Who Else Is in the Room? The Good Mother Myth in the Social Worker–Mother Client Encounter

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A fundamental dyad in public social services is woman to woman. In Israeli public social services, it is often mother to mother. This multi-faceted encounter is complex and in this theoretical article I wish to deconstruct and situate the social worker–mother encounter in a broader context, a social–cultural–national one. Taking a feminist perspective, I will explore how the personal and private social worker–mother encounter is a political and public one. Analysing western ideologies of the 'Good Mother' together with those of the Israeli-Jewish mother, this article aims to develop a theoretical understanding of macro mechanisms that shape the social worker–mother encounter. Being conscious about what influences that encounter might benefit social work clients, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

Keywords: Social work, motherhood, social worker–mother client encounter, 'Good Mother' myth, ecological system analysis.

Introduction

An emerging body of social work literature draws the line between the seemingly private professional encounter and the social, cultural, national, political, institutional, and organisational contexts within which this encounter occurs. Looking at the social worker–mother encounter in an Israeli context provides a case study to deepen the understanding of the interlocking interactions between macro and micro, between the political and the private. In light of these theoretical understandings, practical actions could take place to strengthen a fundamental dyad in social work practice: the social worker–mother dyad.

I will start by setting the scene of the social worker–mother encounter. I will go on to frame the social–cultural context of motherhood, that is the 'Good Mother' myth. I will then articulate the specific national context within which Israeli Jewish motherhood is practiced and conceptualised. Finally, using concepts from ecological system theory I will revisit the encounter between social workers and mother clients in light of the renewed understanding of this encounter. Reflectivity is then offered as a tool to untangle some of the challenges embedded in the social worker–mother encounter.

Using vignettes from interviews I carried out with Israeli Jewish social workers as part of a qualitative research I conducted in 2011–12, this theoretical article attempts to describe and better understand the social, cultural and national contexts that shape the social worker–mother encounter.

Setting the scene: the social worker–mother client encounter

Social workers in public social services meet a varied population. In Israel, as in many other countries, most of the service users are women (Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2012). These are often mothers who came to the attention of the social services because of the questionable welfare of their children. And so, a fundamental dyad in public social services is woman to woman, often mother to mother. This multi-faceted encounter is complex and not often analysed. The encounters of social workers with clients, not necessarily mothers, are more explored, often on a dynamic level, considering transference and counter-transference and object relations and other psychodynamic processes (Mandin, 2007; Karpetis, 2010). There are also analyses that involve social workers' values and how these are confronted when facing clients (for example, Tzafrir *et al*., 2013). These analyses are of great importance to social work practitioners, policymakers, scholars, and clients, but in this article I would like to look at the social worker–mother client dyad through a different lens.

Social workers come into contact with mothers for various reasons, but the trigger is often the questionable welfare of a child (The Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, 2012). The roles of the social worker in that encounter (similar to encounters with other clienteles) might include: an evaluation of the mother; building an intervention program for the child, the mother, or the whole family; offering relevant services in the community; introducing the rights and benefits that are applicable; offering personal support and guidance, and so on. (Hepworth *et al*., 2010).

The social worker–mother dyad does not exist in a void; social work scholars have identified political, institutional and professional ideologies that influence social workers' practice in the context of child welfare.

Neoliberal politics, with its focus on the market as the organising principle of social life, has affected everyone everywhere (Swift and Callahan, 2009; Rogowski, 2010; Penna and O'Brien, 2013). In the context of social work practice, neoliberalism's concern with marketisation, minimising the public sector, and reducing public expenditure has, and is still having, a profound effect on the welfare state and the ways social workers deliver services (Rogowski, 2010; Penna and O'Brien, 2013). The partial or full privatisation of services once delivered by the state; the introduction of new public management techniques into public services that gave rise to evidence-based practices, performance measurements, risk assessments; the adoption of corporate management language; and the prioritisation of budget management and control – all limit the role of social workers as they move away from face-to-face work with service users (Penna and O'Brien, 2013). Pollack (2010) demonstrates how individualistic neoliberal ideologies are evident in social work practice with criminalised women. Scant attention is given to the role of structural barriers to employment, housing, social support, etc., and marginalised women are required to 'internalize the individualizing norms of social control agencies [that] render structural factors obsolete and holds them solely responsible for their plight' (Pollack, 2010: 1275).

Parada (2004) has identified institutional routines that affected social workers' practices in relation to decision-making and professional autonomy in Ontario's child protection system. The province's child welfare reform resulted in an increase in caseload and a proliferation of administrative duties that reduced the time social workers were able to spend with clients (Parada, 2004). Looking at a different aspect of institutional and

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professional routines, Wolf *et al.* (2012) compared the organisational culture and working conditions in child and family programmes (*n* = 27) that implement empirically supported treatments (ESTs) to child and family programmes that do not implement ESTs (*n* = 28). All fifty-five programs were part of a big child and family agency in New York state, and a total of 1,273 front line social workers working in these fifty-five programmes participated in the research. The findings indicate that programmes implementing ESTs were more rigid, more resistant, significantly less engaged, and more stressed than programmes not using an EST.

The 'best interest of the child', another central professional principle that guides welfare provision to families in distress (United Nations, 1989; Dolav and Ben Rabi, 2002; Slonim-Nevo and Lander, 2004), has also been analysed to discover its influence on social workers' practice. As the chief public entity in charge of protecting children from harm due to lack of suitable care, welfare services focus many of their resources on protecting children at risk (Gilat, 2006). Risk assessment and risk management have become a central organising principle for social workers, creating a considerable impact on the social work profession (Green, 2007). Social work scholars have pointed to the worrisome trends of surveillance and risk assessments where professional judgment is traded for following standardised routines in social workers' interventions with families in distress, especially mothers (Parada, 2004; Swift and Callahan, 2009; Pollack, 2010).

These are just a few examples of an ample body of emerging scholarship dedicated to understanding social work practice as situated within and influenced by professional, institutional, political, social, and cultural structures and mechanisms. This article, in the context of Israeli social services, joins this important body of literature by focusing on understanding social, cultural, and national ideologies that influence the social worker–mother encounter.

Criticism directed at welfare policies on families in general, and mothers in particular, suggests that the state is quick to strip parents from low socio-economic status of their parental rights in the name of the 'best interest of the child'. When the state asserts that parents are incapable of caring for their child, it casts itself not only as a surrogate parent, but as the supreme and supervisory authority on the proper way to raise children (Bullock, 2003; Lane, 2003). In most cases, the mother is the one singled out for allegedly deviating from 'normative' parenting (Strega *et al.*, 2013). 'Bad mothers' are constructed as such not only by the welfare services (Appell, 1998; Urek, 2005), but also by the media and by other formal and informal social systems (Douglas and Michaels, 2004). The Othering and marginalisation of families in the care of welfare services make it easier for society to disparage them and to establish means for controlling their mothering, rather than empowering them (Appell, 1998).

The research on how social workers in Israel, Europe, Canada, and the US view mothers in their care reveals virtually the same picture in all these countries: namely, that social workers, in various contexts and roles, tend to see the mothers as being responsible for their families' problems (Anglin, 2002; Swift, 2002; Davies and Krane, 2006; Davies *et al.*, 2007; Davidson-Arad *et al.*, 2008); that the mothers' subjective day-to-day experiences as mothers are only rarely taken into account (Davies *et al.*, 2007); and that the mothering practices of women in various types of distress are regarded as 'bad' (Lapierre, 2008; Mandel, 2010; Peled and Dekel, 2011). Even when social workers make a conscious attempt to be less judgmental and critical toward such clients, they appear to have difficulties doing so (Peled and Levin-Rotberg, 2013).

A similar picture emerges from studies, mostly qualitative in nature, that found that distressed mothers view the welfare services and the social workers as confrontational, judgmental, lacking in empathy for their hardships and unsupportive (Banyard, 1995; Seccombe *et al.*, 1998; Urek, 2005; Johnson and Sullivan, 2008).

Motherhood, being the sensitive issue it is, makes the encounters between social workers and mothers multi-faceted. To try to better understand what is happening in that room, I wish to situate the social worker–client interaction in a wider context, one that is relevant to both female occupants as women in a Western patriarchal society.

The social–cultural context: the Good Mother myth

A mother sent her child with pink boots, a boy, with pink boots to kindergarten. You [as a social worker] need to explain to her that it is not positively accepted … I also have the role of society's representative and as a person who considers herself as normative … I have [a role] as a representative of normal society and social norms. So I allow myself to use it, of course, use appropriately, and understand that not always, that there are things that even if I or my colleagues don't find them acceptable, they can still be fine for others. (Varda, social worker)

In her ground breaking book, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Adrienne Rich distinguishes between the experience of mothering and the institution of motherhood. While mothering refers to the personal everyday experiences of women as mothers, motherhood refers to the context in which mothering takes place. Like every human experience, motherhood is shaped within a context, and the Good Mother myth is of significant importance in understanding the context of motherhood and mothering. The myth is a powerful social construct in Western society, and it was mostly conceptualised by feminist writers of different ideologies (DiQuinzio, 1999).

The dimensions of the Good Mother myth

When analysing feminist critiques of the unreachable and unreasonable expectations mothers are facing in Western society, key aspects of the Good Mother myth can be traced: idealisation versus demonisation of the mother (Bernard, 1974); the expectation of unconditional Maternal Love (Rich, 1976); motherhood as natural and instinctive to every woman (Forma, 1998; DiQuinzio, 1999); mothers as objects whose sole purpose is to cater to their children (Chodorow, 1978); the mother as an asexual woman (Oberman and Josselson, 1996); the mother as exclusively responsible for the child's welfare and to be blamed for every problem and 'deficiency' in the child (Caplan, 1990; Chodorow and Contratto, 1992); and the expectation of intensive mothering and total devotion to the maternal role (Hays, 1996; Douglas and Michaels, 2004).

Idealisation versus demonisation. Bernard (1974) points to the two central maternal archetypes in human society: the archetype of the Great Mother and that of the Terrible Mother. The Mother gives life or takes it away; she is holy or demonic, constructive or destructive, nourishing or denying, joyful or miserable, perfect or evil. In its modern implications, these dichotomies will often sound like: 'I blame my mother for anything bad that is happening in my life', and 'I owe my mother every achievement I ever made' (Tannen, 2006). That pendulum rarely describes the daily experiences of mothers who

are often situated somewhere along the spectrum between the poles of the 'Great' and the 'Terrible' or at both ends at the same time (Oberman and Josselson, 1996).

Expectation of unconditional Maternal Love. There is no relationship in which people are expected to love each other at all times and under every circumstance, but from mothers this kind of love is expected (Rich, 1976). In the psychodynamic literature, Maternal Love is viewed as having the most significant impact on a child's positive development (for example, Bowlby, 1980), and the mother–child relationship is regarded as the most important relationship in life (Freud, 1933).

Motherhood as natural and instinctive to every woman. The source of the expectation for endless unconditional love is rooted in the notion that motherhood is an integral part of a woman's personality, femininity and biological reproduction system. Thus, motherhood is perceived as natural, essential and obvious for all women (Chodorow, 1978; Forma, 1998; DiQuinzio, 1999). Women who lack the qualities needed to perform motherhood as prescribed, and/or who refuse to do so are considered aberrant or imperfect women (DiQuinzio, 1999).

Mothers as objects. Mothers are supposed to deny themselves altogether and be completely devoted to loving their child and fulfilling its needs (for example, Deutsch, 1945). Although Sigmund Freud and his followers dealt extensively with the Mother figure, the subject behind the mother is absent; the mother is perceived as a generic entity (Birns and Hay, 1988). Feminist scholars have critiqued psychodynamic theories for seeing the Mother as an object whose sole purpose is to cater to her children (Chodorow, 1978).

The mother as an asexual woman. The woman's libido needs to be redirected towards motherhood, and it is expected that a woman's sexuality will go underground once she becomes a mother (Deutsch, 1945). So the mother is perceived as an asexual woman who is no longer in need of any sexual pleasure (Oberman and Josselson, 1996). The issue of motherhood and sexuality becomes entangled when taking into consideration the often very physical daily interactions between mothers and their babies. Combined with breastfeeding, these interactions might carry an erotic quality, but these aspects of mothering are overlooked and silenced (Oberman and Josselson, 1996).

Exclusive responsibility for a child's welfare and mother blaming. The mother is viewed as the best and even the only suitable character to raise her children (Caplan, 1990). This is often rooted in developmental studies that focus on infancy as a critical time of mental and psychological development (Chodorow and Contratto, 1992). Since the mother is usually the more present parent during infancy, recovering herself from pregnancy and childbirth, the idea of the centrality of the mother–child early relationship as a crucial component in a child's well-being was established. That relationship is perceived as the platform for every other human interaction the child will ever have and as a precursor for the child's well-being in adulthood (Bowlby, 1980).

The other side of responsibility is blame; therefore, the mother is viewed as the source of every 'deficiency' in her child (Caplan, 1990; Chodorow and Contratto, 1992). One example of the total responsibility and blame mothers carry is the public and academic discussion around the negative effects of day-care on children whose mothers work outside the home (Forma, 1998). Fathers, unlike mothers, are usually left out; they almost never carry the responsibility or blame for their children's problems (Caplan, 1990).

Intensive mothering. The ideology of intensive mothering is another dimension in the myth, mostly related to middle-class mothers. Mothers are expected to devote all their time, energy and money to raising their children (Hays, 1996). They are to master the skills of a therapist, teacher and pediatrician, and channel their emotional and mental worlds into raising their children. 'The women's Olympics' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004: 6) is the competition for best mother, and everybody is constantly competing with everybody else (Douglas and Michaels, 2006).

When analysed from a feminist critical standpoint, the traditional patriarchal perceptions of motherhood can be seen as idealised and unrealistic – 'good' motherhood is supposedly perfect, omnipotent, natural and satisfying. Yet mothers are to blame for all their children's faults. It has been suggested that the disparity between such social expectations and the reality of mothering contributes to the frustration, distress and sometimes misery felt by mothers (for example, Rich, 1976; Oberman and Josselson, 1996; Warner, 2005).

The national context: the national identity of the Jewish mother

> We [social workers] decide this is right and this is wrong. We try to do it as clean as possible. There are some things that are [defined] by law in a very clear manner, that the state actually determines . . . we apply these things. From the place of the responsibility of the state to provide for the children . . . And we are in the service of the state, yes. In the service of the state, in the service of children. Depending on how you look at it. I think that as social workers, we are doing a great service to humanity and the Israeli society. (Elana, social worker).

Although I claim that the Good Mother myth is a relevant concept in the social and cultural structuring of motherhood in Western societies, there are differences among these societies. Motherhood is not conceptualised and practiced in exactly the same way in North America, Australia or Europe. The specific national context is of importance as well in order to better understand who else is in the room when Israeli social workers and service users who are mothers are talking about motherhood. The following is an attempt to describe the national identity of the Israeli-Jewish mother, but due to the multi-culturalism that characterises Israeli society, reductionism and simplicity are hard to shake off. Within the Israeli-Jewish society there are Ashkenazis (Jewish ethnic division descendants from Europe), Mizrachis (Jews descended from local Jewish communities of the Middle East), Morrocans, Ethiopians and Russians, to name just a few of the dominant cultural segments in Israeli-Jewish society. Describing the national identity of the Jewish mother in each and every specific cultural context might prove futile and does not fall within the scope of this article. Hence, a generic overview, potentially impaired by reductionism and simplicity, but at the same time relevant to some extent to all segments of the Israeli-Jewish society, is applied.

Notwithstanding the changes brought upon family life in Western society in the twentieth century, Israeli society still attaches great importance to family, marriage and raising children, as is evident in the high marriage and birth rates in comparison to other OECD countries (OECD, 2015a). Israeli society constructs its expectations of its members in accordance with the 'normative family narrative' of a mother, father and children living together (Lieblich, 2003; Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2005). Moreover, the motherhood of Jewish women is seen as being of national importance for reasons involving the nation's security

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situation (Lieblich, 2003), the demographic 'threat' (Melamed, 2004), Jewish religion (Ben-David, 1992) and the widespread patriarchal tradition (Herzog, 1999). These will be briefly elaborated on.

David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of the State of Israel, in a speech to parliament, stated very clearly: 'A woman's special destiny, the destiny of motherhood, there is no greater destiny in life.' Although pronounced during the 1950s, Ben-Gurion's view of what women's first obligation is remains relevant. The Jewish Israeli woman is constructed and recognised by her familial identity: being married (preferably to a male) and having children (from that male and within that marriage) (Berkovitch, 1999). Remennick (2000) explored the experiences of twenty-six Jewish Israeli women facing infertility. Infertility is experienced as being different and deprived, and infertile women perceive their condition as a hidden disability that devalues them as women. While Remennick (2000) alludes to the fact that these feelings are common to most infertile women across the world, in the 'land of imperative motherhood' they are magnified by strong social and cultural discourses on imperative motherhood. The goal of motherhood justifies any means, and participants describe years of demanding treatments that often led to loosing their jobs or giving up education plans (Reminnick, 2000).

Another famous quote attributed to Ben-Gurion reveals another layer in the role of the Jewish Israeli mother: 'Every Hebrew mother shall know that she has placed her sons' fate in the hands of commanders who are worthy of it.' This quote, appearing in many military bases, tells us of the Hebrew mother who needs to raise her children so that they will join the army and put their fate in the hands of the State of Israel, but she is also responsible for raising the commanders who will carry the responsibility of leading others. Addressing the Hebrew mother rather than the parents, Ben-Gurion is also re-establishing the idea embedded in the Good Mother myth: that the full responsibility for a child belongs to his mother.

Given the unstable national security situation in Israel, the family is viewed as a safe haven, hence one of the most important institutions in Israeli society (Lieblich, 2003). The more important the family is, the more demanding the role of the mother as the main caretaker of that institution becomes (Melamed, 2004).

The definition of Israel as the land of the Jews entails the need to keep a Jewish majority. Women are called to stand in the front line of the demographic struggle (Berkovitch, 1999; Melamed, 2004), but the fertility policies are selective. While for Jewish women there is a straight-forward policy that encourages child bearing, Palestinian women face an indirect concealed policy that aims to reduce child bearing (Melamed, 2004). Even among Jewish women, the encouragement to have children differs. The fertility and motherhood of Mizrachi women were viewed as an internal demographic threat because of the obvious Zionist preference for Ashkenazi women who bear Ashkenazi children (Melamed, 2004). But both Ashkenazi and Mizrachi women perceive motherhood as a national destiny and a civil obligation (Berkovitch, 1999; Melamed, 2004).

The Jewish religion adheres to a patriarchal perception of women, according to which the female role has always been to raise and educate children. The Jewish family is the most important element in preserving Judaism, and the woman is the one through whom Judaism is maintained from one generation to the next, thus she needs to uphold and prove sexual purity against assimilation among the Gentiles. At the same time, although it is highly central to the existence of Judaism, womanhood is regarded with contempt.

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A prominent example is the prayer 'I thank thee, O God, for not making me a woman'[1] which men repeat every morning (Ben-David, 1992).

This bivalent attitude in Judaism toward women is evident in everyday life in Israel (Ben-David, 1992). The religion's patriarchal patterns are reproduced by the state through political and constitutional arrangements that do not separate state from religion. That means that state authority on issues concerning matrimonial laws is delegated to religious institutions. Within those institutions, women are systematically being discriminated against (Herzog, 1999).

Looking at some of Israel's policies concerning fertility and government expenditure on family benefits, one can see how Ben-Gurion's ideology regarding women and motherhood is still alive and kicking. Unlike any other Western country, Israel is funding unlimited fertility treatments, up to two born children (not two pregnancies).[2] If women's destiny, as Ben-Gurion declared, is to have children, the state invests large funds in helping women fulfill that destiny. Indeed, birth rates in Israel are the highest among OECD countries: 2.91 children per woman in Israel compared to the average of 1.74 children per woman in other OECD countries (OECD, 2015a)

On the other hand, government expenditure on family benefits reveals the position the state is taking once a child is born: public spending on family benefits in 2009 (for example, child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits and child-care support) was 2.37 per cent of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), lower than the average of OECD countries at 2.61 per cent (OECD, 2015b). Out of the thirty-three OECD countries, Israel is in twentieth place in public spending on family benefits. While the State of Israel funds fertility treatments to an extent incomparable to other countries, public spending on family benefits is lower than in most OECD countries.

The generous subsidy of fertility treatments, the high birth rates and the low public spending on family issues are just a few examples of the overwhelming disparity between the encouragement and support women in Israel receive for bearing children and the inadequate support in raising them. In other words, the State of Israel will assist a woman in embarking on what is perceived as her greatest mission, but will offer little support in seeing that mission through. Thus, Ben-Gurion's declaration is reinforced, every Hebrew mother should know that the responsibility for a child's welfare remains her own, and that she cannot and should not count on the state's support once she has delivered.

The national Israeli context of motherhood resonates well with the wider social-cultural context of the Good Mother myth. Israeli women, whether social workers or clients, are entrenched within the realm of the Good Mother myth. While this is relevant to most women in Western socities (for example, Forma, 1998; Douglas and Michaels, 2004), Israeli women are faced with yet again another set of national motherhood ideologies. How does the additive influence of the social–cultural and national ideologies of motherhood infiltrate into the room where social workers and their mother clients meet?

So who else is in the room? Revisiting the social worker–mother client encounter

Virginia Wolf encouraged us to have a room of our own, but the room that social workers share with their clients is not their own, often in a physical way but most importantly in a conceptual way. Drawing on an ecological model of social analysis, I wish to look at

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the encounter between social workers and clients who are mothers as situated within a national context that in turn is located within a social–cultural context. Reflectivity is then suggested as a technique to tackle the influences of dominant ideologies on the social worker–mother encounter.

Looking at the room from an ecological system theory perspective

While ecological system theory strives to understand the individual's development in his/her environment, scholars have utilised this theoretical approach to analyse social phenomena. Hong and Espelage (2012), for example, analysed the phenomenon of bullying by using ecological system theory. Hong *et al*. (2011), wishing to better understand suicide among sexual minority youth, also made use of ecological system theory. Bronfenbrenner, the founding father of ecological system theory, stated that 'research on the ecology of human development requires investigations that go beyond the immediate setting containing the person to examine the larger contexts, both formal and informal, that affect events within the immediate setting' (Bronfenbrenner, 1977: 527).

Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1979) suggested four environments in which the human organism lives and grows: the microsystem, the relations between the developing person and his/her immediate environment (for example, home, school, workforce); the mesosystem, encompassing the interrelations among two or more microsystems, each of which contains the developing person (for example, interactions among family, school/workplace, peer group); the exosystem, an extension of the mesosystem embracing other social structures that do not contain the developing person (according to this system, the individual's development is influenced by events occurring in settings in which the individual is not present, for example, social support networks, institutions of the society, mass media, agencies of government) the macrosystem, referrring to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture, such as the economic, social and cultural beliefs, and educational, legal and political systems. The macrosystem level is regarded as a cultural 'blueprint' that can determine the social structures and activities occurring at the immediate system level (Husén and Postlethwaite, 1994). Focusing on the macrosystem level, this article attempts to explore some of the macrosystems within which the social worker–mother encounter takes place. This is not to say that the micro-, meso- and exo-structures that constitute that encounter are of no importance in shaping the encounter, but rather that 'the level of macrosystems, the institutions, and their associated ideologies, that pervade major segments of the society or the culture as a whole' (Bronfenbrenner, 1977: 528) are worthy of investigation on their own. Evident in this theoretical model is that the room social workers and mother clients share is situated within powerful macro systems of cultural, social and national ideologies of motherhood.

The 'person-in-environment' perspective that is embedded in Bronfenbrenner's model is very compelling for social work theory and practice as well as for feminist thought and practice (Collins, 1986). After all, the heart of feminist practice is a recognition that the individual struggles, experienced by so many people, actually are rooted in social, political and cultural forces, and that these struggles cannot truly be resolved without changing the systems and structures from which they arise (Morrow and Hawxhurst, 1998). The idea that individual struggles may be created or aggravated by
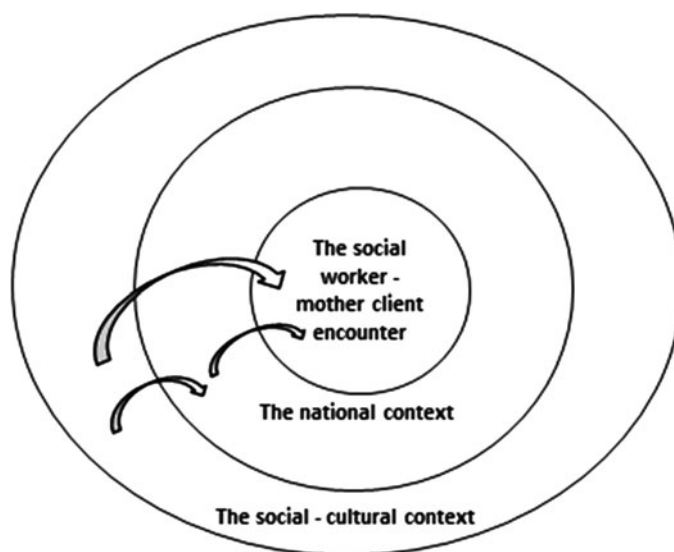
Figure 1.

oppressive systems is captured in the well-known feminist phrase, 'the personal is political' (Goodman *et al*., 2004).

This model will hopefully help social work practitioners, clients, scholars and policymakers to get a better understanding of the room where social workers meet mothers and those things that influence their encounter. Such an understanding can open new possibilities for social workers and clients and can have far-reaching effects. At the same time, this model is impaired by simplicity. Micro-, meso- and exo-levels that constitute the social worker–mother encounter are not taken into consideration in this analysis. Furthermore, not all macro-level contexts that influence the encounter between social workers and mothers are taken into consideration. These include, but are not limited to, institutional realities, policy constraints and power relations. The agency of the participants in this encounter should also be taken into account as these are not passive beings who absorb macro-level constructs as they are, but rather active agents who bring into that interaction their histories, beliefs, understandings and interpretations. Hence, this model is multi-layered and far more complex than presented in this article; but it is an attempt, a work in progress, to unpack the encounter of a fundamental dyad in social work practice: the social worker–mother encounter.

Reflectivity as a means to sort out the messy room

Although the room is occupied by only two women, it is full of social and cultural ideologies regarding mothering as well as the Israeli national ethos of motherhood. All these are present in the room where social workers and female clients discuss motherhood and mothering in Israel. Depending on the organisational setting, the inner policies, the history and experiences of the social worker and those of the client, the 'case' that is being discussed and other factors that shape that encounter, the centrality of these macro

contexts in any given interaction will differ. But even in feminist settings, where one might expect or hope that interactions between social workers and mothers would overcome these social constructions, the Good Mother myth is present (for example, Peled and Dekel, 2010).

What challenges does the cluttered room pose for the interaction of social workers with clients who are mothers? Social work interventions have a goal: to improve the well-being of an individual, a family, a community or a society (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). While different methods and approaches tackle the intervention process differently and diverse ideologies differ in their understanding and interpretation of the meaning of 'well-being' (for example, Healy, 2000), the discipline of social work aims towards humanitarian ideals.[3]

When the room is so cluttered, what space is left for the helping relationship to take place? What space is there for empowering, reaching-out, seeking help? Is it possible to establish rapport, trust and partnership in a room so crowded and 'contaminated'? The overall quality of the therapeutic bond, that is the one-on-one interaction between a professional and a client, influences the intervention outcomes more than any other factor (Duncan *et al.*, 2010).

Research addressing what is needed to establish a therapeutic bond that will hopefully lead to a positive intervention highlights the need for trust and closeness, treating the client as an equal and as an individual, and being genuine and non-judgmental (Knei-Paz, 2009; Barker and Thomson, 2014; Healy *et al.*, 2014). The difficulty in cultivating such a bond is often attributed to the work setting of social services, which include a heavy workload, extensive burdens of bureaucracy and significant budgetary limits that make it almost impossible for social workers to devote themselves to cultivating a meaningful bond (Knei-Paz, 2009). While this institutional context is of great importance, I suggest that the wide social–cultural context surrounding motherhood and mothering – as well as the more specific national context within which Israeli social workers and clients negotiate motherhood – is highly relevant as well. Since social workers meet mothers in various welfare settings with different characteristics, the institutional context that shapes the social worker–mother client encounter is not a uniform one for all social services; different settings will operate under different institutional circumstances. The social–cultural–national ideologies regarding motherhood do not depend on a specific setting; rather, they are widespread and relevant to every encounter between social worker and mother. Although 'Social Workers' and 'Welfare Mothers' are not homogeneous groups (Swift and Birmingham, 2000), and each woman as well as every dyad responds differently to the various motherhood ideologies, these ideologies are relevant to all society members. Assuming that everyone is affected differently by the same interlocking set of symbolic images and social constructions allows us to move forward towards new analyses (Collins, 1993).

Recognising that the room social workers and mothers share while negotiating motherhood and mothering might limit their ability to interact in a meaningful and productive way is a vital first step. Thinking of ways to move forward is a crucial subsequent step. Clearing the room by encouraging social workers and clients to leave the social–cultural–national contexts at the threshold might be helpful but is not always feasible. I suggest the exact opposite. Practitioners and service users should be encouraged to recognise what it is that they bring into the room. Practicing reflexivity means that practitioners will subject their own and others' knowledge claims and practices to analysis,

so they can be debated, interrogated and seen in their social and historical context (Taylor and White, 2001). Re-organising and conceptualising the contexts that are present in the room can be the key to evaluating how helpful or destructive those beliefs are in a woman's life. In order to explore their moral judgements, social workers need to concern themselves with understanding their own and others' reasoning processes (Taylor and White, 2001). Unexamined social, cultural and national ideologies retain powerful effects; through their explication, social constructs such as the Good Mother myth can be questioned, challenged and perhaps even changed (Swift and Birmingham, 2000). Social workers and mothers can work together to recognise the ideologies they hold, name their influences on their lives as well as their therapeutic relationship and find ways to resist the myth and its aftermath.

I wish to revisit Varda's words cited earlier to demonstrate the potential contribution derived from a process of reflectivity. During our interview Varda explained her role as a cultural transmitter and even enforcer with her clients. She gave an example of a mother that sent her boy to kindergarden wearing pink boots and demonstrated her role in explaining to that mother why doing so is not socially/culturally acceptable:

> a mother [that] sent her child with pink boots, a boy, with pink boot to kindergarten. You [as a social worker] need to explain to her that it is not positively accepted.

A critical reflection on Varda's behalf could have unearthed several embedded 'truths' in her approach to this mother: why is it that a boy wearing pink boots requires an intervention with his mother? The unquestionable assumption that pink is not a colour for boys is rooted in gendered social constructions that Varda is not questioning; why should the mother apply to these norms? Why is it that Varda sees her job as guarding these norms? Although not saying so explicitly, it seems that Varda's view of this woman's motherhood practices is not favorable; as a social worker, she needs 'to explain to her that it is not positively accepted'. According to Varda, a mother's job is to raise her children according to the social norms, hence dressing her son in pink boots requires intervention. A critical reflection would have promoted Varda's ability to recognise her personal assumptions about gender and motherhood and to put them up to debate and interrogation. Instead of explaining to the mother 'it is not positively accepted' that she sent her son in pink boots, Varda could have discussed with her client these strict gendered norms, talked about conforming versus fighting these norms, and what the possible stakes of each informed decision are.

Looking at Elana's words about the social workers' role as determining right from wrong in the name of 'the state', critical reflectivity might be a handy tool for Elana to broaden her point of view.

> We [social workers] decide this is right and this is wrong

But taking the role of telling right from wrong in a strict way might narrow Elana's ability to contain, assess or identify with her client's stories. This in turn might jeopdise the therapeutic bond of the social worker–client relationship (Wexler, 2006). Engaged in a reflective process, Elana might be able to see how 'the state', through its welfare policies on families in distress, practices policing and surveillance in ways that often reproduce and perpetuate families' distress (Swift and Parada, 2004). Wexler (2006) points to the
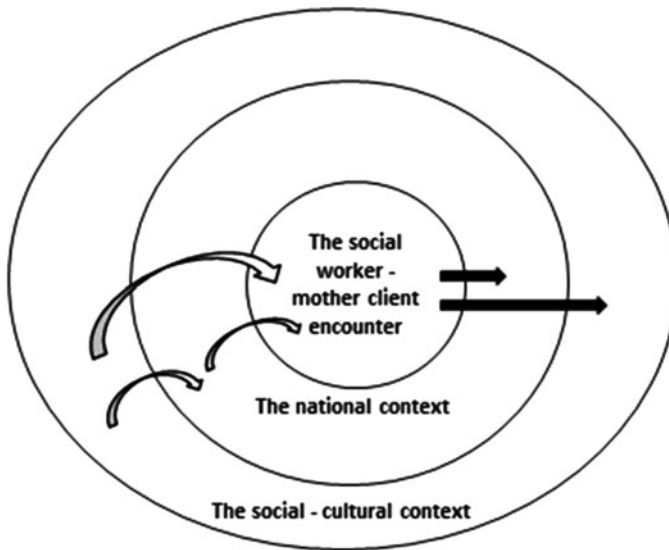
The social
worker -
mother client
encounter

The national context

The social - cultural context

Figure 2.

growing need for social workers working with vulnerable mothers to examine their own
mother-blaming attitudes and to develop feminist, holistic and reflective approaches for
intervention. Adopting such an approach might leave Elana and her mother–client more
room for exploration and questioning and nurture a dialogue in which the 'welfare mother'
could be seen as a subject rather than an object.

Concluding thoughts

Recognising the ways in which the seemingly private encounters of social workers
and mothers in welfare settings are situated within social–cultural–national contexts
highlights the ways in which these are political encounters (Hanisch, 1969, 2006).
When social workers and clients who are mothers converse about mothering, they
are negotiating under the aegis of the realm of social norms and national identities
concerning motherhood. Thus, to begin, both females in the room are constrained by
social constructions that produce certain discourses while others are silenced.

We do not often pay attention in the field of social work to the ways in which both
social workers and service users in fact share similar social constraints. Criticism is often
laid on professionals for exercising power over clients, but rarely does it take into account
that the professionals themselves share the same social and cultural world as their clients,
even if and when there are class and power differences. Looking at the social, cultural
and national ideologies concerning motherhood in Western societies, and specifically in
Israel, provides an example of the ways in which a linear approach to power relations
can be challenged by a more complex understanding of how power operates (Foucault,
1980).

By pursuing the Foucauldian notion of power as exercised and not necessarily
possessed, productive and not only repressive, coming from the bottom up and not

exclusively from the top down (Sawicki, 1991), another layer can be added to the proposed model for the interventions of social workers with mothers in welfare settings. The social worker–mother dyad can be viewed not only as a passive entity influenced by the contexts within which it is located, but also as an active dyad that can influence those meta-ideologies through its actions. Innovative ways of thinking about social work with mothers can lead to new micro as well as macro-level interventions that can bring about fundamental changes in the lives of many women, men and children. Shifting our focus from interventions that often aim toward a personal or familial change to macro-level interventions that target a social–structural change is an important step in promoting the ideals of feminist social work (Ortega and Busch-Armendariz, 2014) that will potentially benefit all service users and beyond.

Through recognising the differing experiences with power and oppression and creating coalitions around common causes and building empathy (Collins, 1993), new connections between social workers and clients can be forged that will lead the way to social change.

Acknowledgment

Notes

1 Tractate Berachot, Chapter 6, paragraph 23.
2 http://www.gov.il.
3 The extent to which social work as a discipline achieves these humanitarian goals as well as questions regarding their appropriateness in the post-modern, neoliberal era are well debated (Rogowski, 2010).

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