Introducing Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practices in Public Services: Rhetoric to Practice

Article *in* British Journal of Social Work · December 2014

DOI: 10.1093/bjsw/bct049

CITATIONS
20

READS
3,110

2 authors, including:

Roni Strier
University of Haifa
41 PUBLICATIONS **584** CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

British Journal of Social Work Advance Access published April 24, 2013

British Journal of Social Work (2013) 1–18
doi:10.1093/bjsw/bct049

Introducing Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practices in Public Services: Rhetoric to Practice

Roni Strier* and Sharon Binyamin

Roni Strier, Ph.D., is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Social Work, Haifa University, Israel. Sharon Binyamin, MSW, is a Deputy Director at the Department of Social Services, Jerusalem Municipality, Jerusalem, Israel.

*Correspondence to Roni Strier, Ph.D., School of Social Work, University of Haifa, Mount Carmel, Haifa, Israel. E-mail: *rstrier@univ.haifa.ac.il*

Abstract

While anti-oppressive social work has become a central focus in theoretical social work discussions, the impact of its principles in the field is still marginal, especially in public social services. The few studies documenting the implementation of anti-oppressive practices in service organisations have typically focused on non-governmental agencies or grass-roots community organisations. The influence of anti-oppressive discourse on the public social services is virtually unknown. This article describes a case study of a long-term, comprehensive change process that aimed to develop a new service based on critical anti-oppressive principles in the public social services. Using quantitative and qualitative data from extensive evaluation studies carried out during different stages of the change process, the article reveals the complexity of introducing anti-oppressive social work principles within the public welfare system. Findings and conclusions, far from categorical, call for a theoretical and practical debate on the role of these principles at the hard core of social work practice: the public services.

Keywords: Anti-oppressive social work, anti-oppressive practice, social services, public services, critical theory

Accepted: November 2012

Introduction

Despite growing interest aroused by the anti-oppressive social work perspective, implementation of anti-oppressive approaches within the hard

core of public social services is still marginal (Hick *et al.*, 2005). Studies documenting this perspective have focused mainly on social work education settings or to a lesser degree on non-governmental agencies (Collins and Wilkie, 2010). Using a case study methodology, this paper, divided into five sections, discusses emerging questions related to the viability of anti-oppressive practices in the public services. First, it reviews relevant literature on the anti-oppressive approach and the nature of public social services. Second, a case study includes a brief description of the context, theoretical rationale, goals and organisational change process. Third, it introduces the case study methodology and provides a short overview of the studies the article draws on. Fourth, it presents and analyses emerging themes and core issues. Finally, based on findings, the article discusses theoretical issues and raises questions that encourage a necessary debate on the role of anti-oppressive approaches in the public social services.

Literature review

Introducing anti-oppressive practices in social services

Anti-oppressive social work addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work done with clients and workers. It aims to change the structure and procedures of service delivery through macro-systemic changes at the legal and political level (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Clifford and Burke, 2005; George *et al.*, 2007).

According to Dominelli (1996), anti-oppressive practice embodies a person-centred philosophy; an egalitarian value system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people's lives; a methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies on their interaction and the work they do together. Anti-oppressive social work has been extensively discussed in social work literature and a comprehensive review of its many controversies and multiple interpretations is far beyond the limits of this article (Burke and Harrison, 2002; Lynn, 1999; McLaughlin, 2005; Danso, 2009; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Rush and Keenan, 2012). This brief review will be limited to the organisational aspects of anti-oppressive practice or, in other words, to the translation of the anti-oppressive social work theoretical framework into institutional practices. Karabanow (2004) supports the idea that anti-oppressive organisational structures should attempt to build safe and respectful environments for marginalised populations. Evidently, any systematic implementation of anti-oppressive practices in social services would require extensive changes in the organisational structure and culture of social services. Although the organisational setting is central in implementing anti-oppressive practices, few studies

have documented processes of organisational changes in public social services (Pollack, 2004; Sakamoto, 2007; Danso, 2009). One reason for this gap is that anti-oppressive approaches are usually oriented towards social change whereas public social services deal with basic needs of clients (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005). In this respect, Millar (2008) found a sharp conflict between the anti-oppressive discourse and services delivered by the highly regulated public social work system in the UK.

The theoretical rationale for an anti-oppressive transformation of social services may include developing non-hierarchical work relations between clients and social workers, promoting social rights, adopting structural and contextualised views of clients' social problems and developing client representation. In addition, the rationale includes responding to social, class, gender and ethnic diversity, acknowledging unequal power relations with clients, creating a non-bureaucratic organisational culture, developing alliances with clients and critical consciousness among clients and workers, as well as promoting reflexivity between workers and clients (Strier and Binyamin, 2010).

It would appear that compared to the impact of anti-oppressive social work on social work education (Weiss-Gal, 2009; Anderson, 2010; Dustin and Montgomery, 2010; de Montigny, 2011), anti-oppressive practices are still rare in the public social services and the necessary theoretical discussion on the viability of the anti-oppressive approach is still in its infancy (Rountree and Pomeroy, 2010; Dominelli and Hackett, 2011).

Anti-oppressive social work and the public social services

The public social services have probably become the most criticised social institution (McDonald, 2006; Harris, 2008). Criticism comes from numerous sources. The first source comes from the dominant neo-liberal discourse. Neo-liberal policies have eroded the image of public services and have provided the ideological rationale for systematically dismantling the welfare state (Kus, 2006). In many countries, neo-liberal policies have consistently favoured social policies that generate high levels of poverty, an anti-welfare political climate, punitive welfare reforms, periodic budgetary cutbacks and the subsequent decay of the social service sector (Harvey, 2005; Morgen *et al.*, 2010). Carey (2008) asserts that public social work is being transformed by privatisation and market-led policies in ways that lead public services to abandon clients. A second source of criticism comes from the neo-managerial school of management (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). Payne (2000), Leung (2002) and Lorenz (2005) take a critical view of the impact of neo-managerial ideologies on social services. These have harmed the ability of many social services to respond to the needs of their most vulnerable constituencies. They also undermine social workers' capacity to fulfil their fundamental social mission: to promote social change and to pursue

social justice (Handler and Hasenfeld, 2006*a*, 2006*b*). Inspired by the neo-managerial narrative, governments have launched policies to combat what is in their point of view the retrograde, obsolete and dysfunctional nature of the public service (Wacquant, 2001; Dickens, 2008). A third source of censure derives from the general discontent of the consumers of public services who react to the lack of substantive solutions for broad social problems like poverty and social exclusion (Mantle and Backwith, 2010; Monnickendam *et al.*, 2010). Ife (2002) states that the institutional environment wherein social workers provide services does not support the ethical character of their mission. Finally, but to no lesser a degree, radical and critical perspectives have contributed to the general condemnation of public social services (Gilbert and Powell, 2010). Social services are portrayed as following racist and discriminatory practices and taking an active part in the pathological labelling of excluded populations (Blitz and Greene, 2006; Stepney, 2006). The encounters between client and worker, worker and agency, and agency and state are all shaped within the context of unequal power relations (Pollack, 2004). Given this imbalance, it is not surprising that social services for excluded and vulnerable populations are fertile ground for oppressive practices (Durham, 2002; Ferguson, 2003; Hooper and Koprowska, 2004; Dominelli, 2007).

Despite the general discontent with the function and nature of public social services, these services have remained the main and sometimes the only institutional support in many countries for populations living in poverty. Spicker (2008) claims that the general criticism against public services is based on a distorted conception of the social mission and institutional nature of social services. Public services are not simply commodities that can be negotiated or exchanged in the goods market, but tools to achieve social goals. As mechanisms of redistribution, they provide services to the public, and consequently cannot be assessed only by standards of efficiency, profit, costs, capacity and outputs. Given the centrality of public services for the most vulnerable population and the systematic persecution they undergo, introducing critical anti-oppressive practices into the public social services becomes a critical issue for the defence of poor and excluded populations (Shera, 2005; Schram, 2006; Baines and Benjamin, 2007). In light of this centrality, the article addresses a crucial issue: the viability of anti-oppressive social work principles in the public social services.

Case study: Family Aid Centre

The context

The case refers to the development and implementation of a new service, the Family Aid Centre (FAC), in the public welfare services of Jerusalem,

Israel. Welfare services in Israel are delivered for the most part by the municipalities, with central and local governmental funding. The government lays down rules and regulations for the delivery of services but the local welfare bureaus are sovereign in the development of services within this framework. Over the last decades, neo-liberal policies, neo-managerial ideologies and accelerated privatisation implemented by different governments have transformed the welfare system (Shafir and Peled, 2002; Filc, 2005; Ajzenstadt, 2009, 2010). While, in the past, almost all social workers were employed by the state, the trend towards privatisation and outsourcing has resulted in new patterns of employment (Bar-Zuri, 2004; Bar-Nir and Gal, 2011). The new privatised services include provision of essential needs of vulnerable groups such as children and youth at risk, families in crisis, battered women, the handicapped elderly, the physically disabled, the mentally challenged, people battling substance abuse, new immigrants and the homeless (Katan and Lowenstein, 2009). Many services that are mandated by law and funded by public funds are presently provided by NGOs (Filc, 2009). Against the alarming rise of poverty and social inequities, the social services are seen as performing a supervising or pacifying role as proposed by several critical approaches to the profession (Reisch and Jani, 2012). As result of these critiques, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services launched in 2009 a comprehensive proposal for the restructuring of the public social services. The proposal includes changing their legal status, improving services, adopting a family-centred approach and setting standards for caseload to ensure quality of services. However, this comprehensive reform is still in its initial stages.

The new service was developed at the joint initiative of the municipal public social services and a private foundation interested in promoting and funding innovative services for poor and excluded populations. The municipal public services of Jerusalem are the largest in the country in terms of the number of service users. The department, with its network of neighbourhood offices, delivers services to almost 40,000 households. Jerusalem's population is almost 800,000, many of whom are Arab and ultra-orthodox Jewish families. Over half of Jerusalem's children live below the official poverty line. The initiative was a result of the rapid rise of poverty in the city, increasing demands for services, parallel to continuous government cutbacks in budgets and personnel. There was also a growing sense of professional and moral discontent among front line workers and directors regarding the ways that mainstream social services dealt with poverty and excluded populations. In the first evaluation study, Savaia and Weissman (1997) defined the service before the intervention as a situation of a permanent state of emergency due to growth in client enrolment linked to the raise of the poverty rate in the city. These changes caused considerable 'levels of burnout, high turnover of frontline workers, and inefficient services for clients living in poverty' (Savaia and Weissman, 1997, p. 4).

The service

The theoretical rationale of the service developed gradually over several years. Early organisational drafts at the start of the process show the great diversity of conflicting and changing theoretical worldviews and practical expectations associated with the new service. It took some years to define a clear shared theoretical framework. Significantly, social services in Israel in past years were shaped by a therapeutic, professional discourse centred on risk (Weiss-Gal, 2008). Strier and Binyamin (2006) defined the FACs as services focused on supporting clients whose basic problem was poverty. The centres draw on principles of critical social work and are oriented to support the clients' strengths, giving special attention to their concrete needs. Client satisfaction is monitored over time to promote and maintain service quality. FACs aim to provide a high level of services that are easily accessible, flexible and sensitive to clients' needs. The centres foster a non-hierarchical and egalitarian client–worker relationship, promoting a reflective organisational culture through critical dialogue between clients and social workers. These new services seek to expand resources and mobilise the community through coalitions and building strategies. Workers are encouraged to engage in policy practice projects with, and on behalf of, client groups. The centres encourage partnerships and alliances between workers and clients on the individual, group and community levels. Centres are also encouraged to develop innovative intervention methods that integrate the personal, community and policy advocacy levels. Centres promote client participation in decision-making processes by including clients' representatives on steering committees. Clients are encouraged to join in lobbying efforts at the community, city and national levels. FACs were defined as services which adopt a structural theory of clients' poverty, work with the clients' definition of the problems, develop multilevel intervention methodology, encourage cultural, ethnic, gender and class awareness and competence, develop alliances with clients, and acknowledge the detrimental effects of unbalanced power relations on client–worker interactions. These centres are encouraged to establish democratic organisational settings, promoting clients' participation and reflection, politicising the professional identity of social workers and raising the devalued professional status of front line social workers working with the poor (Strier and Binyamin, 2006).

Developmental stages

The change process took place over ten years, between 1995 and 2005. The centres were set up in three developmental stages. The first occurred between 1995 and 1997 and focused on developing the theoretical and

organisational rationale for the change, establishing six centres in different parts of Jerusalem.

A second stage, from 1998 to 2004, sought to apply a more critical alternative social work approach. It set up a pilot project—two demonstration centres—with a grant from the Foundation for Innovative Projects of the National Insurance Institute.

A third and subsequent dissemination stage was based on the success of the pilot project. At this point, the Jerusalem Municipality Social Services Department disseminated the model and developed fourteen new centres throughout the city. Later, between 2005 and 2010, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services in conjunction with the National Insurance Institute decided to disseminate the model in several Israeli cities. This article focuses on the first three stages in Jerusalem, between 1995 and 2005.

Methodology

The article employs a case study methodology deeply anchored in social, political and organisational studies. Creswell (1998) considers case study methodology one of five main traditions in qualitative research. This methodology responds to the need to understand multifaceted and context-based social phenomena in their full complexity (Yin, 1994; Stake, 1995). Case study methods are designed for studying situations that are beyond researchers' capacities to exert control, and when studying a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life multi-layered and changing context. Case study is a critical inquiry on a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context used when boundaries between phenomenon, context and multiple variables are not clear. Case studies may have descriptive, exploratory or explanatory purposes. Their data come from multiple sources such as documents, written material, evaluations and previous research and personal interviews with stakeholders and informants. Case studies are typically criticised for lack of systematic data analysis and unsystematic reporting of evidence. Despite these criticisms, however, case studies are still a valuable, widespread and accepted research methodology (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Data collection

The data draw from three evaluation studies which were conducted between the years 1995 and 2005. These studies were carried out by different and independent external experts in service evaluation, all of them scholars from different schools of social work in Israel. The study between the years 1995 and 1997 focused on the first stage of model development and implementation (Savaia and Weissman, 1997). It used a participatory approach that included quantitative and qualitative data gathering

from stakeholders, focus groups and interviews with 180 clients. The second study covered the demonstration centre development over some three years, between the years 2001 and 2005, and included qualitative and quantitative data, and participative observations, drawing on data from 120 clients (Havassy, 2006). A third study of the project was conducted in 2005 and covered the third stage of the process: dissemination. It included structured questionnaires and phone interviews with 168 clients (Zeira and Ben-Harush, 2007). These evaluations gathered data through in-depth, open-ended personal interviews, structured questionnaires and participant observations, drawing on multiple stakeholders, among them clients, front line workers, directors and FAC coordinators. In total, 468 clients and fifty-six social workers, paraprofessionals and centre directors participated in the three evaluation studies. In addition, the article relies on content analysis of multiple documents, protocols and internal organisational communications. Documents include different versions of model drafts and protocols of committees and task groups. Out of methodological and ethical considerations, both authors were personally and professionally involved in all stages of the process, one as an external consultant and the other as overall manager responsible for the programme (Strier and Binyamin, 2006).

Data from evaluations, studies and other sources were analysed in content analysis meetings and discussed with external professionals. To increase reliability and authenticity, data and findings were also discussed with different stakeholders (clients, social workers, paraprofessionals and FAC directors from other Israeli cities), in a reflective four-hour seminar.

Findings

Analyses of the data depict a wide variety of achievements and challenges.

Achievements

Reframing professional discourse

As stated earlier, social services in Israel moved from a social discourse initially centred on social inequalities to a therapy-based professional discourse centred on risk. The estrangement of mainstream public social work from macro social issues like poverty is reflected clearly in the professional terminology used by stakeholders to define the clients of the centres during the first steps of the process. First drafts serving as a basis for model development defined the main and overt problem of clients as a 'lack of income', as 'chronic', 'resistant', 'reluctant', 'multi-problem', 'untreatable' or 'unchangeable'. Over time, with the help of multiple training programmes, workshops, seminars, group discussions and professional

supervision, a new terminology was introduced, internalised and reflected in the second and third stages of the process. Introducing the new service helped to change the perception of poverty to one less individual and more structural. The theoretical rationale of the centres as defined in later official publications included key concepts like partnership, involvement, advocacy, empowerment, participation, consciousness raising, social rights and policy practice. The publications point out the impressive shift of the professional rhetoric of the services, from a pathological individual discourse on poverty to a more collective, emancipatory, social change-oriented professional approach (Vojak, 2009).

Prioritising the poor

Amidst the growth of poverty, the lack of budgets and personnel, the rising number of clients and their growing material needs, public welfare services in Israel are exposed to overwhelming and ever-changing demands. These services protect themselves as organisations by setting realistic, attainable goals and by prioritising clients groups.

Before the development of FACs, clients whose main problem was defined as poverty were served by a specific social worker whose main role was client maintenance. Client maintenance as opposed to client change can be interpreted as minimising contact with clients, avoiding outreach and providing a basic service that maintains minimal functioning. A significant achievement of the new service was to change labels and bring the public social services back to focusing on poverty. The great majority of clients were defined as people living in poverty whose main reason for applying to social services was low income an area that usually remained unaddressed and underserved. Findings in all studies show that by far the main reason that clients required services, with a range of 83.7–88 per cent, was for 'material help'.

Improving service delivery

FACs contributed in no small measure to improved services. Clients reported 'high satisfaction with a shorter waiting period, accessibility, worker availability and even director availability' (Havassy, 2006, p. 18). Most clients (71 per cent) reported a high level of satisfaction with the service (Zeira and Ben-Harush, 2007, p. 108). Workers reported a sharp decline in violent acts by clients against staff.

Improving client–worker relations

In all the evaluation studies reviewed in this article, most clients reported being respected and understood. Studies show high satisfaction with the

client–worker relationship ranging from 58 to 83 per cent across the studies. Clients defined these relationships as characterised by a high degree of acceptance, co-operation and partnership—in sharp contrast to the widening discontent of the general clientele with public social services in Israel as documented in previous studies (Krumer-Nevo and Barak, 2007). These findings converge with the Knei-Paz (2009) study in which welfare clients defined a successful helping relationship with social workers. This study suggests the existence of two general domains of the client–worker relationship: factors that provide a sense of equality in the relationship, such as love, friendship and a non-judgemental stance; and helping relationship and the notion that the helping relationship should parallel more normative contacts and include components such as flexibility, chemistry, luck and going the extra distance.

Influencing the system

Findings show wide system impact. The FACs' professional ideology was a source of inspiration in initiating new services and programmes among different populations in the Jerusalem Municipality's Social Service Department. At a later stage, centres were set up elsewhere in the country when eleven other cities decided to replicate them with government and local funding (Eldar, 2010; Havassy, 2006).

Developing new interventions

Data show that FACs introduced multilevel and multi-method interventions (micro–macro) that proved suitable for the needs of the target population. Group work and community practice consequently became recognised intervention methods. Many community projects followed the inception of the FACs. In addition, the centres developed programmes promoting social rights in areas such as housing, women's issues and employment.

Clients' community participation

According to the Welfare Bureau's internal reports, FACs have mobilised and trained hundreds of neighbourhood activists. Between the years 2003 and 2005, more than 3,500 clients participated in community projects. The centres also developed advocacy efforts in wide-ranging issues such as housing rights, food security and the welfare of single mothers.

Changing the professional status of front line social workers

Before the FACs were set up, the status of social workers in the area of poverty was perceived as inferior. Often, those seen as unfit for other,

more 'professional' positions were relegated to working with the poor. Today, the new services are perceived as offering a highly professional service, having developed their own professional culture, approach, strategy and unique tools and interventions, which attract more high-quality, motivated professionals. According to workers' reports, the position is perceived as a springboard for further advancement and an opportunity for empowerment. Directors report a dramatic decrease in front line worker turnover.

Challenges

Low client satisfaction with the centres' effectiveness

Compared to the high level of satisfaction with worker–client relationships, in all the studies reviewed in this article, clients expressed low satisfaction with the level of problem solving in the centres. In one study, a quarter of the clients reported not having received the requested help whereas, in another, only 40 per cent asserted that they received the full assistance requested. 'Clients do not report a significant change in their situation' (Havassy, 2006, p. 4).

Lack of resources

In general, operational budgets of the FACs are limited vis-à-vis the growing number and needs of clients and the rise in poverty. Workers and clients see lack of resources as a main impediment to meeting the needs of the population.

Organisational resistance

The change process was carried out over a long period (1995–2005) and was costly in terms of both time and money. The time factor was influenced most significantly by resistance encountered from workers and middle management. In addition, clients, after years in the system, required time to renew their trust in it.

Client participation

Centres encouraged client participation at both the service and the community levels. At the service level, this was mainly expressed in client participation in steering committees and, at the community level, in their

involvement in community projects. Steering committees were designed as the organisational channel for client participation in goal setting, budgeting, service evaluation and other significant areas. As expected, their active participation raised multiple concerns and questions. For the first time, the public service opened itself up to client scrutiny that included questions of entitlement, allocation of funds and other sensitive issues. Implementing the steering committees and avoiding tokenism was one of the main challenges in the process (Havassy, 2006, p. 8). Clients were recruited and trained and the committees operated for a while. However, establishing the steering committee as a mechanism for full client participation at the service level failed. Many clients dropped out and workers lost their motivation to recruit new members. Worker–client steering committees exacerbate workers' fears of losing control and even raise ethical concerns about risks to clients' rights to confidentiality.

Discussion

Based on an explanatory case study, this article calls for a debate on critical questions for the future of a relevant anti-oppressive social work agenda. It is of value because most published studies that documented and analysed the implementation of anti-oppressive principles have usually focused on non-governmental agencies. No studies, as yet, have addressed the feasibility or compatibility of these practices with the culture and nature of public social services. The current article describes a case study implementing anti-oppressive principles in the framework of public welfare services. Its uniqueness is based on four characteristics: setting, scope, length of process and trustworthiness of data. First, as the introduction states, earlier studies indicate that anti-oppressive approaches were embraced mainly by non-governmental, feminist or grass-roots alternative agencies, whereas the particular setting of this case is in the mainstream public welfare services. Second, this case is unique in terms of the intervention's scope, affecting as it does the largest welfare agency in the country with the largest number of clients. Third, it is unique in the length of its ten-year change process. Finally, the case is unique in terms of data reliability, since the change process was extensively evaluated by different external teams through a variety of methods at its different stages. These unique characteristics turn this case study into a valuable tool for the main theoretical discussion: the compatibility and feasibility of anti-oppressive social work principles within the public social services.

To debate this question, we rely on a previous article in which we offered a theoretical and organisational blueprint for developing transformative services for people living in poverty, by incorporating the anti-oppressive perspective in the social services. Its principles included adopting contextual theories of social problems, working with the clients' definition of the

problem, developing a multilevel intervention methodology, as well as cultural, ethnic, gender and class competence, alliances with clients and increasing social awareness. Acknowledging the effect of power relations on client–worker interactions, democratic organisational settings were established, promoting reflection, politicising the professional identity of social workers and raising the devalued professional status of those working with the poor.

Findings show that many of the criteria formulated were positively assessed by the studies. The new services were prompt in adopting a more contextualised, structural view of the clients' problems and in distancing themselves from pathological, therapeutically oriented perspectives of poverty that blame the poor. Consequently, it is to be expected that findings across all evaluations show that clients felt respected and understood, free from the judgemental regulation of public services. It would seem that this notable improvement in client–worker relations reflects a deep change in the public and bureaucratic services' usual top-down attitude towards clients. Then, too, the new services seemed ready to embrace a more egalitarian, less hierarchical approach to worker–client relations and to service delivery. The quality of services, of client–worker relationships and the level of client satisfaction in wide areas like accessibility and availability of services were raised by the new approach. The traditional focus on individual casework was altered as the new service introduced multi-method interventions by bringing in group work and community practice methodologies. Moreover, the services strengthened clients' involvement in the community. Data also show positive changes in the devalued self-image and diminished professional status of front line workers with impoverished clients.

Despite the achievements, evaluations are inconclusive on important topics like the development of cultural, ethnic, gender and class competence in services and practices (Parrott, 2010). The very omission of these questions in three study evaluations may possibly show a low awareness of how crucial such practices are in introducing critical social work into the public service realm, especially in the ethnically segmented society of Israel. Similarly, data are inconclusive in the important areas of clients' social awareness, stimulating reflection and politicising the professional identity of social workers. The evaluations ignored these areas, raising the need for additional studies.

With that, the evaluations are conclusive in two fundamental areas: the improbability of transforming public social services into more democratic organisational settings and the low effectiveness of the services in changing the clients' situation. Studies show that, despite the intensive training programme and professional supervision aimed at making the centres more democratic, the system was unable to incorporate genuine client participation as a part of its organisational routine. These findings converge with Wilson and Beresford's (2000) concerns about the regressive potential of anti-oppressive practices for service users' real participation.

Were the long-term investment, the desire for change by leaders of the process and the high professional standards of the training programme not sufficiently effective in bringing about a transformative change, a paradigmatic change or a second-degree change? Or perhaps has the system used anti-oppressive rhetoric to justify and humanise the vilified public welfare services without addressing the core question of unequal power relations in society, as represented, embodied and embedded in social service relations with oppressed populations? These open questions require future debate.

In addition, findings show that, despite all efforts, ultimately, clients remained sceptical about the ability of the improved services to better their situation. We are forcefully reminded that social services, regardless of their nature, are not the panacea for social ills. It is a reminder that the remedy for oppression appears to be far beyond the realm of social services, but lies in the political arena and in deeper structural changes in society. Therefore, the question of theoretical compatibility of social services with anti-oppressive views should be discussed in the broader frame of the political, social and economic policies that shape and reflect the institutional context in which social services are delivered. Data show that, despite the anti-oppressive premises on which the service was established, what prevailed was the oppressive institutional context of public social services expressed through limited budgets, heavy caseloads, inadequate staff and poor working conditions, thus limiting the scope of the change. These findings support McLaughlin's (2005) position that:

> . . . anti-oppressive social work, rather than being a challenge to the state has allowed the state to reposition itself once again as a benign provider of welfare, and via the anti-oppressive social worker is able to enforce new moral codes of behaviour on the recipients of welfare (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 283).

The case presented here opens the arena for debating interrelated questions: Are anti-oppressive principles compatible with the nature of public social services? Do public social services still represent a meaningful priority for an anti-oppressive agenda or should critical social work search for more favourable institutional domains? Are the public services a significant target for a relevant anti-oppressive social work agenda? These questions are critical for the future of social work as a profession of change on both a theoretical and a practical level. Is it possible that, in a different political, social and economic context, introducing anti-oppressive approaches in the public social services may offer real solutions to impoverished and oppressed populations?

The case study presented in this article shows that, despite their rigid and restraining organisational culture, public social services may offer a significant platform for launching alternative professional messages, for creating subversive organisational microclimates, for forging islands of counter

culture, for exposing professionals and clients to alternative visions of social problems, to a search for shared solutions within a highly regulated and controlling organisational milieu. We believe that public social services are meaningful, fragmented and contested symbolic arenas that an anti-oppressive social work agenda cannot ignore. However, one must realise that, under current rigorous neo-liberal, neo-managerial policies as reflected in the institutional framework of public social services, the compatibility and feasibility of anti-oppressive approaches are seriously compromised.

References

Ajzenstadt, M. (2009) 'Moral panic and neo-liberalism: The case of single mothers on welfare in Israel', *British Journal of Criminology*, **49**, pp. 68–87.

Ajzenstadt, M. (2010) 'Women in the workforce in the context of neo-liberalism: The case of Israel', in S. H. Gavigan and D. E. Chunn (eds), *The Legal Tender of Gender: Law, Welfare and the Regulation of Women's Poverty*, Oxford and Portland, OR, Hart, pp. 123–41.

Anderson, D. (2010) 'Anti-oppressive social work: A guide for developing cultural competence', *European Journal of Social Work*, **1**, pp. 283–5.

Baines, D. and Benjamin, A. (eds) (2007) *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Building Transformative Politicized Social Work*, Nova Scotia, Fernwood Publishing.

Bar-Nir, D. and Gal, J. (2011) 'Who has the power? The role of NPOs in local authorities', *Voluntas*, **22**, pp. 1–25.

Bar-Zuri, R. (2004) '*Social Workers in Israel: A Survey of Developments in the Field in the Years 1990–2002*, Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Labour, Jerusalem (in Hebrew).

Beresford, P. and Croft, S. (2004) 'Service users and practitioners reunited: The key component for social work reform', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**, pp. 53–68.

Blitz, L. V. and Greene, M. P. (eds) (2006) *Racism and Racial Identity: Reflections on Urban Practice in Mental Health and Social Services*, Binghamton, NY, Haworth Maltreatment and Trauma Press.

Burke, B. and Harrison, P. (2002) 'Anti-oppressive practice', in R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne (eds), *Anti-Oppressive Practice*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan Ltd, pp. 227–36.

Carey, M. (2008) 'What difference does it make: Contrasting organization and converging outcomes regarding the privatization of state social work in England and Canada', *International Social Work*, **51**, pp. 83–94.

Clifford, D. and Burke, B. (2005) 'Developing anti-oppressive ethics in the new curriculum', *Social Work Education*, **24**, pp. 677–92.

Clifford, D. and Burke, B. (2009) *Anti-Oppressive Ethics and Values in Social Work*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.

Collins, S. and Wilkie, L. (2010) 'Anti-oppressive practice and social work students' portfolios in Scotland', *Social Work Education*, **29**, pp. 760–77.

Creswell, J. (1998) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

Danso, R. (2009) 'Emancipating and empowering de-valued skilled immigrants: What hope does anti-oppressive social work practice offer?', *British Journal of Social Work*, **39**(3), pp. 539–55.

De Montigny, G. (2011) 'Beyond anti-oppressive practice: Investigating reflexive social relations', *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, **22**, pp. 8–30.

Dickens, J. (2008) 'Welfare, law and managerialism: Inter-discursivity and inter-professional practice in child care', *Journal of Social Work*, **8**, pp. 45–64.

Dominelli, L. (1996) 'Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies, postmodernism', *British Journal of Social Work*, **26**, pp. 1–170.

Dominelli, L. (ed.) (2007) *Revitalising Communities in a Globalising World*, Aldershot, England, Ashgate Publishing.

Dominelli, L. and Hackett, S. (2011) 'Diversity: Engaging with and planning for difference', *International Social Work*, **54**, pp. 467–9.

Durham, A. (2002) 'Developing a sensitive practitioner research methodology for studying the impact of child sexual abuse', *British Journal of Social Work*, **32**, pp. 429–42.

Dustin, D. and Montgomery, M. (2010) 'The use of social theory in reflecting on anti-oppressive practice with final year BSW social work students', *Social Work Education*, **29**, pp. 386–401.

Eldar, D. (2010) *The Client at the Center: Family Aid Centers: A Study of the Family Aid Centers Dissemination*, Jerusalem, National Security Institute (in Hebrew).

Ferguson, H. (2003) 'In defense (and celebration) of individualization and life politics for social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **33**, pp. 699–707.

Filc, D. (2005) 'The health business under neo-liberalism: The Israeli case', *Critical Social Policy*, **25**(2), pp. 180–97.

Filc, D. (2009) *Circles of Exclusion: The Politics of Health in Israel*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006) 'Five misunderstandings about case-study research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, **12**, pp. 219–45.

George, P., Coleman, B. and Barnoff, L. (2007) 'Beyond "providing services": Voices of service users on structural social work practice in community-based social service agencies', *Canadian Social Work Review*, **24**, pp. 5–22.

Gilbert, T. and Powell, J. L. (2010) 'Power and social work in the United Kingdom: A Foucauldian excursion', *Journal of Social Work*, **10**, pp. 3–22.

Havassy, H. (2006) *The Client at the Centre: Study Evaluation of Family Aid Centres*, Jerusalem, Department of Research and Planning, National Security Institute.

Handler, J. F. and Hasenfeld, Y. (2006*a*) *At the Front Lines of the Welfare System: A Perspective on the Decline in Welfare Caseloads*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Handler, J. F. and Hasenfeld, Y. (2006*b*) *Blame Welfare, Ignore Poverty and Inequality*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Harris, H. (2008) 'State social work: Constructing the present from moments in the past', *British Journal of Social Work*, **38**, pp. 662–79.

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Hick, S., Fook, J. and Pozzuto, R. (eds) (2005) *Social Work: A Critical Turn*, Toronto, ON, Thompson Education Publishing.

Hooper, C. A. and Koprowska, J. (2004) 'The vulnerabilities of children whose parents have been sexually abused in childhood: Towards a new framework', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**, pp. 165–80.

Ife, J. W. (2002) *Community Development: Community Based Alternatives in an Age of Globalisation*, 2nd edn, Frenchs Forest, Australia, Longman.

Karabanow, J. (2004) 'Making organizations work: Exploring characteristics of anti-oppressive organizational structures in street youth shelters', *Journal of Social Work*, **4**, pp. 47–60.

Katan, J. and Lowenstein, A. (2009) 'Privatization trends in welfare services and their impact upon Israel as a welfare state', in K. Powell and J. Hendricks (eds), *The Welfare State in Post-Industrial Society*, New York, NY, Springer, pp. 311–32.

Knei-Paz, C. (2009) 'The central role of the therapeutic bond in a social agency setting, clients' and social workers' perceptions', *Journal of Social Work*, **9**(2), pp. 178–98.

Krumer-Nevo, M. and Barak, A. (2007) 'Service users and personal social services in Israel: Are we ready to hear what clients want to tell us?', *Journal of Social Service Research*, **34**, pp. 27–42.

Kus, B. (2006) 'Neoliberalism, institutional change and the welfare state: The case of Britain and France', *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, **47**, pp. 488–525.

Leung, J. B. C. (2002) 'The advent of managerialism in social welfare: The case of Hong Kong', *Hong Kong Journal of Social Work*, **36**, pp. 61–8.

Lorenz, W. (2005) 'Social work and a new social order: Challenging neo-liberalism's erosion of solidarity', *Social Work and Society*, **3**, pp. 93–101.

Lynn, E. (1999) 'Value bases on social work education', *British Journal of Social Work*, **29**(6), pp. 939–53.

Mantle, G. and Backwith, D. (2010) 'Poverty and social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**, pp. 2380–97.

McDonald, C. (2006) *Challenging Social Work: The Institutional Context of Practice*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

McLaughlin, K. (2005) 'From ridicule to institutionalization: Anti-oppression, the state and social work', *Critical Social Policy*, **25**, pp. 283–305.

Millar, M. (2008) 'Anti-oppressiveness: Critical comments on a discourse and its context', *British Journal of Social Work*, **38**, pp. 362–75.

Monnickendam, M., Katz, C. and Monnickendam, M. S. (2010) 'Social workers serving poor clients: Perceptions of poverty and service policy', *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**, pp. 911–27.

Morgen, S., Acker, J. and Weigt, J. (2010) *Stretched Thin: Poor Families, Welfare Work, and Welfare 'Reform'*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press.

Parrott, L. (2010) *Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice*, Exeter, Sage Publications.

Payne, M. (2000) *Imagining Welfare, Anti-Bureaucratic Social Work*, Birmingham, Venture Press.

Pollack, S. (2004) 'Anti-oppressive social work practice with women in prison: Discursive reconstructions and alternative practices', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**, pp. 693–707.

Reisch, M. and Jani, J. S. (2012) 'The new politics of social work practice: Understanding context to promote change', *British Journal of Social Work*, **42**, pp. 1132–50.

Rountree, M. and Pomeroy, E. (2010) 'Bridging the gaps among social justice, research, and practice', *Social Work*, **55**(4), pp. 293–5.

Rush, M. and Keenan, M. (2012) 'The social politics of social work: Anti-oppressive social work dilemmas in 21st century welfare regime', Working Paper, February, University College Dublin, School of Applied Social Science.

Sakamoto, I. (2007) 'A critical examination of immigrant acculturation: Toward an anti-oppressive social work model with immigrant adults in a pluralistic society', *British Journal of Social Work*, **37**(3), pp. 515–35.

Sakamoto, I. and Pitner, O. (2005) 'Use of critical consciousness in anti-oppressive social work practice: Disentangling power dynamics at personal and structural levels', *British Journal of Social Work*, **35**, pp. 435–52.

Savaia, R. and Weissman, M. (1997) *Formative Evaluation of Family Aid Centers*, Center for Evaluation of Human Services, Tel Aviv, Israel (in Hebrew).

Schram, S. F. (2006) *Welfare Discipline: Discourse, Governance, and Globalization*, Philadelphia, PA, Temple University Press.

Shafir, G. and Peled, Y. (2002) *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Shera, W. (ed.) (2005) *Emerging Perspectives on Anti-Oppressive Practice*, Toronto, Canadian Scholars Press.

Spicker, P. (2008) *Social Policy: Themes and Approaches*, Bristol, University of Bristol, Policy Press.

Stake, R. E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research*, London, UK, Sage Publications.

Stepney, P. (2006) 'Mission impossible? Critical practice in social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **36**, pp. 1289–307.

Strier, R. and Binyamin, S. (2006) *Family Aid Centers: Theory and Practice*, Jerusalem, Municipality of Jerusalem (in Hebrew).

Strier, R. and Binyamin, S. (2010) 'Developing anti-oppressive services for the poor: A theoretical and organisational rationale', *British Journal of Social Work*, **40**, pp. 1908–26.

Tsui, M. and Cheung, F. C. H. (2004) 'Gone with the wind: The impacts of managerialism on human services', *British Journal of Social Work*, **34**, pp. 437–42.

Vojak, C. (2009) 'Choosing language: Social service framing and social justice', *British Journal of Social Work*, **39**, pp. 936–49.

Wacquant, L. (2001) 'The penalization of poverty and the rise of neo-liberalism', *European Journal on Criminal Policy and Research*, **9**, pp. 401–11.

Weiss-Gal, I. (2008) 'The person-in-environment approach: Professional ideology and practice of social workers in Israel', *Social Work*, **53**(1), pp. 65–75.

Weiss-Gal, I. (2009) 'Teaching critical perspectives: Analyses of professional practice in the film ladybird', *Social Work Education*, **28**, pp. 873–86.

Wilson, A. and Beresford, P. (2000) 'Anti-oppressive practice: Emancipation or appropriation?', *British Journal of Social Work*, **30**, pp. 553–73.

Yin, R. K. (1994) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage Publications.

Zeira, A. and Ben-Harush, A. (2007) 'Support centers in Jerusalem: A new initiative in a changing reality', *Social Security*, **74**, pp. 95–120 (in Hebrew).