

# "Building a Bridge Between Arab Culture and What You Learn at the University": Social Workers with Fathers at Arab Child-Parent Centers in Israel

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**Abstract:** The article describes the therapeutic encounter of Arab women social workers with fathers at child-parent centers. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 Arab women social workers. The interviewees indicated that the therapeutic encounter was tense, due to cultural and gender issues. This highlights the workers' similarities and differences between their cultural perspectives and those of the fathers. The article sheds light on the complexity of the therapeutic encounter, and indicates that the workers had not been academically prepared for this task. The findings contribute to developing curricula and supervision techniques that will facilitate the workers' job.

**Keywords:** Field Work Training, Culturally Sensitive Social Work, Arab Society in Israel, Society in Transition, Grounded Theory

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## 1. Introduction

In Arab society in Israel, which comprises approximately 20% of the country's population, the prevailing cultural orientation is collectivistic. That is, individuals in Arab society identify their membership group as the family or the broader community [1, 2]. However, Arab society is influenced by Western processes of modernization due to the encounter with the Jewish majority group. Today, Arab society in Israel is characterized as a society in transition from a traditional-collectivistic lifestyle to a modern-individualistic lifestyle [3, 4]. A particularly prominent area of cultural change is the family and child rearing.

The state offers services at child-parent centers for families that have difficulty caring for their children. Parents of children aged 5-12 who have been diagnosed as having "parenting disabilities" are referred to these centers by professionals in cases where the parenting disability is perceived as harming their children's development. The child-parent centers in Arab society are mainly run by Arab women social workers who have been professionally socialized at Western universities but work in the context of a

society in transition from collectivism to individualism. This cross-cultural encounter can have implications for the social workers' therapeutic relationship with fathers. The present article presents the experiences of Arab women social workers in the therapeutic encounter with fathers in the context of Arab-Israeli culture, and examines the meaning that these women attribute to the encounter.

### *Arab Society in Israel as a Collectivistic Society in Transition*

Arab society is essentially traditional. Emphasis is placed on the values of maintaining historical and cultural roots, provision of needs through the social network of the extended family, preference of collectivistic behavior over individualistic behavior, the right to intervene in personal affairs, patriarchal gender relations, a demand for interpersonal loyalty, and preserving honor [1, 5-8, 2, 9]. The transition from collectivism to individualism is reflected in many changes that have taken place in Arab society. In that process, nuclear family patterns have penetrated to traditional families as the centrality of the extended family has been undermined and lifestyle changes have taken place [10-13]. Over time, the Arab nuclear family has freed itself from the dominance of the extended family and gained the right to

determine its own priorities, goals, and affairs [12]. There are those who argue that some of the reasons for these changes in Arab society are related to its exposure to the West through the media and higher education as well as through Jewish society [10, 14]. These processes have been accompanied by changes in the status and role of women, particularly with regard to working outside of the home and acquiring higher education. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2013 almost 20% of the Arab women were employed [15].

#### *Professional Socialization of Arab Social Workers*

The field of social work is rooted in secular, liberal Western culture which differs from many cultures in the world [16, 17]. In contrast to social work training programs in Canada, the United States, and Britain, Israeli programs do not require cross-cultural training. As such, social workers in Israel are trained to work with clients in accordance with behavioral norms and therapeutic approaches that are accepted in Western culture [18].

Social work education is supposed to instill values, a professional identity, and knowledge in students, which contribute directly and indirectly to the process of their professional socialization. In practice, however, minority groups in general and the Arab population in particular are not taken into account. Thus it can be argued that various aspects of Jewish-Arab relations are ignored or silenced, and this contradicts the values of the profession [19]. The experience of Arab students on campuses in Israel in general and the experience of Arab social work students in particular is a complex one in terms of their life on campus as well as in terms of the content and nature of the curriculum [20].

Many of the social work students at institutions of higher education in Israel are trained in accordance with Western approaches, which are based on an individualistic orientation and are appropriate for only a small proportion of the Arab students. This adds to the sense of confusion and alienation among Arab students [21, 22]. Another aspect that exacerbates the complexity of the Arab students' experience is the role of Israeli campuses as an arena where the political-national division between Jews and Arabs constantly emerges [1, 23-25]. In light of the above, it appears that Arab social work students have to cope with difficult problems in the process of their professional socialization. The conflict between the individualistic-Western values of the profession and the values of Arab society, which is in the process of a cultural transition within an exclusionist political reality, is further intensified when women social work students between working with Arab clients in various social welfare settings. In these settings, they encounter pressure from some clients to maintain traditional values, whereas other clients are in the process of cultural transition and are more open to adopting Western values.

Arab social workers, like all other social workers, view the professional theoretical framework as a basis for deriving their professional and therapeutic intervention strategies. In situations where these strategies are not consistent with the values and norms of Arab society in which they live and

work, the workers will feel that they do not have a professional theory. Social workers can choose between two work strategies to deal with these cases: one strategy is based on theories and models they learned in their field work training; and the other derives from the culture they grew up in [26].

#### *Arab Fathers: Between Tradition and Change*

On the one hand, the majority of Arab society identifies with the collectivist cultural orientation [1, 2]. On the other hand, processes of modernization have led to the breakup of the extended family and undermined its authority of the extended family. These processes have also led to the penetration of contemporary family patterns, as well as to an emphasis on individualist values in areas such as education, employment, patterns of spending time, and women's status [10, 14]. The impact of culture on parenting styles and parent-child relations is particularly far-reaching [27]. The prevailing parenting style in collectivist societies is characterized by a tendency, especially among fathers, to extend parental control for the sake of social harmony [28]. The social structure and customs of traditional-Arab society are based on the expectation that men will be dominant and that women will submit to the demands of their husbands. In Arab society, the father is the head of the family and the main provider; he is the dominant figure, and paternal control is considered an expression of the father's concern and love. Family members are subordinate to him; they honor his decisions and accept his authority in matters relating to their lives [29]. Discussions about problems and personal issues are considered a violation of values and norms which can lead to personal, family, and social stigmatization [6]. Therefore, it is against social norms for families in general and Israeli-Arab men in particular to enter a therapeutic process, and doing so can arouse personal and family conflicts. In Arab society in Israel, seeking help from formal social welfare settings is viewed as an invasion of family privacy and as harming the family's good reputation, in addition to harming family solidarity and the family's mutual dependence on the collective [8]. Nonetheless, in recent years there are indications of an upward trend in the number of Arab family members who seek help outside of the family collective, including Arab fathers [11]. In a study conducted by Bashara-Razaq [30], which examined the perceptions of Muslim non-custodial fathers at child-parent centers in Israel, the fathers described the encounter with professionals as causing a sense of alienation, as an invasion of their private space, as undermining their cultural norms, and as harming their parental authority. In another study, even though the social workers were Arab, the fathers perceived them as representatives of the threatening Western establishment, and as contradicting the prevailing social values of Arab society [11].

#### *The Men's Difficulty Developing a Professional-Therapeutic Relationship*

The literature indicates that Arab men have difficulty developing a professional-therapeutic relationship due to their socialization. For them, the experience of receiving

help is accompanied by feelings of vulnerability, shame, reluctance to reveal personal and family problems, fear of intimacy, and fear of losing control [31-33]. McBride and Rane [34] mentioned four main barriers that prevent fathers from participating in programs for young children: the fathers are reluctant to reveal their opinions; the practitioners are ambivalent about involving fathers; the mothers do not want to give up their role; and the programs do not suit the fathers' needs. The men who enter therapy feel ambivalent, as reflected in an inner struggle: on the one hand, they feel that receiving assistance will give them emotional freedom; on the other hand, receiving assistance can cause them to lose their sense of power. According to the literature, men who receive assistance at social services expect that the social workers will foster trust, that they will be supportive, reassuring, respectful, empathetic, warm, tolerant, and attentive to problems, and that they will be committed to individual independence [32, 33]. Understanding the needs and difficulties of men is a major factor affecting satisfaction with therapy, and it enables men to cope with the sense of helplessness inherent in the therapeutic process [35].

#### *Child-Parent Centers*

Child-parent centers are intended for elementary school children with emotional and behavioral problems due to inappropriate parental care. The centers aim to improve the children's emotional, social, and behavioral situation; and they aim to improve the parents' behavior toward their children as well as the relationships between the children and their parents, so that the children will be able to grow up in their families. The centers are run by the Ministry of Social Affairs and by the social service departments of the local authorities. There are 50 centers in Israel, of which 15 are in the Arab sector. Every center treats an average of 100 children and their parents per year. The basic condition for receiving therapeutic services at the center is that the father participate in the intervention. In a study of fathers at parent-child centers, Rivkin [36] found that as in other services, fathers participated in programs less than mothers. It appears that paternal participation in therapy is a general problem, but the nature of the problem is different in Arab society and culture.

#### *Research Questions*

1. What characterizes the therapeutic encounter of women social workers with Arab fathers at child-parent centers from the perspective of the workers?
2. What challenges and dilemmas do Arab women social workers face in the therapeutic encounter with fathers at child-parent centers?
3. How do the social workers cope with the challenges and dilemmas deriving from the encounter with Arab fathers at child-parent centers?

## **2. Method**

The study was based on grounded theory [37]. Charmaz distinguished between two types of theories: objective (or

positive and post-positive) grounded theory; and constructivist grounded theory, which is based on the perspective that knowledge is produced through a process of social construction, which includes the intersubjective relationship between the participant in the research and the interviewer. In this way, Charmaz linked grounded theory with the interpretive paradigm through constructivist grounded theory [38]. Charmaz argued that the grounded nature of the research method is based on three dimensions: in the first dimension, the researchers closely follow the data; in the second dimension, theoretical analysis is directly based on the process of interpreting the meaning of the information; and in the third dimension, researchers need to relate their analyses to existing literature and theories. It is assumed that the participants in the study will show similar psycho-social patterns, which can be identified through major themes that enable a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. These approaches to research are most appropriate for examining ethnic and cultural groups whose voice on sensitive issues has been weakened [39].

### **2.1. The Sample**

The participants in the present study were selected on the basis of purposive-criterion sampling [40]. Interviews were conducted with 15 Arab women social workers aged 29-51, who were employed at nine child-parent centers and work with Arab fathers as part of their job. Ten of the social workers were Muslim, four were Christian, and one was Druze. Fourteen of them were married, and one was divorced. All of them had studied social work at Israeli universities; all of them except for one had an MSW degree, and all of them had received specific training to work at the child-parent centers. The workers had three to 13 years of experience working at the child-parent centers: nine of them had over five years of experience, and six of them had 3-5 years of experience. All of the participants worked with Arab fathers at the center. The rationale for choosing social workers with at least three years of job experience relates to the importance of the social worker's experience in the field. Moreover, three years is considered a long enough time to formulate an opinion about the topic of research. The criterion of treating at least 3-5 cases of fathers ensured that the participants would not only have job experience, but that their experiences would be different.

#### **2.1.1. Data Collection and Data Processing**

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews [41, 42]. The participants filled out a brief socio-demographic questionnaire, and responded to open questions such as: what are the characteristics of the encounter with the fathers? What challenges and dilemmas did they face, and how did they cope with the encounter? Interviews were conducted in Arabic, and lasted about an hour.

Analysis of the interviews was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the researchers read the interviews over several times in order to gain a comprehensive empathetic perspective of the participants' narratives [43]. In the second

stage, the researchers put similar statements together, and created themes that served as the conceptual framework of the study [44, 45].

### 2.1.2. The Researchers

One of the researchers was an Israeli-born Christian Arab woman, who is married with two sons and had served as director of an Arab child-parent center for 13 years. The workers participating in the interviews were not subordinate to the researcher. The second researcher was an experienced Jewish social worker who has been dealing with the fields of communities, multi-culturalism, and social exclusion for many years in her practice as well as in her teaching and research.

### 2.2. Reliability

The reliability of the present study was obtained by enabling the interviewees to describe various types of reality that can neutralize the impact of their job as therapists at child-parent centers on the research findings. For that purpose, we used several tools: (1) The full amount of time was allotted for conducting interviews, so that the interviewees would maximize their reports. (2) Grounding or "rich data" were provided. That is, excerpts were quoted directly from the interviews, which enable readers to gain insights and derive thematic constructions [46]. (3) From the stage of interpretation, the researchers adhered to the rules of formal logic and maintained the "spirit" of the participants' subjective interpretations as a basis for constructing the conceptualizations [47].

### 2.3. Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for the research was provided by the Research Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem after the social workers received permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services to participate in the study. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and they signed informed consent forms. Because there are a limited number of Arab child-parent centers in Israel, besides using assumed names we eliminated any details that could identify the interviewees.

## 3. Results

Analysis of the interviews indicates that the therapeutic encounter at child-parent centers focused on two main aspects, which reflect conflicting attitudes towards two significant characteristics of the encounter: attitudes toward boundaries in the family and gender; and attitudes that reflect how the cultural space converges with the professional space.

### *Characteristics of the Therapeutic Encounter as a Reflection of Differences in Cultural Approaches*

From the social workers' reports about their encounters, the fathers they treated can be placed on a continuum. At one end of the continuum were fathers who maintain a traditional-collectivist culture based on patriarchal values, extended family, and gender differences. In these cases,

interviewees described the therapeutic encounter as reflecting the fathers' conservative approach toward modernization and loyalty to their culture of origin.

Suhad explains the strong collectivistic structure and the blurring of intergenerational boundaries:

There is still a very strong relationship between the son, father, and grandfather. The grandfather might be the only one who decides about everything that concerns the rest of the family: who marries whom, where the family will live, where they will go, and things like that [Suhad].

Another component that emerged from the interviews and as a source of tension was the issue of gender. The social workers described the tension that emerged in the therapeutic encounter, in which they represented the change that has taken place in the status of women whereas the fathers tended to try and maintain the status quo as a positive value. Besides the intercultural tension generated by the therapeutic encounter itself, there was also tension deriving from the encounter between genders, which was implicitly subdued in favor of the existing cultural structure in order to alleviate the fear of the men, who might view the professional intervention as a power struggle between the value system prevailing in Arab culture, and the individualistic-Western values.

At the other end of the continuum were the fathers in the process of transition, who are opening up to the trend toward modernization and individual choice. Some of the interviewees described the therapeutic encounter as an expression of modernization, and as adopting a new set of values and norms with an individualistic orientation.

In Arab society there is a group of fathers that is more open and has liberated itself from the boundaries of collectivistic Arab culture. This open group of fathers had more potential for treatment, particularly when that potential was combined with a process of recruitment and therapy that was adapted to them [Nahad].

Daa' emphasized the need to approach the therapeutic encounter from the premise that Arab society can be defined more in terms of a continuum than as a uniform culture:

The continuum that characterizes the two cultures creates subcultures that are determined on the basis of the father's choices regarding different aspects of the two cultures [...] A father can connect with one aspect of traditional culture and another aspect of Western culture. This has resulted in fathers with a new combined culture. [...] My job as a therapist is to learn where the father stands on the cultural continuum [Daa'].

The therapist's encounter with the father leads to an encounter between the professional space and the cultural space. For this reason, the interviewee indicated that in every encounter there is a need to define the client's values versus the values of the social worker.

### *The Therapeutic Encounter as a Reflection of the Social Workers' Behavior and Their Feelings, in Light of Cultural Background and Gender*

The interviewees described a variety of behaviors and feelings that characterize their interventions. All of these are

determined by where each father places himself and where the Arab social worker places herself on the cultural continuum with regard to two main value issues: one issue is the conflict between the value of gender equality, which the social work profession espouses, and the value of male superiority to women in general, especially as it is expressed in Arab culture in Israel. Some of the interviewees emphasized that the social workers and fathers belong to the same culture, as described in the following statement.

My belonging to the same culture increases the chances that I will understand the Arab fathers, and helps me make careful use of culturally sensitive tools despite the difference between us. Sometimes after the encounter with an Arab father I feel angry about all of the traditional views that he brings to the room, and I ask myself: why is he so stubborn? Why is he so egocentric? Why does he think he is above everyone else, that women are subordinate and need to serve him? [Dima]

Ataf describes the intensive and exhausting effort, which is accompanied by the presence of gender tension in the encounter:

I make another effort with the father besides the therapeutic effort that I make with the mother. Therefore, I also feel a sense of fatigue in my interventions with Arab fathers. My effort focuses on trying to persuade and maybe change the father's perspectives that derive from his cultural education, and from the belief that fathers do not need therapy because they are strong enough to take care of themselves. Being an Arab man in an intimate therapeutic situation causes embarrassment and is not socially acceptable [Ataf].

The other value issue is that of giving and receiving assistance, which is the essence of the social work profession. This value conflicts with the role of fathers as it is defined in Arab society: the father is the main provider, he is in control and provides assistance, he provides for the needs of his family, and he refrains from receiving help. When the father does receive assistance, he prefers that it not be provided by professional services outside of the extended family. In the following statement, Nahad describes the sense of tension and competition in the encounter:

The therapeutic encounter arouses diverse feelings in fathers. They often experience a conflict between the desire and obligation to come to therapeutic sessions on the one hand, and refusal or reluctance to cooperate and seek help for various reasons on the other. The father feels that he is competing with the therapist for control and knowledge about his family. Therefore he expresses feelings of resistance and disagreement out of a desire to prove that he knows everything and doesn't need us... [Nahad].

To summarize, the social worker's feelings toward the father, which derive from the cultural background and gender dynamics in the therapy room, often facilitate the treatment of fathers and generate understanding. However, in some cases they can be an obstacle to treatment. These opposing forces derive from differences between the values of the social workers and fathers in the family domain, even though

they share a common culture.

#### *The Encounter between what is Taught in the Social Work Profession and the Values of Arab Culture*

Most of the interviewees reported a conflict between what they were taught in social work programs at universities in Israel and the values of Arab culture – a conflict that is manifested in the Arab social workers' encounter with Arab fathers.

Dima argued that what is taught in social work training programs is completely inconsistent with the values of Arab culture. Her professional experience in the field taught her how to treat Arabs in general and Arab fathers in particular. Her statements show her anger at the university for not giving her appropriate training.

There is a difference between what social workers are taught in social work programs at universities and what our society needs from them. The values of our culture are totally inconsistent with what we learn in social work training programs. My experience in the field, my affiliation with Arab society, and the lack of tools and skills for work with Arab clients in general and fathers in particular are what taught me how to practice social work that is appropriate for Arab fathers. I did not learn this in my training for the social work profession. The challenge is to adapt the tools and skills that you acquire to the culture of Arab men, until you find the balance between the values and are able to prevent conflicts. The balance is accompanied by feelings of anger and frustration with the university for failing to train me for work with the Arab population [Dima].

Rula's statement also highlights the issue of gaps between what is taught in social work training programs and practice with the Arab population. She adds that over time a balance is achieved between the two approaches, but this process is accompanied by the social workers' feelings of anger about not being trained and about attempts to prevent the conflict.

Most of the theories that we learn at the university about treating various problems, including the perspectives of the family, are Western. For example, take the idea that boys should be free to express and share their needs and opinions with their father, and that the father is supposed to listen, sympathize, help, and accompany his son. This idea is totally Western, and it is not consistent with traditional Arab culture at all. The conflict became more prominent when I met with Arab fathers and noticed the gap between the values of the social work profession and the needs of the fathers... At the stage when the male ego feels confident and is not threatened, I will be able to allow myself to integrate Western values that have been adapted to Arab culture. It's as if you are building a bridge between Arab culture and what you learn at the university. There are values from both sides on that bridge. Arab social workers are aware of the sensitivities in Arab culture, and are also aware of the Western approaches as a result of their training. Therefore they become the link that connects the two worlds to the new Arab culture in Israel, which is not completely traditional but not completely modern [Rula].

All of the interviewees agreed that there is a conflict

between professional social work training programs and the values of Arab culture. The conflict is evident in the encounter of Arab women social workers with the Arab population in general and Arab fathers in particular. The participants also agreed that the theories and approaches that they learned in the social work training program need to be adapted to the Arab population in general and to Arab fathers in particular. Fundamental aspects such as the father's stage of therapy, the extent to which he is willing to accept values that differ from those of Arab culture, and the extent of the Arab social worker's experience in the field are all essential for designing a therapeutic program that connects academic learning with the values of Arab culture in a way that furthers treatment of fathers.

#### 4. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that some families in Arab-Israeli society have adopted a coping style known as the "chameleon" style [48]. This is a bi-cultural style adopted by parents who understand that there are significant differences between the customs of the majority and minority cultures. Therefore they encourage their children to live in both cultures simultaneously. This style is based on a continuum ranging from collectivism to individualism: individuals can place themselves at different points on the continuum, according to the set of values and norms that they choose to adopt and depending on the issue at hand. According to this perspective, Arab-Israeli society is characterized by high diversity, in which a person can adopt collectivist values in certain situations and individualist values in others.

The research findings indicate that in this context, the therapeutic encounter reflects the characteristics of the culture that the fathers choose to emphasize, according to the specific situation. Fathers whom the social workers perceive as maintaining the collective-traditional culture will behave in a way that impedes therapy [49]. The collectivist-traditional orientation can cause difficulty for the fathers and even prevent them from participating in therapy at child-parent centers. At the same time, the social workers interviewed in the study found that some of the fathers had the potential for cooperating in therapy and changing. The fathers in this group tended to choose values and norms at the individualistic end of the continuum, and they were more likely to instill those values. They had been exposed to Western culture, and were open to seeking and receiving formal help from a professional woman; they were willing to consider their wife as a partner in the therapeutic process, they cooperated in the process and they admitted that their extended family had failed to help them. As a result, the intervention process was less threatening for this group of men.

The social workers felt that their socialization process was similar to that of the fathers, because they belonged to the same traditional, collectivist culture of origin. However, the social workers also felt that they were different from the

fathers because they were at a different place on the cultural continuum and because of the socialization process that they had experienced in their academic training for the social work profession. The similarities and differences between the social workers and the fathers arouse a variety of behaviors and feelings that affect the therapeutic encounter. Therefore, the social workers need to develop self-awareness in order to gain the trust of the fathers and establish a relationship that can facilitate the therapeutic process.

Besides the cross-cultural tension that exists in the therapeutic encounter itself, there is also the tension of the encounter between genders, as mentioned. The social workers represent changes in the role and status of women, whereas some of the fathers tended to try and preserve the status quo in which men are superior to women. Essentially, this inner tension is experienced by every Arab woman social worker, who has internalized the same cultural values as her clients and is familiar with those values. The tension is intensified by the social worker's process of socialization, which emphasizes Western values and which she internalizes for the most part.

#### 5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study highlight the importance of the role of higher education institutions in the process of training and socializing social workers in general and social workers from minority groups in particular. Academic institutions need to develop culturally sensitive training programs while creating a safe space to discuss cultural, gender, and political challenges faced by Arab women social workers who practice in the field. These findings can indicate directions for developing tools and skills that will help Arab social workers deal more effectively with the population of fathers in general and Arab fathers in particular.

#### 6. Limitations of the Study

Like every qualitative study, this study did not purport to present a general portrayal of the situation. Rather, it aimed to provide insights into the unique nature of the case examined. Although the findings represent the experience of women social workers working with Arab men at child-parent centers, they do not purport to represent the experiences of all Arab social workers who work with Arab fathers.

Another limitation relates to the issue of language. The participants were interviewed in Arabic, so that they were able to express themselves freely and precisely. It is possible that in the process of transcribing the interviews and translating them into Hebrew, the nuances and details of what the participants intended to say were not conveyed. We tried to overcome this limitation by listening to the interviews again.

A third limitation relates to the fact that we chose to interview only women social workers. We did not include male social workers in the sample because there were so few

of them, and because most of them only had up to three years of job experience, so that they did not meet the criterion for inclusion in the research sample. Hence there may have been a gender bias in the social workers' perceptions of the encounter. The knowledge that the number of women social workers in the Arab sector is much larger than the number of Arab men in the profession offsets this limitation.

## Conflicts of Interest

All the authors do not have any possible conflicts of interest.

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