Abuse and Neglect: The Alcohol Connection", *Alcohol Health and Research World*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1977), pp. 2-7; C. A. David, "The Use of the Confrontation Technique in the Battered Child Syndrome", *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (1974), pp. 543-552.

⁹ M. A. Mendes, "Single Fatherhood", *Social Work*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (1976), pp. 308-312; R. Todres, "Motherless Families", *Canadian Welfare*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (1975), pp. 11-13. Anita Fast, *The Father-Only Family: An Alternative Family Style*. Doctoral dissertation. Waltham: Brandeis University, Heller School of Social Work, 1979.

¹⁰ K. W. Bartz, and W. C. Witcher, "When Father Gets Custody", *Children Today*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (1979), pp. 2-6. M. Russell, "A Father's Role in the Custody and Rearing of His Children" (V. Jordan, ed.). New York: *Conference for the Advancement of Private Practice in Social Work*, 1969.

or of passivity as clients, with fathers "cooperating" by proxy through their wives.

Fathers, too, often have their own stereotypes about what their role should be in relation to social services and social workers. Many fathers delegate these contacts to their wives who are considered more available for appointments and who are presumed to handle these matters. Sometimes father's roles are conditioned by the roles social workers "give" them. An absence of active efforts to involve a father can be taken as a message for him not to get involved. If these social worker "messages" match the father's own stereotype of his wife's role as one in charge of social worker contacts, there is little chance of obtaining the father's input and involvement. Unfortunately, these messages are often conveyed to fathers in foster care, school social work, and other services that are directed almost instinctively to mother, as major partner. She, herself, usually presents herself as the applicant for the service.

Women Treating Women

Social work is primarily a women's profession in most countries. In Israel, nearly 80 percent of all social workers are women (Israel Association of Social Workers, 1980). Not only is the working day geared to women social workers raising their own children, but wage agreements for Israeli welfare workers have always included special benefits for working mothers, including shorter working hours and day-care subsidies. The Israeli public welfare scene is essentially one of female social workers helping female clients.

Child welfare is even more than the general field of social work a predominantly female professional practice.

Teen-age prostitutes in Israel, for example are generally classified as a "child welfare" concern. Social workers who work in this area tend to be almost exclusively women. Unfortunately, this match up did not facilitate work with the girls' pimps located in unsavory city hangouts to which women social workers were reluctant to go. However, when the work with juvenile prostitutes was transferred from the Child Welfare Division in the Jerusalem municipality, to the predominantly male-staffed Division of Rehabilitation, male social workers engaged in outreach work with both the pimps and the adolescent prostitutes, with success. Moreover, for the first time, many young girls had access to a stable, helpful, father-figure represented by the male social worker. For the first time, pimps were threatened by the social worker who vied for the loyalty of "their" girls. In a very effective, planned way the new father surrogates weaned the girls from dependency on the pimps to a more independent, satisfying life-style.

Caretaking and Father Figures

In one area of social service, that of institutional or boarding-school placement, the role of fathers is distressingly neglected. In Israel, child placement has been a major response to family disruption, absorption of mass immigration, poverty, and overcrowded housing.¹¹ The Youth Aliyah organization alone cares for nearly 20,000 youth living away from home¹² and the Ministry of Labor

¹¹ Eliezer D. Jaffe, *Child Welfare in Israel*, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1982.

¹² Department of Children and Youth Aliyah, "Statistical Summary for April 1, 1979", *Annual Report of the Youth Aliyah Department*. Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 1979.

and Social Affairs is responsible for placing 12,000 children.¹³

While there is substantial literature on problems of separation and the need for mother figures in dormitory settings, less emphasis is placed on the need for father figures and male role models. How much contact is provided with a consistent adult *male* figure? Is this possible in view of the relatively rapid turnover of institutional counsellors, cottage parents, and other male staff members? One variation of congregate care, the S.O.S. children's villages, originated in Austria by Herman Gemeiner,¹⁴ rejects as a matter of principle the concept of cottage fathers, and insists on employing only unattached cottage *mothers* in order to guarantee long-term stability of the mother surrogate role. Unfortunately, the child care theory underpinning this policy has never been clearly explained or researched, despite the rapid expansion of S.O.S. villages around the world.¹⁵

Congregate care generally tends to deemphasize the father role for either logistical or conceptual reasons, and this development is an important subject for further study. It is ironic that many of the dependent children in placement came from homes without healthy father relationships, and never really have an opportunity in placement to make-up for that loss.

In summary, despite the apparent importance attached to fathers as key partners in social work practice, other realities have resulted in a downgrading of this partnership and a marked lack of accommodation for fathers.

¹³ Tanchum Merari, "Placement of Children Away From Home", *Society and Welfare*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1978), pp. 490-497, (Hebrew).

¹⁴ James Dodge, "SOS Children's Villages Throughout the World: Substitute or Superior Service", *Child Welfare*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (1972), pp. 344-353.

¹⁵ S.O.S. News. Vienna: S.O.S. Kinderdorf International, 1977.

Fathers as a Subculture

All too often, the term "fathers" is used to specify a presumably homogeneous group of people who occupy a certain role in the family. But any discussion of fathers must ask *which* fathers we are talking about? Is there a prototype? Do we relate to "fathers" as some mythical, universal, Western father, or are we thinking about different fathers from various cultural groups? Are we talking about disadvantaged or affluent fathers, about immigrant fathers or "old-timer" fathers? On second glance, everyone will acknowledge that beyond certain universal similarities there are vast differences between father roles and statuses from culture to culture, and that even within various cultures the father can be studied as part of a specific sub-culture. For social workers and child care professionals this information is crucial if one is to provide services and function properly. One excellent example of the importance of such information can be seen from Samih Rizk's advice to supervisors of social workers working with Arab village families in Israel:

The Arab family structure is avowedly patriarchal. The father is the authority; he is God-on-Earth. The way his children are raised, his relationship to his wife, are based on his teaching, his orders, and his use of physical punishment to resolve problems. Only infrequently is encouragement given to internal strengths and abilities of the family members, and rarely does he encourage them to express themselves regarding their problems. There is no trace of the principal of equal rights in their relationship with him . . . In essence, all these things show that the major factor in father-child relationships is the fact that the children and other family members must blindly obey and honor their elders, otherwise they will be called to order by physical force.¹⁶

Without such insights, it would be folly to attempt child care work with

¹⁶ Samih Rizk, "Social Work Supervision Within the Arab Culture," *Saad*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1977), p. 18. (Hebrew).

Arab fathers. Similar information has proven vital for work with Jewish fathers who immigrated to Israel from Moslem countries, and fathers from ultra-Orthodox communities in Poland, Hungary, or Russia. How many American social workers have studied the sub-culture of the Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican, or Native American father? And how many British social workers have studied the father's role in West Indian, West African and Asian migrant families who came to England in recent decades? These cultural, ethnic, and social aspects of social work with immigrant fathers and families are matters of concern today for most Western countries, and in recent years have become topics for regional and international meetings of social workers. Nevertheless, much has yet to be learned about fathers in unfamiliar cultures. What do we know about the changing role of fathers as a result of the clash between traditional and modern cultures among immigrant groups? What has the father's handling of his role-change done to the self-image of his children, to their image of the father, and to their selection of male role models? How do second-generation sons of immigrants, torn between new and old cultures, relate to social services and social workers? Are their attitudes different from that of their fathers', and if so, in what ways?

In most countries, social welfare workers are drawn primarily from the dominant culture, while their clientele are drawn from ethnic minorities¹⁷ This has provided a built-in strangeness between helpers and recipients of service and a need for social workers to learn about cultures other than their own. Affirmative admission policies at various

schools of social work and the introduction of some courses on ethnic customs and cultural anthropology may have alleviated the problem somewhat. Nevertheless, within this larger picture, there is an urgent need for studying the sub-cultures of different groups of fathers in a systematic way. This can be done in the field following one's professional education, but universities today are also beginning to grapple with this problem. Perhaps one of the reasons for the delay in teaching about fathers in different subcultures (and perhaps about mothers, too) was a reluctance to acknowledge or legitimize the importance of ethnic issues in child care practice. The goal in most Western countries for many decades had been towards rapid acculturation of immigrants within a melting-pot, rather than encouraging separation and cultural pluralism. Furthermore, early denial of the importance of ethnic issues in social work education in favor of generic principles and methods of intervention, may have served to allay fears of middle-class, white social workers concerning their own competency to understand and treat problems of clients of whatever ethnic background.

In Israel, until the early 1970's, it was generally considered unacceptable and socially divisive to emphasize Sephardi-Ashkenazi (i.e. Middle-Eastern, Western) differences and ethnic backgrounds as correlates of social stratification and social problems. After all, they were all Jews, and the country had been founded on the principle of the Ingathering of the Exiles.

Another reason why relatively little is taught about the sub-cultures of fathers is simply because social work and the behavioral sciences have accumulated only meager knowledge of them. Few researchers have studied the subject and even fewer practitioners have written about it. No wonder, therefore, that

¹⁷ Eliezer D. Jaffe, "Manpower Supply and Admissions Policy in Israeli Social Work Education", *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. 53, No. 4 (1977), pp. 242-249.

child care personnel have not studied the subject.

Fortunately, reality has caught up with social ideology in most countries, and social welfare, along with other social institutions, is becoming more aware of ethnic issues and the need to accept and understand ethnic sub-cultures.¹⁸ For social work education, Jenkins' work¹⁸ is of great importance for its attempt to develop a typology for incorporating ethnic factors in social welfare based on experiences with five ethnic groups in America, and a review of ethnic issues in Britain and Israel. She is one of the few social work educators to present the ethnic dilemma in social ser-

vices in international perspective, and her observations show quite clearly how all of us in different countries are struggling with very similar problems.

Summary

It is ironic, perhaps, that the renewed interest in women's rights and women's roles in modern society has also led to a "rediscovery" of the distinct client role of fathers. As society begins to identify each parent as a separate entity and experimentation with family roles becomes more acceptable, the male, as well as the female parent role, has received more attention.

For social welfare and child care workers this development is very important since there has been a tendency to overlook the father as a client. The reasons for this are varied, ranging from the organization and demographic make-up of the social work profession to stereotypes about fathers and a lack of knowledge about ethnic groups. In order to correct this situation, both conceptual and administrative changes may be necessary in child care practice, and above all, a greater sensitivity to the role of fathers as partners and clients. If social work still includes outreach, if office hours don't dictate clientele, and if father subcultures are more sympathetically understood, then social work has a chance to help fathers. Beyond the issue of father's rights to social services, it is important to emphasize that effective child welfare practice begins with parents, biological or psychological, and that inadvertent or deliberate discrimination against either parent can result in poorer service to children.

¹⁸ Among the pioneering educators in this endeavor are: Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968; with Jeanne M. Giovannoni, *Children of the Storm: Black Children and American Child Welfare*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Janovich, 1972; Miguel Montiel, "Recent Changes among Chicanos," *Sociology and Social Research*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (1970), pp. 47-51; and "The Chicano Family: A Review of Research," *Social Work*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1973), pp. 22-31; Bok-Lim C. Kim, "Asian American: No Model Minority," *Social Work*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1973), pp. 44-53; and "An Appraisal of Korean Immigrant Service Needs," *Social Casework*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (1976), pp. 139-48; Jack Rothman, ed., *Issues in Race and Ethnic Relations: Theory, Research and Action*, Itasca: Peacock Publishers, 1977; John B. Turner, "Education for Practice with Minorities," *Social Work*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (1972), pp. 112-18; Eliezer D. Jaffe, *Ethnic Preferences of Israelis*, Tel Aviv: Tcherikover, 1984 (Hebrew); Shirley Jenkins and B. Morrison, "Ethnicity and Service Delivery," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1978), pp. 160-165, and "The Ethnic Agency Defined," *Social Service Review*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (1980), pp. 249-61.

¹⁹ Shirley Jenkins, *The Ethnic Dilemma in Social Services*. New York: The Free Press, 1981.