European Journal of Social Work

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cesw20

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To cite this article: Lior Birger , Yochay Nadan & Mimi Ajzenstadt (2020): Politicisation processes in everyday practice with refugees: the experiences of Israeli and German social workers, European Journal of Social Work, DOI: 10.1080/13691457.2020.1793107

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1793107

Published online: 16 Jul 2020.

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL WORK
https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2020.1793107

Politicisation processes in everyday practice with refugees: the experiences of Israeli and German social workers

תהליכי פוליטיזציה במסגרת הפרקטיקה עם פליטים: חוויותיהם של עובדים סוציאליים גרמנים וישראלים

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the political context of social work practice with refugees. Specifically, it addresses the ways politics and policies that derive from them, interplay with social workers' perceptions and constructions regarding their daily practice. It is based on findings from a qualitative study that included 22 in-depth interviews with Israeli and German social workers who work with refugees. Working in a 'highly political' field meant that practitioners encountered xenophobia and racism, reinforced by the negative public discourse surrounding refugees, and faced the outcomes of exclusionary state policies towards service users and social services. The article demonstrates that working under challenging political circumstances, enhanced social workers' political awareness, termed *politicisation*, in that they became more attuned to their identities in relation to practice, to user-worker power imbalances, and to the ways politics and policies influence service users' well-being. Politicisation included social workers highly emotional involvement, which motivated them to take action towards social justice, as well as enhanced the risk of being overwhelmed and experiencing 'political fatigue'. The article discusses implications for the 're-politicisation' of social work research, practice and education.

KEYWORDS

Germany; Israel; politics; politicisation; refugees; social work practice

מילות מפתח

גרמניה; ישראל; פוליטיקה; פוליטיזציה; פליטים; פרקטיקה בעבודה סוציאלית

תקציר

מאמר זה עוסק בהקשר הפוליטי של הפרקטיקה בעבודה סוציאלית עם פליטים. המאמר מתמקד באופן שבו פוליטיקה והמדיניות הנגזרת ממנה, משתקפות בתפיסות ובהבניות של עובדים סוציאליים לגבי הפרקטיקה שלהם. המאמר מבוסס על ממצאים מתוך מחקר איכותני אשר כלל ראיונות עומק עם 22 עובדים סוציאליים ישראלים וגרמנים העובדים עם פליטים. עבור העובדים, העבודה בתחום 'פוליטי במיוחד', כללה חוויות של מפגש עם שנאת זרים וגזענות, שהועצמו על ידי שיח חברתי שלילי כלפי פליטים, וכן התמודדות עם תוצאותיה של מדיניות ממשלתית מדירה כלפי פליטים וכן וכלפי השירותים העובדים עמם. המאמר מדגים כיצד עבודה בתנאים פוליטיים מאתגרים אלה, העצימה תהליכי פיתוח מודעות בקרב העובדים, המכונים 'פוליטיזציה', בכך שהם נעשו מודעים יותר לזהויותיהם ולקשר שלהן לפרקטיקה, ליחסי הכוח הקיימים בקשר בינם ובין הפונים, וכן לאופן שבו ממדים של פוליטיקה ומדיניות משפיעים על רגשותיהם ועל רווחתם של הפונים. תהליכי פוליטיזציה אלה כללו גם מעורבות רגשית גבוהה של העובדים הסוציאליים, אשר קידמה את נקיטתם בפעולות המקדמות צדק חברתי, ובו בעת הגבירה את הסיכון לחוות הצפה רגשית ו'תשישות פוליטית'. לסיכום, מציע המאמר השלכות עבור קידום תהליכי 'רה-פוליטיזציה' במחקר, בפרקטיקה ובהוראה בעבודה סוציאלית.

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The globalisation of recent decades has involved a marked increase in international forced migration, which in 2015 reached the highest levels ever recorded. In Europe, so-called 'host' countries are shifting between welcoming and exclusionary policies, shaped by shifting public attitudes, and an increased 'backlash' (Libal & Berthold, 2019). The current political trends bring new challenges for social workers (SWs), yet immigration has long been linked with the profession, dating back to its emergence in the nineteenth century, when the settlement movement was founded in response to immigration. Despite this long-lasting link, social work practice with refugees and asylum seekers emerged as a distinguished field around the beginning of the twenty-first century (see, for example: Nash et al., 2006; Valtonen, 2001). Refugees are legally defined under the 1951 UN Convention and the 1967 Protocol as people who have left their country because of persecution or violence and are unable or unwilling to return (UNHCR, 2019). For the purpose of this article, the term Social Work with Refugees (SWR) is used to refer to practice with all those who are at various points in the process of claiming refugee status. The different implications of the precarious status of asylum seekers or rejected refugees are discussed when relevant. Moreover, the use of the generalised term 'refugee' does not imply a singular 'refugee experience' but rather is used for convenience reasons.

Social workers are agents of change in society and in the lives of the people that they serve (IFSW, 2014). As a profession, social work has always operated within the political sphere – both influenced by it and aiming to influence it, and therefore, is always a form of political practice (Hartman, 1993). This dual influence between the profession and 'the political' is encapsulated in the term *politicisation's* two-fold meaning: First, politicisation includes processes of increased reflectivity and awareness about political dimensions and power relations in society (Nadan et al., 2016). These reflective aspects are closely linked with critical and anti-oppressive approaches' use of Freire's concept of 'critical consciousness', the development of awareness of structures of oppression in people's lives (Freire, 2000). These approaches incorporated the term to discuss practitioners' own awareness raising (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Second, politicisation includes actual practices for political change, such as policy advocacy (Gray & Webb, 2013). Although the two dimensions are closely linked, this paper only focuses on the reflective aspects of politicisation. We explore SWs' perceptions and constructions regarding the political context of their practice with refugees, based on findings from in-depth interviews with 22 social workers in Israel and Germany. Following Reisch and Jani's (2012) two-fold definition, the political in the narrower sense, as 'electoral or policy arenas', guided the research question; and in its wider sense, as 'the way power shapes the allocation of rights and resources, and influences … needs … and interventions' guided the analysis of the findings (Reisch & Jani, 2012, p. 3).

The article begins with an overview of SWR challenges on the political and policy levels. Then, the situation of refugees in Israel and Germany is described. Following the methodological section, the findings regarding SWs' views of 'the political' and the processes of politicisation are described. We conclude with implications for SW research, practice and education.

Challenges to social work with refugees on the political and policy levels

SWR occurs in extremely challenging politics and policy circumstances. In the context of rising nationalism and anti-refugee sentiments in the US and Europe, supporting refugees is contested (Libal & Berthold, 2019). Accordingly, restrictive policies often limit social services' resources, and SWs are often caught between their obligations to service users and to the state (Valtonen, 2001). Practitioners in SWR are often criticised for applying inhumane practices through neoliberal immigration policies (Humphries, 2004) and for supporting the 'othering' of refugees when helping them 'fit' into European societies (van der Haar, 2015). In the Israeli context, they are criticised for adopting a needs-based approach while neglecting social and political dimensions (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shinar Levanon, 2019). Although some of these claims might be appropriate, understanding SWs' own views regarding the political circumstances that shape SWR are extremely limited.

In recent years, a number of studies have incorporated SWs' views of the political context of SWR in Europe. In the UK, Robinson (2013) found that SWs experienced racism from mainstream providers and from the general public. In contrast, German SWs were concerned with increased anti-refugee sentiments, yet reported of only hearing of racism from clients but not experiencing it themselves (Hagues et al., 2019). Furthermore, while SWs in the UK viewed restrictive policies and limited resources as increasing ethical dilemmas, this reality lead them to develop creative use of the limited resources they did have (Masocha, 2014). In the Netherlands, van der Haar (2015) found that the political discourse in the European context, enhanced workers' use of a 'culturization' frame, i.e. seeing refugees' culture as an explanation for the difficulties that arose. Evidently, politics and policies that derive from them intersect with SWs everyday practice in diverse ways, including their perceptions and implementation of interventions. Refugee politics and policies in the Israeli and German contexts will be reviewed in the following section.

Refugees in Israel and Germany

This research focuses on Eritrean refugees, who flee indefinite military service and severe human rights restrictions. By the end of 2018, Eritreans were the ninth-largest group of refugees worldwide (UNHCR, 2019). Israel and Germany are amongst Eritreans' main 'host' countries. Thus, with the aim of comparison, the research focuses on SWs who primarily work with Eritrean service users in both countries.

Israel

Some 22,000 Eritreans live in Israel, comprising 70% of all African non-Jewish refugees (PIBA, 2019). They started arriving in Israel in the middle of the 2000s, after surviving atrocities in the Sinai Desert. By 2012, when the fence on the border with Egypt was completed, their entrance almost completely stopped. Although Israel has ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, it never incorporated it into domestic law (Kritzman-Amir, 2015). Until 2013, Eritreans were denied access to Refugee Status Determination (RSD). Since 2013, the RSD process has supposedly been accessible, yet it is still reported as being dysfunctional (Bar-Tuvia, 2018). Israel's recognition rates for protection status are extremely low: For Eritreans, it stands at less than one percent; between 2009 and 2019 refugee status was granted to only 13 Eritreans; instead, the majority are provided with a temporary visa, renewed every few months and comprising of only the right to stay, while excluding health and social rights or work permits (Kritzman-Amir, 2015). Despite this fact, we still use the term 'refugees' to refer to Eritreans in Israel since (a) UNHCR explicitly defines them as 'people in refugee-like situations'; and (b) they have notably high recognition rates globally (Bar-Tuvia, 2018).[1]

Israel's declared position towards refugees is 'to try and make them leave': restrictive policies towards them include incarceration, detention and economic sanctions. In addition, since late 2013, Israel initiated a 'voluntary departure' programme, transferring refugees to Rwanda and Uganda. In 2018, a plan for forced deportation was announced and cancelled a few months later, following an unprecedented public campaign (Bar-Tuvia, 2018).

Throughout the years, these governmental policies were accompanied by incitement and a xenophobic state-led discourse. Whereas some Israelis actively support refugees, often while emphasising Israel's Jewish history, the common construct is of refugees as threatening 'others' (Kalir, 2015). This is in congruent with officially referring to them as 'infiltrators', a categorisation which constructs them as both a security and demographic threat (Birger & Peled, 2017).

No governmental agency is responsible for Eritreans 'integration'; they are not entitled to health and social rights, including social benefits, and are denied access to social services, except in cases of at-risk populations (ASSAF, 2019). Thus, the majority of specialised social work services for refugees are municipal agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Germany

Aapproximately 90,000 Eritreans reside in Germany, making it the largest Eritrean community in Europe, with approximately 60,000 of them having arrived in recent years (BAMF, 2019). The issue of refugees in Germany is not entirely new, but the 2005 Immigration Act was still the country's first comprehensive immigration law. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) was created, with branches located in all of the Federal States (*Länder*), and is responsible for asylum procedures and granting protection (Neuer-Miebach, 2016). Germany's recognition rates for protection status are amongst the highest in Europe. They vary according to country of origin: for example, while Eritreans' protection rates are around 90%, the rates for people from Afghanistan are about 50%, and many face deportations threats (BAMF, 2019).

The refugee issue reveals a deep division among the German public. In 2015, Chancellor Merkel's 'open arms policy' stood out in comparison to the restrictive EU policies and was accompanied by a Willkommenskultur (a welcoming culture), including an unprecedented involvement of citizens in voluntary actions (Jacobsen et al., 2017). At the same time, an anti-refugee and populist discourse was accompanied by a rise in the new right-wing party (AfD) political power, and an upsurge in xenophobic and racist attacks (Jacobsen et al., 2017).

Refugees arriving in Germany are assigned to one of 16 federal states. They initially reside in communal accommodations and are required to participate in integration courses. The possibility of acquiring residency lies in the refugees' demonstration of a concerted effort 'to integrate'. They are granted access to welfare services and health care but with certain restrictions. SWs are employed in a variety of specialised services for refugees, ranging from mass accommodations to migration advice centres (Neuer-Miebach, 2016). Overall, although comparing the two countries is complex due to historical, socio-political and other contexts, the differences in terms of asylum and integration policies towards Eritreans are striking, as Israel's policies are far more restrictive and exclusionary. Still, a growing populist and anti-refugee discourse prevails in both places. With the aim of exploring how these contexts are reflected in SWs' experiences, our investigation was guided by the following questions: (1) What are the perceptions and constructions of SWs in the SWR field, regarding the political context of their practice?; and (2) What are the differences and/or similarities between German and Israeli SWs' perceptions and constructions?

Methodology

The article is based on data from a larger qualitative study, which explores the relationship between Eritrean refugee service users and SWs in Israel and Germany. The study is informed by a Context-Informed Perspective, which views the concepts that humans generate as influenced by the many interlocking cultural, socio-political, historical and other contexts (Roer-Strier & Sands, 2015). The study utilises a constructivist grounded theory (GT) qualitative methodology, aimed at systematically developing a theoretical model grounded in data, by examining both SWs' and service users' perceptions, and positioning the research in historical, social, and situational conditions (Charmaz, 2017). The current article is based on the data collected from SWs in both countries, focusing on the political context in the construction of their perception of everyday practice.

Data collection and sample

Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with twenty-two SWs, by the first author. Interviews were conducted between January 2017 and September 2018. The sample was both a convenience sample, based on social services familiar to the first author, and a snowball sampling, based on participants' referrals (Patton, 2002). There were two criteria for inclusion in the study: (1) SWs or those employed as SWs; and (2) those who work with individual refugees or families. Ten interviews were conducted in Germany (Berlin, Brandenburg, Erfurt) and twelve in

Israel (Tel Aviv, Jerusalem). As such, the German or Israeli SWs describe the interview's location but not necessarily the interviewees' identities. SWs ages ranged from 26 to 63 (m = 38). 19 were female and three were male. In the German sample, three were not certified SWs, but employed in a SW position, and three had a refugee background. The majority had volunteered or worked with refugees prior to their current job. By the time of the interview, they worked at their current job for an average of two years. They all worked in specialised social services for refugees (and/or migrant workers), including NGO's, non-profits, municipal or governmental services. In Germany, they were mostly governmentally or municipally funded, whereas in Israel about half were based on donations or had limited governmental funding. They worked with diverse service users, mostly adults, but also children, families and unaccompanied minors.

Interviews were conducted in Hebrew (Israel) and English (Germany). One interview was interpreted from English to German by the interviewees' colleague. They took place at a location of the interviewee's choice, usually their workplace, a cafe, or in their home. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. The interviewees signed an informed consent form and filled out a socio-demographic questionnaire. The interviews were guided by an interview guide that included the following subjects: reasons for entering the SWR field; main issues and dilemmas surrounding SWR; perceptions of the user-worker relationship; and perceptions of the contexts that shape this relationship. The questions were open-ended, allowing participants to spontaneously raise other topics.

The researchers

The first author, who conducted the interviews, is a white, Ashkenazi (Jewish of European origin), Israeli woman. She is a SW who has years of practice experience in SWR in Israel, a one-year of practice experience in SWR in Germany, including social and political activism for refugee rights. As such, she had a complex position of being both an *insider* (for all SWs) and an *outsider* (for German SWs). Overall, her previous acquaintance with half of the interviewees, and the use of a common professional language, assisted in her ability to gain access to participants and to create trust. The second and third authors were the research advisors. They are both white, Ashkenazi, Jewish Israeli researchers in the areas of diversity. We were attentive to how different positionalities interplay in the data collection and analysis: the first author used reflexivity by conducting a field diary, consultations and peer debriefing with the other authors.

Data analysis

Interviews were audiotaped, fully transcribed and anonymized. The analysis was conducted based on the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first stage, the researchers acquired a familiarity with the data (immersion) by reading the interviews several times. In the second stage, we began open coding, which facilitated the identification of basic units of meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Then, links and hierarchies among and within the codes (subcategories) were established using axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Data from Germany and in Israel was first analysed separately, and then compared. The analysis was conducted in the language of the interviews. The translation of the relevant quotations from Hebrew to English was done while writing the research report. Data analysis was conducted using MAXQDA – a qualitative data analysis software.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's School of Social Work. The study was conducted in accordance with the Ethics Committee's guidelines: participants signed an informed consent form and confidentiality was ensured throughout all stages of the study, including the use of pseudonyms and the omission of all identifying details from this article.

Findings

Four main themes related to politicisation processes emerged from the analysis: (a) SWs' definition of 'the political' in SWR; (b) the main characteristics of SWR that generate politicisation processes; (c) the main aspects of the politicisation processes; and (d) the challenges and limitations of politicisation.

SWR is 'highly political'

SWs characterised SWR as a distinguished field of practice, mostly in that it was 'highly political'. They held varied views of what defines 'the political', yet shared a common perception of it in the narrow sense, as they mentioned that the refugee issue was at the heart of political campaigns. Andrea, a German SW, explained why it was 'more political':

> [Working with refugees] is much more political then working with … children … or the elderly … there are many more structures that you need to analyse and your political standing needs to be clear … it's [also] related to borders and to … international relations.

The majority of SWs viewed the political as a sphere which was impossible to ignore, even if one wished to. Sebastian, a German SW, said:

> If you work with refugees you always get recognized as a refugee supporter … people want to challenge you … people are curious, and you start to explain and very quickly you get political because if you talk about the supply and the welfare system - you talk about the problems, [that] people are not politically accepted.

As Sebastian explained, working in SWR, SWs were politically identified and challenged to engage in a political discussion; to 'get political'. Evidently, his views focused on the politics and policies manifestation of 'the political'. A smaller number of SWs incorporated views of the political as also entailing issues of power that interplay in their relationships with users. Yael, an Israeli SW, said:

> As a white woman … [my identity] is always present, whether I talk about or not … my perceptions and my interventions are political … the baseline for the therapeutic alliance is dealing with power relations.

As such, Yael referred to 'the political' in the wider sense. Still, 'the political' manifested in SWs everyday practice primarily via politics and policies: they experienced the xenophobic public discourse mainly through their encounters with racism towards themselves and towards service users; and exclusionary policies mainly in that they affected their resources (or rather the lack of them) as well as service users' well-being.

SWR characteristics that generate politicization processes

In portraying how working in a 'highly political' field impacted them, SWs described two main SWR characteristics that generated the processes of politicisation.

Fluid boundaries between work and personal life

The first was the fluid and often blurred boundaries between work and personal life. SWs mentioned different reasons for why maintaining these boundaries was difficult, including working with emergency situations, or the fact that this was 'more than just a job' as many were involved in political activism or were volunteering with refugees before or during their 'official' work hours. As Lina, a German SW said:

> I know it's important to separate work life from private life, [but] is a bit difficult for me to keep it just as my job because it's also my passion.

These blurred boundaries were intensified due to the political nature of SWR. SWs described a 'bare' experience – everywhere they went, they were exposed to questions and comments, often negative ones. Even when their environment was supportive, it seemed that 'everyone has something to say',

and the personal and professional became mixed up. This was evident in the description that Ayelet, an Israeli SW, gave of a conversation she had during the deportation period:

> I went for dinner at a friend's house and met a person that I didn't know before. I shared something that happened at work, and he started saying bad things about refugees … you know, I am not an extremist, and I didn't try to convenience him, but then I just felt very uncomfortable and upset … why should I feel uncomfortable? Why does it have to become personal?

She described how politics pervaded spaces that were viewed as personal. While some SWs avoided mentioning their occupation during social gatherings, often the choice wasn't in their hands: whether it was family members who 'dragged' them into dispute at the dinner table, or their daily encounters with racism. The latter was exemplified in Sarah's, an Israeli SW who worked with refugee children and families in Tel Aviv, accounts:

> I searched for a flat and I was asked [by the landlords] 'where do you work?' I said, 'I am working with refugees' and they said: 'Oh, just don't bring *these* people to the flat'. Later it intensified … there were so many times that I was walking with the children on the street and people in the neighbourhood were yelling at us: 'You refugee fucker, get the hell out of here'. We were so angry and sad … I mean, I am there with children! It just made me feel terrible.

The fluidity of boundaries between work and personal life was apparent as she described the encounters with racism in both spheres as entwined. Furthermore, she referred to extreme emotions such as anger and sadness that such encounters evoked. These two aspects supported the processes of politicisation, as will be elaborated upon further.

Discrepancies between SWs' practice and exclusionary policies

Another dynamic which characterised SWR were the discrepancies between SWs' practice and limiting or exclusionary policies. In light of service users' adversities and multiple challenges, their capabilities were limited. In this position, SWs experienced tensions and dilemmas related to their everyday practice. This was evident in the narratives of SWs in both countries, but was intensified in the Israeli context, in light of the latter's extremely restrictive policies. Israeli SWs' feelings shifted between helplessness, anger and despair to agency and capability. Ayelet, an Israeli SW said:

> I can't help them with almost anything … There is a woman that has PTSD and she ran out of medicines and needs to go to the refugee clinic, now the clinic is about to be shut down … and she has panic attacks and faints in front of her son … so it's like step by step her whole world is shrinking. Sometimes I feel embarrassed or unnecessary … what do I help with? Telling them there isn't anything I can do and that I'm sorry? […] but [on the other hand] it is an important role - being there for people who need someone, who have no one here.

The shifts between feeling important and unnecessary were intensified by the state's policies that restricted the refugees' rights. This was described in a different manner by a German SW: those who worked with unrecognised refugees, such as those facing deportation, expressed similar notions. Others described the challenge in accommodating the service user's well-being 'from within' a limiting social system. Many SWs criticised the system for creating hierarchies between different groups according to legal statuses, or for pressuring recognised refugees 'to integrate' while ignoring their needs. Sebastian, a German SW who worked with minors and young adults, said:

> There isn't a lot of time to really respond to the needs of the people, because if you [as a refugee] come here [to Germany], you have such a big pressure of integration, there are so many things you need to succeed in … [as a SW] you have to tell them to go to school … and after school … to get into job training. You are determined by the political frame, and you need to really be critical … in order to question it.

He described the dilemmas that arise related to his interventions in light of the 'political frame'. Unlike most of his Israeli colleagues, he was working inside the social system, and thus encountered different power structures, which, as he put it, were somewhat hidden and harder to question. Still, his encounters with 'the political' supported politicisation processes, as will be discussed next.

Politicisation processes

SWs described their becoming increasingly politically aware in the context of a 'highly political' practice. These processes were not linear, ending with SWs 'becoming politically aware', but rather continuance, including cognitive, emotional and behavioural elements, by which SWs *enhanced* or *developed* political awareness. Three main aspects of these processes will be elaborated upon.

Increased awareness to the workers' identities

One aspect of politicisation included increased awareness to SWs' complex identities. For example, Yael, an Israeli SW, mentioned that in her practice she had reflected upon her position both as an Israeli-citizen and a white woman. This awareness intensified when she experienced a racist incident:

> I went out of the office with a community mediator, we were talking and laughing, and then someone on the street started cursing me: 'Hooker … you dumb, he will probably rape you!' … I heard so many stories from service users … about daily racism … such as that people on the bus stand up when they sit next to them, but when you experience it first-hand … it is just horrifying.

Yael's narration exemplified a shift from *knowing about* racism, to *experiencing* racism. Despite the fact that it was a disturbing event, it presented an opportunity for SWs to enhance the partnership with service users because they were subjected to something similar to the users' experiences. In this case, as Yael mentioned, the politicisation processes included the awareness of her positionality that existed on a cognitive level beforehand, yet a first-hand encounter with racism added the emotional aspects. Differently, Lia, another Israeli SW, perceived herself as an a-political person, in the narrow sense. She said: 'I could have overlooked the refugee issue easily, I mean demonstrations is totally "not me", I'm not political'. But when she described the period of the deportation, Lia said:

> [During this period] I experienced a real crisis … how could I say to my clients that I am not a part of the establishment? On the one hand I am supporting, while on the other hand I am deporting … I mean - I am the state of Israel … I am white … it's my country, who does that! And it was so painful. I would go out of a session, burst into tears and then try to hold myself together.

Lia's accounts revealed how encountering the political in the marrow sense, in this case state's policy of deportation, was related to the development of political awareness in the wider sense: through self-reflection on her ethno-national identity, existing user-worker power imbalances were exposed.

For other SWs, mostly those with migration or refugee backgrounds, working with refugees enhanced their confrontation with different positionalities as both privileged and excluded. Medhane, a German SW with an Eritrean background who had worked as both an interpreter and SW, described an incident where he had to mediate between unaccompanied refugee minors and policemen in East Germany:

> The police were in the train station to pick me up … since they said it is too dangerous for a black guy to run around the city, because of these Nazis [*referring to Neo-Nazi groups*]. I told the policeman – 'if the young kids go around there, then I can do it too'. But imagine the situation for the people! They hear insults about their origins or looks on a daily basis. They are afraid to go out after 6 o'clock in the evening because it's getting dark.

Evidently, encountering racism revealed the complexity of Medhane's identities: on the one hand, as a black man with a refugee background he was subjected to racist violence, on the other hand, as a SW the police offered him (temporary) protection, which service users did not have. His decision could be interpreted as positioning himself in partnership with the minors.

Increased awareness of macro-micro relations

Other aspect of politicisation included SWs' increased awareness of the relationship between politics and policies on the macro level, and users' well-being on the micro level. Political decisions and policies that derive from them were perceived as traumatic and traumatising, and as an explanation for many of the refugees' challenges. Other explanations included the contexts of migration, culture and

personal resources, however 'the political' was a main explanatory factor. For example, Lina, a German SW, talked about Afghan service users, whose asylum was rejected and thus faced deportation:

> Political decisions … really destroy my clients … they cannot attend German classes and they are always afraid … I try to activate their inner warrior … I say 'you are behaving exactly like the state wants you to behave or feel … it's a political strategy. I can imagine that it feels horrible but try to be strong' […] sometimes information helps … [but] some people don't have resources to fight anymore … [they] just sit at home and stare of the window … existing but not living.

In Lina's accounts, 'the political' was not the only explanation for users' distress, yet, was a major stressor. Working in a highly political field of practice highlighted existing links between the macro and micro levels, thus supported SWs' adoption of de-pathologizing and de-individualizing views of service users.

Increased emotional involvement

A third element of the politicisation processes included emotional aspects: working in a highly political field included SWs highly emotional involvement, which overall enhanced their political awareness and motivated them to act. For example, Dana, an Israeli SW, reflected on her work experience:

> It is really sad … it's painful … the more you accompany this community the angrier you become at our country [Israel] and fall deeper into despair. It is really exhausting to be angry all the time. [but] on the other hand … being angry helps to maintain your strength … what helps me is that I am fighting for certain families, I will turn to the social services and fight for a person … even if it's in my own small territory – I do feel like I am fighting.

Dana described feelings such as anger, despair and pain that were evoked in the encounter with service users' adversities and the exclusionary policies towards them, which was described earlier. This emotional involvement enhanced processes of politicisation and motivated SWs to not only become aware but to also to take action.

To conclude, the different elements of the politicisation processes were well articulated in Ayelet's accounts. She said:

> I didn't come to this job with an agenda or idealism, I just love children … and it was devastating - the distresses … and our inability to help. This acquaintance opened my world … [today] when I see refugees, I want to tell them all – 'I see you, you exist, you are important'! […] and how come they weren't angry with me? At the end of the day I go back home to my luxuries and they stay with their poverty … so I came because of the children but I stayed because it gave me a meaning. I always wanted to treat the human soul, and didn't care about social policy, and then I came to this job and I felt it in my guts.

The processes of politicisation were evident in the structure of Ayelet's narration: she began by describing a non-political motivation to work with refugees, yet concluded with addressing her awareness of the power relations based on her identity and the role that policies played in intensifying them. Furthermore, the tension between service users' adversities and the lack of services, and her emotional involvement, supported the politicisation processes in the wider sense.

Politicisation: challenges and limitations

Working in a 'highly political' field also included risks for SWs' well-being. Witnessing and experiencing injustice, which is enhanced and created by the state, especially when political change is far reaching, involved despair and burnout. This was evident in the accounts of Galit, an Israeli SW who mentioned that she chose SWR out of idealism:

> This work has changed my life, the way I see the world … It made me much more aware of human rights issues … and feel pain regarding the situation in Israel … it's almost intolerable … the position of being willing to see - you pay a heavy price for it. For positioning yourself as a part of this country or even humanity, that causes such evil did.

Galit referred to what the 'price' that 'being willing to see', or rather becoming politicised, included. Moreover, for a small number of SWs, the 'highly political' nature of practice had strengthened intervention strategies that focus on the individual level. They didn't ignore the presence of 'the political', but rather viewed it as a 'sphere of despair', where there is no chance of creating change. Thus, focusing on clinical or medial needs made sense. Hanna, who had many years of experience working with immigrants and refugees, said that she used to be politically active, but currently refrains from it:

> In order for the political situation not to distract me and stress me, I try to separate my work from my life. I try to focus on the health situation - what they need from me and what I can get for them.

Refraining from the political was a means of self-care, which helped Hanna to continue her everyday practice. Overall, it seemed that working in a 'highly political' context had the potential of causing 'political fatigue': along with becoming more politically aware, came the risk of becoming emotionally overwhelmed or burned out. One potential consequence was SWs resorting to individualistic explanations and practices, which are closer to de-politicisation rather than politicisation.

Discussion

This article aimed to explore the perceptions and constructions of Israeli and German SWs regarding the political context of SWR. The findings revealed varied views of 'the political', yet SWs mainly viewed their practice as 'more political' and 'highly political' in that the refugee issue was politically and publicly contested. This distinction corresponds with British and Australian SWs' views of the political context of SWR as 'unlike any other area of social work practice' (Robinson, 2013, p. 9). In the current research, this manifested itself in the everyday practice mainly via encounters with racism that were reinforced by the negative discourse surrounding refugees, and via exclusionary state policies towards services and service users. Our findings demonstrate that SWs characterised their practice by fluid boundaries between work and personal life, and by increased discrepancies between their practice and exclusionary policies. Such characteristics of SWR, including encountering racism and the practical and ethical challenges derived from restrictive policies, were also observed in previous studies (e.g.: Masocha, 2014; Robinson, 2013). Such dynamics generated politicisation processes: SWs became more aware of their identities in relation to practice, and of the ways politics and policies influence users' well-being. Politicisation also included highly emotional involvement, which supported SWs' increased awareness as well as their motivation for action. Overall, working in a 'highly political' context in the narrow sense (electoral or policy arenas), enhanced political awareness of both the narrow and the wider sense (the way power shapes the allocation of resources and interventions). Yet becoming politically aware also involved paying a 'heavy price', such as the risk of burn-out or 'political fatigue', which lead some SWs to retreat to individualistic explanations and interventions, which are closer to the de-politicisation processes.

Our findings are compatible with critical and anti-oppressive approaches to multicultural social work's view of 'critical consciousness'. Leaning on Freire's concept of 'critical consciousness' (Freire, 2000), the anti-oppressive approach discusses practitioners' own increased critical awareness. For example, Pitner and Sakamoto's (2005) cyclical framework, views critical consciousness as encompassing 'cognitive, affective, and behavioural components … involves the process of continuously reflecting on … how our own biases … and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive … power dynamics … ' (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 685). Our findings are consistent with their conceptualisation, while they emphasise how working in a highly political field of practice enhances practitioners' critical consciousness raising.

Taking a further step from their model, we suggest that reframing these reflective processes as politicisation, enables to encapsulate the prominent role that politics plays in increasing practitioners' awareness. Although multicultural social work literature considers structural and socio-political element, it tends to highlight the role of culture and cultural differences in raising critical consciousness (e.g.: Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). We argue that beyond the cross-

cultural elements, SWs' encounters with public attitudes, political campaigns, media discourse, intergroup conflicts, xenophobia and racism, plays a prominent role in raising political consciousness in both the narrow and wider senses.

One important element of politicisation was SWs' increased use of politics as an explanatory factor for the service users' situation. 'The political' seemed to overcome both intra-psychic as well as cultural explanations. This challenge's previous criticism of SWs as either adopting 'culturalist' approaches (van der Haar, 2015), individualistic models (Humphries, 2004) or ignoring political dimensions (Nuttman-Shwartz & Shinar Levanon, 2019). Finally, while politicisation incorporates de-pathologizing and de-individualizing views of service users, there is a risk that overemphasising political explanations will neglect the role of individual differences and other contexts in assessing users' situation.

Although German and Israeli SWs' perceptions of SWR as 'highly political' were mostly similar, one difference is worth discussing. While experiencing an *enhancement* of their political awareness was reported in both countries, it was only (some) Israeli SWs who reported *developing* such awareness. The latter also mostly didn't choose SWR because of an idealistic or political agenda, and initially viewed themselves as 'non-political'. These differences could be understood in light of professionalisation processes: In Israel, the profession has arguably undergone a de-politicisation (Nadan et al., 2016), which is impacted by neoliberalism, an educational focus on practice with individuals (Weiss-Gal et al., 2020), and the presence of political issues such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, which the profession largely avoids (Nadan et al., 2016). As such, in the current study, SWs' practice in an extreme political climate of SWR in Israel might have intensified their politicisation. In Germany, however, a more politically-oriented agenda is attributed to social work: SWs are considered to be more interested in politics and are more left-wing oriented than the general public, and the majority of them views the profession as having a political mandate (Kulke & Schmidt, 2019).

The study has a few limitations. First, it relied mainly on a snowballing sampling, which may have resulted in a relatively homogenous sample of participants who tended to be 'more political'. Second, the first author's previous acquaintance with some of the participants may have impacted the interviews and their content. Moreover, for the participants on the German side, being interviewed in English might have impacted their ability to fully express themselves. Finally, the study only included reflective aspects of politicisation. While the findings did indicate that SWs' increased awareness was connected to their political actions, a future elaboration of politicisation practices, including advocacy, is needed.

Implications

By portraying SWs' politicisation processes, the research's findings support the call for the 're-politicisation' of social work practice and education (Gray & Webb, 2013; Reisch & Jani, 2012). This could be done by facilitating SWs and students' reflections upon social and political explanations to users' well-being, and on how politics shape power dynamics in the worker-users relationship. Moreover, discussing 'the political' in both the narrow and wider senses in the classroom, could support countering students' reluctance to deal with 'the political'. Supervision should support SWs' self-reflection and political awareness, while adhering to the risks of 'political fatigue' and emphasising self-care, which could eventually enhance their actions towards social change.

Conclusions

The current article views SWs' encounters with political injustice in SWR as an opportunity to develop and re-define 'the political' in social work, beyond the refugee field. As the study demonstrated, by incorporating politically informed explanations to refugees' situations, and by adopting a critical stance to the state's policies, German and Israeli SWs challenged their common construct as 'othering' refugees or as executers of inhumane policies.

Note

1. The use of the term 'refugees' is contested: In the Israeli context, it is used to refer to World War II Jewish refugees, to 1948 Palestinian refugees, and to non-Jewish African refugees. For a further understanding of the unique situation of Palestinian refugees, see, for example: Bocco (2009).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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