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# Trapped between neoliberal social context and professional socialization: The case of Israeli social workers in the social protest of 2011 and implications for the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract**: This study examined Israeli social workers' experiences of the social protest of summer 2011, focusing on their attitudes toward services provided to clients in poverty in the context of neoliberal social policy. These experiences were examined in regard to social workers' perceptions toward poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was conducted using mixed methods strategy. The qualitative data were collected through in-depth interviews (n=16) that were analyzed using thematic analysis methods. Two themes emerged from the data: 1) Perception, attitude, and participation in the protest, 2) Not on the same side of the table: Relationships between social workers and clients during and after the protest. The quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire that was analyzed using descriptive statistics (n=157). Most of the quantitative results validated the qualitative findings, highlighting the conflict between neoliberal policies that govern social workers' workplaces and social workers' professional values regarding poverty and social change. In addition, they highlight social workers' perceptions of people in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic, which were characterized by "salvation" "charity" rather than "welfare." These results call for a discourse within the social services that seeks ways of enabling social workers to fight to implement professional values.

**Keywords**: Neoliberal socioeconomic policy; social workers; social protest; poverty

## Introduction

Neoliberal ideology affects social policy in many Western countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Neoliberal policy outcomes tend to include a significant increase in the number of people living in poverty, a widening gap between socioeconomic classes, and the depletion of the socioeconomic middle class. Neoliberal policy is characterized also by erosion of the welfare state, as reflected in reduced state responsibility, privatization of services, and extensive cuts in welfare (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Gray et al., 2015; Ornellas et al., 2020). These social policy changes have created a special challenge for social workers, who are expected to act as social agents who fight for social change that promotes human welfare (Dominelli, 2021; Ife et al., 2022; Ornellas et al., 2020; Strier & Feldman, 2017; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014). One way in which social workers can have an impact on welfare-promoting changes is to engage in social and political activism (IFSW, 2014). An example of this political activism is organization of and participation in social protests against socioeconomic policy that is detrimental to human welfare, such as the implementation of neoliberal policy. This study used the social protest staged in Israel, in

summer 2011, to examine social workers' attitudes regarding their commitment to act as social agents to promote human welfare. In addition, the findings were reflected on in accordance with social workers' activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The Context of the Study: The Social Protest of Summer 2011

The social protest in Israel during summer 2011 was part of a global, ongoing event, during 2011–2012, in several Western countries. The social protest in Israel followed the social protest in Spain that started in May 2011 (Simsa, 2012), and preceded the Occupy Wall Street protest of September 2011 in the United States (Grinberg, 2013; Yonah, 2015). These protests were ignited by neoliberal socioeconomic policy that enabled a small minority to accumulate capital by reducing state responsibility and budgets in various areas related to human welfare.

The social protest of summer 2011 in Israel, which became known as the Tent Protest, was an action by Israel's citizens to oppose government policies that had led to a rise in cost of living and severe financial hardship for large segments of society. Among the difficulties caused by this policy were a significant increase in housing costs, a shortage of affordable child daycare facilities, and erosion of salaries to the extent that even some members of the middle class were unable to cover monthly expenses. The protesters represented diverse segments of Israeli society, although the majority were middle class and lower-middle class secular Jews. Both Israeli Arabs and strictly Orthodox Jews who were living in poverty took part in the protest, but these population groups were underrepresented (Grinberg, 2013).

Unlike in other countries, Israel's social protest did not erupt after an economic crisis, but after decades of neoliberal policy that had eroded the welfare state and increased inequality (Rosenhek & Shalev, 2016). It is noteworthy that Israel's social protest was not the first sign of citizens' dissent with economic policy. It followed two major professional strikes, one by social workers and the other by physicians. In March 2011, Israel's union of social workers organized this strike to demand higher salaries. Although there are conflicting views among Israel's social workers regarding the strike's outcomes, there is a consensus that it was unsuccessful (Livneh, 2013). This provided a basis for the reasonable assumption that social workers, as members of the middle and lower-middle socioeconomic classes (Nisanov, 2014), would participate in the social protest that summer. Another reasonable assumption was that social workers and people in poverty (who comprised a significant portion of their clientele) would be "on the same side" in this social protest. In other words, we argue that the social protest was an opportunity for social workers and their impoverished clients to fight together, as citizens, to change socioeconomic policy and to improve their economic standing.

This study explored social workers' experiences of the social protest and the integration of these experiences in their practice with welfare service users. In addition, due to the ongoing discussions within the academia and in various public contexts in Israel regarding the 2011 protest (e.g., Ben Tzur & Portugali, 2012; Helman, 2023), we were curious to find out whether and how the experiences of the social protest projected onto the social workers experiences of working with population in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy that, despite the government having taken certain steps designed to cope with the public criticism, the neoliberal socioeconomic policy continued, thus perpetuating the impoverishment of the welfare system (Ben Tzur & Portugali, 2012; Helman, 2023). Even amid the ongoing discourse surrounding the implications of this policy, the government did not change its policy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Helman, 2023). For example, On September 22, 2020, Prof. Avi Simhon, the Israeli Prime Minister's economic advisor,

declared that the poor were least affected by the COVID-19 crisis because they received a subsistence allowance from the National Insurance Institute (NII). Many economists criticized this declaration, using Ministry of Welfare data. However, the economists' criticism was not accompanied by social workers voices (Shamai et al., 2021).

**Social Protest and the Social Work Profession under Neoliberal Policy**

Neoliberal policy has eroded the welfare state and has provided an ideological rationale for its systematic dissolution (Dominelli, 2021; Feldman & Greve, 2020; Ife et al., 2022; Ornellas et al., 2020). More specifically, the state's withdrawal of social protection for its citizens, particularly those vulnerable groups who could not function according to the market rule, caused significant growth in inequality (Dominelli, 2021; Feldman & Greve, 2020). In Israel, this erosion has included reduced state responsibility, privatization of services, and extensive cuts in welfare budgets (Bracha-Sadowitz et al., 2023). All these have undermined social service providers' ability to address many of their clients' needs. In numerous Western countries, the prevalent neoliberal discourse regarding welfare emphasizes individual and family responsibility for promoting and maintaining human welfare. It views the welfare state and its policies as creating dependency among people in need, who are not then held responsible for their own financial position (Doron, 2008; Powell, 2001). Thus, if social workers perceive themselves as responsible for populations in poverty, they need to confront the neoliberal discourse to reaffirm public responsibility for poverty and for their clients' well-being (Ife et al., 2022).

The neoliberal orientation perceives personal difficulties as medical or psychological problems while ignoring the impact of the way social context is constructed by those in power. This neoliberal orientation had a significant impact in the development of critical and radical social work approaches (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Ife et al., 2022). These critical and radical approaches to social work claim that the use of medical or psychological models will result in services that oppress the disadvantaged. They hold that by adopting the neoliberal orientation and its accompanying practice, social workers play into the hands of policymakers who are in power and advocate for neoliberal welfare policy. Critical and radical approaches raise substantive questions regarding the social work profession's conflict of loyalties—to clients or to employers who implement neoliberal policy. This conflict of loyalties poses a theoretical and professional challenge. It creates tension that forms the basis for redefining the terms of social work by placing emphasis on the meaning and practice of social activism, be it institutional or extra-institutional, consensual, or confrontational (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Ife et al., 2022; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014).

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) defines social work as including a commitment to social change and to the values of social and distributive justice. Under this definition, social workers are expected to be agents of social change and to promote human welfare. One way to promote human welfare is to engage in social and political activism (IFSW, 2014). Various studies pointed to the increasing number of social workers who have engaged in policy practice (e.g., Strier & Feldman, 2017; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014). However, there is a significant difference between policy practice and social and political activism. While policy practice is implemented mainly through joint work with official municipal and parliamentary committees, where social workers try to maneuver between actual socioeconomic policy and human welfare needs, the main characteristic of social activism is direct protest against the social policy that causes injustice and inequality for either large or small groups in society. Knowledge is lacking on social workers' role and contribution in the

social activism context, such as participation in social protest. Thus, the goal of the present study was to fill some of this lacuna by focusing on social workers' involvement in the social protest of 2011 in Israel. This study suggests that the social protest provided an opportunity for social workers, as members of the (lower) middle class, to engage in social activism through a joint struggle with disadvantaged populations. The main interest of the research was to learn whether and how social workers utilized this opportunity. The study questions were as follows:

1. In what ways did Israel's social workers participate in the social protest of summer 2011?

2. What were their attitudes toward the protest?

3. Did the protest create a basis for joint activities between social workers and clients in poverty?

4. Did the protest influence social workers' attitudes or the services they provide to clients in poverty?

In addition, we were curious to find out whether the protest was reflected, in any way, in social workers' activities with populations in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since we did not examine this aspect directly either during or after the pandemic, we based our analysis on the information given by clients in poverty regarding social workers' practice (Shamai et al., 2020; Lewin et al., 2023) and on the lack of response by social workers to the declaration made by the Prime Minister's economic advisor, which neglected the special needs of people in poverty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Method

The study was performed using a mixed methods approach, more specifically concurrent triangulation strategy (Battista & Torre, 2023). This strategy incorporates simultaneous quantitative and qualitative data collection. The quantitative and qualitative parts of the study were analyzed separately and were integrated in the last stage of interpretation and presentation of the findings. It is noteworthy that the two parts of the research were based on the same conceptualization and differed only in methodology. The use of this research design provided an opportunity to attain a wide and deep perspective of the topic under study, thus enhancing the validity and trustworthiness of the findings. Based on this methodological approach, the quantitative and qualitative methods are presented in tandem and are integrated in the findings and discussion sections.

## Sample and Sampling

Participants were recruited among social workers in three major cities in Israel: Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, and from two smaller localities: Nazareth (an Arab city) and Kiryat Shmona (a low-income peripheral Jewish town). All these localities had hosted significant activities related to the social protest, including public tent gatherings, demonstrations, and small group discussions regarding the country's social policy. After receiving approval from the university IRB (No. 167/13), the researchers contacted social services department directors, who approved recruitment of social workers to participate in the study. Social workers participated either in the quantitative or the qualitative part.


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### Quantitative Study

Four hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed in the social services departments. Only 160 (33%) social workers responded to these questionnaires, and three questionnaires were excluded from data analysis because many questions remained unanswered, leaving a sample size of 157. The relatively low response rate must be acknowledged, but the sample can still be considered valid because it represents Israeli society's diverse social groups, differentiated by nationality, religiosity, and gender. Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of social workers who responded to the survey. Most respondents were women (135, 87%), corresponding with the overall gender distribution among Israel's social workers (Bar-Zuri, 2004). Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 67 (M=42, SD=11.42, MD=39.5). A total of 124 (80%) identified as Jewish, 29 (19%) as Arab (Muslim, Christian, or Druze), and four (1%) as "other." Regarding level of religiosity, 52 (33%) identified as religious, 33 (21%) as traditional (partially observant), 67 (43%) as secular, and five (3%) gave no response. In terms of family income, 22 (17%) reported an income that accords with low socioeconomic status, 33 (25%) reported a lower-middle-class income, 58 (44%) reported a middle-class income, and the remainder, 19 (15%), reported an upper-middle-class income.

### Qualitative Study

The sample included 16 social workers. The sample size was based on the principle of saturation (Hennink & Caiser, 2022). The aim was to build a sample with maximum variation and to achieve a broad and in-depth understanding of social workers' experiences. Thus, the sample included participants from all the five cities; six were men and 10 were women; 13 were Jewish and three were Arab. Their professional experience ranged from 10 to 30 years.

## Measurement Tools and Data Collection

### Quantitative Study

The quantitative data in this study were collected by a questionnaire developed for the purpose of the current research. It included closed and open-ended questions and consisted of five focal areas:

1. Background questions on sociodemographic characteristics (e.g., gender, objective measures [income] and subjective measures of economic situation [good, average, bad], workplace, and job). 2. Social workers' attitudes toward the protest and its impact. This focal area included two parts. Part 1 centered on attitudes toward the protest and included four statements a) The social protest expressed my financial difficulties, b) In the social protest I realized that, as a social worker, I have somewhat similar difficulties to those of the poor population, c) I identified with the goals of the protest because it called for social justice for people in distress, d) The protest inspired me to undertake activities to demand social justice. Each statement was graded on a 3-point scale: agree, partly agree, and disagree. Cronbach's alpha of the three items was 0.74. Part 2 centered on social workers' attitudes toward the impact of the protest and included three items: a) The social protest strengthened people in poverty; b) The social protest improved social workers' attitudes toward people in poverty, c) Services provided to clients living in poverty improved following the protest. 3. The third focal area addressed participation in the social protest (e.g., Did you participate in the protest? yes/no. If you answered yes, in what ways? [multiple choices provided]. If not, why not? [multiple choices provided]). 4. The fourth focal area referred to professional activities in the

social services departments (the workplace) related to the protest. This area included two parts (e.g., formal activities and discussions during staff meetings; informal activities and discussions among workers. 5. The fifth focal area was cooperation with clients during the protest (questions regarding various activities with clients during the protest, such as bringing up the issue during interventions). Also, the extent to which the social services department supported workers' activism in the social protest (e.g., formal activities, such as discussions in staff meetings about the social protest and about the activities of the workers in it. Informal activities, such as discussions among workers).

Social workers submitted their completed questionnaires to the department secretary in sealed envelopes, to ensure privacy. The researchers collected the envelopes about 1 month after distribution. Data were collected during September–December 2014.

### Qualitative Study

Data were collected during September–December 2014, through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by trained interviewers. Interviews lasted approximately 1–1.5 hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Following a brief explanation of the general research aims, the interviewer reconfirmed that all participants agreed to participate in the study on a voluntary basis, and formal consent was obtained. The interviews addressed a range of topics, including: 1) ways and means of participating in the social protest and its impact on social workers, 2) general thoughts about the importance of social protests focusing on socioeconomic issues, 3) formal and informal discussions with colleagues, regarding the social protest, during and after the protest, 4) joint activities with clients in poverty, and 5) the impact of the protest on attitudes toward and services provided to clients in poverty.

## Data Analysis

### Quantitative Study

Survey data were analyzed through primarily descriptive statistical methods, using SPSS v23.

### Qualitative Study

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin (2015), consisting of the following stages:

### Open Coding

In this stage, each transcript was read independently by two researchers who made notes alongside the text to capture and identify the initial units of meaning (categories) that emerged from the data (e.g., "the relationships with clients in poverty during the social protest;" "conflict with the municipal authorities regarding the provision of help to people on strike"). After their independent analyses, the researchers compared the categories that had emerged and discussed the cases in which they perceived meanings differently. The rare cases over which they could not resolve their disagreement were presented to a third researcher for a final decision.

### Axial Coding

Relationships between categories, by context and content, were identified and organized into themes. For example, the categories, "the relationships with clients in poverty during the social protest," and "the distance between workers and clients," were integrated into a theme titled "Not on the same side of the table: Relationships between social workers and clients during and after the protest."

### Integration

Interconnections among themes were identified to provide a framework for the research questions.

## Findings

The findings of the qualitative and quantitative studies supplement each other and are presented in tandem. First, each qualitative finding is presented and then either validated or contrasted with the quantitative findings. Two themes emerged from the data: 1) Perception, attitude, and participation in the protest. This theme answers the first two questions raised in the study: In what ways did Israeli social workers participate in the social protest of summer 2011? What were their attitudes toward the protest? 2) Not on the same side of the table: Relationships between social workers and clients during and after the protest. This theme answers the study's other two questions: Did the protest create a basis for joint activities between social workers and clients in poverty? Did the protest influence social workers' attitudes or the services they provide to clients in poverty? The fifth question, focusing on the reflection of protest on attitude and help provided to people in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed separately, based on the study by Shamai et al. (2021).

### Perception, Attitude, and Participation in the Protest

All participants in the qualitative part of the study claimed to agree with the goals of the protest because Israel's socioeconomic policy consistently undermines the welfare state. The consensus in this regard is illustrated by the following examples: "The social protest is completely justifiable given the injustice created by social and economic policy . . . and I fully supported it" and "I have been thinking that Israel's socioeconomic policy was destroying the welfare state; I think the protest was overdue." The quantitative findings, presented in Table 1 (Part 1), are consistent with the qualitative findings.

Table 1: Social Workers' Attitudes Toward the Protest and Its Impact (N=156)

| **Part 1: Attitudes towards the protest** | **Complete agreement** | **Partial agreement** | **Disagreement** | **Total (n)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. The protest expressed financial difficulties that were also relevant to social workers | 27 % (40) | 60% (87) | 13% (19) | 146 |
| 2. The protest highlighted similarities in financial hardship between social workers and people living in poverty | 28% (40) | 51% (74) | 21% (30) | 144 |
| 3. I identified with the protest's goals because it calls for social justice for people in distress. | 56% (85) | 34% (52) | 9% (14) | 151 |
| 4. The protest inspired social workers to undertake activities demanding social justice | 11% (16) | 47% (67) | 42% (59) | 142 |
| **Part 2: Attitudes toward the protest's impact** | | | | |
| 1. The protest strengthened people in poverty | 4.6% (7) 5% | 37.7% (57)38% | 57.6% (87) 58% | 151[1] |
| 2. The protest improved social workers' attitudes toward people in poverty | 3% (4) | 29% (40) | 68% (93) | 137 |
| 3. Services provided to clients in poverty improved following the protest | 14.4% (22)14% | 41.4% (63)41% | 44 % (67) | 155[2] |

Table 1 (Part 1) shows that the majority of participants (87%) agreed (either completely or at least partially) that the social protest expressed their financial difficulties (item 1) and that it called their attention to the financial hardship common to them and people in poverty (79%; item 3). The majority also identified with the protest because it called for social justice for people in financial distress (90%; item 2).

[1] The percentages do not sum up to 100% due to rounding error.

[2] The percentages do not sum up to 100% due to rounding error.

Despite agreement with and support for the social protest, most of the social workers (58%) were not inspired to undertake activities demanding social justice, even though they are considered an integral part of social work (Craig, 2002; Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Ife et al., 2022; Strier & Binyamin, 2010, see Table 1, Part 1, item 4). This was expressed by the low rates of participation in the protest activities, as presented in Table 2. Table 2 shows that only 45.8% (n=70) of social workers participated in the social protest.

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of Forms of Participation and Reasons for Not Participating in the Protest

| **Participation in Social Protest** | **%** | **n** |
|---|---|---|
| Participated in the social protest | 46% | 156 |
| **Reasons for Not Participating** | | |
| Personal reasons | 41 % | 36 |
| Ideological reasons | 7% | 6 |
| Organizational reasons | 5% | 4 |
| Other reasons | 47% | 41 |
| Total (non-participation in protest) | 100% | *N= 87* |

The most common response to explain non-participation (47%, n=41) was "personal reasons," such as, "There were not many activities near our area" and "I was a young mother during the social protest." Only 8% (n=7) gave "ideological reasons" for not participating, such as, "I did not feel as though I wanted to be there" and "Religious social workers did not participate in the protest because they support the right-wing government and its policies on negotiations with the Palestinians, and they felt that the protest was against the government."

Interesting observations were voiced by Israeli Arab social workers, who drew connections between the social protest and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. As Ms. H. commented: "Usually, I am very active politically and I come from an active family. However, I did not take part in the protest since it did not take into consideration political issues related to the Palestinians and the occupation." This quote sheds light on the sense of exclusion and alienation Israeli-Arab social workers experienced during the protest. It is important to note that the organizers of the social protest intentionally avoided mentioning the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict. They were concerned that any reference to this divisive topic would reframe the protest as a left-wing attempt to oppose government policy and would reduce the number of participants (Ram & Flic, 2017; Rosenhek & Shalev, 2016).

An even more complex picture emerged from the reasons given for participation in the protest as personal or professional. Table 3 shows that only 29% (n=20) of those who participated (N=70) were motivated by professional commitments. The majority (71%, n=50) joined the

protest because of personal reasons. Modes of participation did not differ between those who took part on a personal basis and those who participated because of professional requirements. An additional quantitative analysis revealed that social workers who participated in the protest reported a higher degree of identification with the cause than those who did not participate ($t=2.51$, $p<.01$).

Table 3: Forms of Participation among Social Workers Who Participated in the Protest

| **Forms of Participation in the Social Protest** | **Personal** | **Professional** |
|---|---|---|
| Joined demonstrations (%) | 67% | 33% |
| (n) | (32) | (16) |
| Visited tents | 69% | 31% |
| (n) | (20) | (9) |
| Conversations | 73% | 27% |
| (n) | (27) | (10) |
| Attended lectures and discussions | 38% | 62% |
| (n) | (3) | (5) |
| Total | 71% | 29% |
| (n) | (50) | (20) |

Many participants justified social workers' limited participation in the protest by claiming that, as employees of the state or of the municipal authority, they were not permitted to organize activities or to protest under their professional title. However, some participants criticized this position and claimed that "social workers should have been at the forefront of the protest and among its leaders." Some further argued that, by acting in accordance with neoliberal welfare policy, social workers "… are often used as a fig leaf for implementing anti-social policies." This type of criticism may point to tensions that developed during the

social protest, when social workers' practice with their clients was in conflict with professional social work values.

Some participants even reported having violated restrictions imposed by their employers because they perceived the protest as a significant action that was consistent with social work goals and values. This is illustrated by the following description by Ms. M.:

> I am an employee of the municipal authority and decided to help the protesters . . . So, after work hours, I went as a social worker to find out whether I could help. As a lone social worker, I couldn't help much, but showing professional support was important to me.

Interestingly, according to some participants, the municipal authority helped the protesters "by supplying various services." Ms. D. described this help:

> The municipal authority understood that it wouldn't help to put up restrictions and to send police to pull down the tents . . . I was asked to meet with the organizers to find out how we could help them . . . First, we put chemical toilets in the tent area and later, I asked them to join us in the group that was discussing welfare issues.

Another interesting finding was the lack of formal activities within the social services departments. In the qualitative interviews, several participants said that the protest was hardly discussed during staff meetings:

> "We did not have even one staff meeting that discussed the social protest." "We had one staff meeting about the protest. People shared their opinions and attitudes . . . but since we were not allowed to get organized together as social workers, nothing was planned or decided."

The quantitative results verified this point. As can be seen in Table 4, only 37% of participants mentioned a staff meeting that focused on the protest. Most of the activities in the departments were informal, as described in the qualitative interviews:

> "All the discussions and debates regarding the protest and the way it was organized took place through informal discussions among the workers . . . during short breaks in the middle of work" and were verified in the quantitative results by 77% of participants.

Based on these findings, it can be argued that social workers did not use the social protest as a tool either for actively supporting social change or for raising colleagues' awareness of their professional commitment to promoting human welfare.

Table 4: Activities in workplace (N=156)

| **Activities in Workplace** | **%** | **n** |
|---|---|---|
| Informal discussions between workers | 77% | 121 |
| Official activities: staff meetings | 37% | 58 |
| Discussions with clients in poverty | 16% | 22 |

Although the interviews took place 3 years after the social protest, it was still being discussed in the media and in the political arena and was still part of the formal and informal discourse. Thus, it was not surprising that most of our participants addressed the achievements of the protest. The participants were divided when referring to social-policy changes that had occurred as a result of the protest. Some of them claimed that no changes had been made and that the social protest had failed to create an impact on the government's socioeconomic policy, as remarked on by Ms. K.: "The social protest changed nothing …." Another group claimed that it was too early to evaluate the outcomes of the protest because political changes usually take time. Others claimed that the protest publicized socioeconomic issues, including poverty, and that it had become part of the social discourse in Israeli society also among politicians. Mr. D. integrated the two claims, as follows:

> The protest put socioeconomic issues on the political agenda. For the time being, we can't see concrete changes, but it is a process that might take longer. However, it was clear that the government would respond to socioeconomic issues, only if the people gather together and make demands.

In sum, based on the findings, the answer to the first two questions of the study (In what ways did Israeli social workers participate in the social protest of summer 2011? What were their attitudes toward the protest?) is somewhat complicated. Although the majority of the participants identified with the protest's goals, actual participation in the protest activities was relatively low on both personal and professional levels. Social workers justified the absence of organized activity by referring to state and local authority regulations. This contradiction between social work values and organizational restrictions highlights a tension that the authors of this article argue is at the core of the social work profession and will be discussed further on.

**Not on the Same Side of the Table: Relationships Between Social Workers and Clients During and After the Protest**

This theme focused on the relationships between clients in poverty and social workers, during and after the social protest. Characterizations of the client–social worker relationships during the social protest can be placed along a continuum. At one end, participants claimed that, during the protest, boundaries between clients and social workers were broken down, but in a positive way: "We were on the same level and could look at each other from the same vantage point." At the other end were those who reported some sense of cooperation, but that some distance remained: "The boundaries between social workers and clients were significantly less pronounced during the protest, but I can't say that we are on the same side of the table."

In the middle of the continuum were descriptions that differentiated between the two time points: during the protest, there was a sense of togetherness that reduced some social workers' tendency to criticize clients living in poverty. After the protest, this sense of togetherness vanished, as expressed in the following description by Mr. D.:

> Social work practice often creates an unequal position between social workers and clients. During the protest, there was a sense of equality … I am not sure how long it lasted . . . Sometimes, social workers tend to criticize clients in poverty. I hope that the protest led to some changes in this behavior. You know that the financial status of many social workers is very close to poverty, and I hope that the protest exposed this situation and helped the workers to be more tolerant toward populations living in poverty.

The results of the quantitative study reflect Mr. D.'s description. Table 1 (Part 2) presents the impact of the protest on social workers' attitudes regarding clients in poverty. As can be seen, most social workers did not attribute to the protest any changes in their attitude and/or services provided to clients in poverty. In the words of one participant: "… the service provided to the majority of clients in poverty and the relations with them had been good before the protest and remain good after." However, Mr. G., representing the minority, claimed as follows:

> There is no change in the services given to clients living in poverty following the protest. Social workers and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services do not have the tools to deal with poverty. Only a change in the country's entire socioeconomic system can change the way poverty is addressed.

One social worker specifically criticized clients living in poverty. According to qualitative methodology, even the voice of one participant may shed light on the phenomenon under study; hence the presentation of Ms. K's words here:

> "Many people living in poverty don't manage their expenses well… Even in the tents, it was like a vacation for them; they got food… They took advantage of the social protest."

An additional issue that was raised in the qualitative interviews and was examined in the quantitative survey referred to discussions about the social protest between social workers and their clients in poverty. It was found that the majority of social workers (114, 83%) had not discussed the social protest with their clients in poverty, even though they reported knowing that their clients in poverty had taken part (67, 43%). A chi square test showed that social workers who had participated in the protest discussed it with their clients more than social workers who had not participated ($x2=18.37$, $p<.001$). According to the qualitative findings, discussions about the protest can be placed on a continuum; one end presents social workers who discussed the goals of the protest with their clients and even encouraged them to participate and the other end presents social workers who did not discuss the protest with their clients. The latter raised the issue of their clients' characteristics to justify neglecting the issue. For example, they did not discuss the protest with strictly Orthodox Jewish or Israeli Arab clients because these groups, despite their high poverty rates, had low rates of participation in the protest. In effect, by avoiding discussion of the protest, social workers accepted these marginalized groups' sense of alienation and thereby missed an opportunity to encourage members of these communities to engage in social activism and to influence socioeconomic policy. A small number of social workers explained the lack of discussion of

the protest with their clients by generalizing the prohibition to participate in political activities as employees of the state or municipal authorities. Sessions with clients came under this category because they took place in official state or municipal settings.

In sum, based on the findings, the answers to the third and fourth study questions (Did the protest create a basis for joint activities between social workers and clients in poverty? Did the protest influence social workers' attitudes or the services they provide to clients in poverty?) are as follows: The participants presented a variety of perceptions toward activities undertaken with clients in poverty during the protest. Nonetheless, the general impression that emerges is that the opportunity to operate as equals, in pursuit of shared personal and professional goals, was not translated into action.

**Was the social protest of 2011 reflected in social workers' practices with populations in poverty during the COVID 19 pandemic?**

As to the question of whether the social workers' experiences and activities during the social protest were reflected, in any way, in their activities with populations in poverty during the pandemic, we based our findings on an additional study (Lewin et al., 2023; Shamai et al., 2021). The study focused on the impact, on people in poverty, of the two lockdowns in Israel during the COVID-19 pandemic, including the type of help received and satisfaction with their contact with social workers. In addition, we asked social workers from different social services departments regarding the type of help they had provided to people in poverty during the two lockdowns (Shamai et al., 2021; Lewin et al., 2023). However, we did not ask the social workers directly whether their attitudes and activities had been influenced by the social protest of 2011. Nevertheless, they gave clear answers regarding the type of help provided. Although the 40 social workers who participated in the qualitative part of the study were employed in different social services departments, their descriptions of interventions with people living in poverty were very similar at the microlevel, as can be seen in the following quote: "We were instructed to initiate telephone contact every day with several families who were our clients, mainly families living in poverty, and to examine their needs during the lockdown and to support them during the crisis." Of the 85 social workers who took part in the quantitative study, 97.5% reported having followed this line of intervention. The social workers' reports regarding their contact with people in poverty revealed that they perceived the deterioration in the economic situation and mental state of people living in poverty as having resulted from the pandemic, as well as from difficulties in parenthood, particularly during the lockdowns. This finding was consistent with reports from clients living in poverty. Most of the participants living in poverty indicated that they were satisfied with instrumental (mostly food) and mental help they received from social workers, particularly during the first lockdown (April–May 2020). Although the level of satisfaction dropped in the second lockdown (September 2020), it was still sufficient (Lewin et al., 2023). However, in analyzing the components of help as described by the people living in poverty and by the social workers, the type of help provided can be defined mainly as "salvation" or "charity." The demand for socioeconomic policy based on welfare-state principles, as was the main goal of the social protest, was not voiced by social workers, particularly in response to the declaration by the Prime Minister's economic advisor, which neglected the special needs of people in poverty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Discussion

Social workers' involvement in the protest of summer 2011 has not been studied extensively (Grodofsky & Malaros, 2016). The current study set out to fill this gap by examining social workers' participation in and attitudes toward the social protest of summer 2011, which took place in the context of a neoliberal regime. It is noteworthy that, although the study refers to a protest that took place 10 years previously, the neoliberal socioeconomic policies that sparked it continue to be prevalent in most Western countries, where social workers still have to cope with their implications. Neoliberal policy has eroded the welfare state, reduced state responsibility, privatized services, and implemented extensive cuts in the welfare system creating constant challenges to social workers (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Gray et al., 2015; Ife et al., 2022; Schram, 2015). Some essential deficiencies of neoliberal socioeconomic principles were emphasized particularly during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which required more mutual responsibility between the state and its citizens, including those with low socioeconomic status.

The majority of social workers who participated in this study did not take part in the social protest—neither on the basis of professional or organizational commitment nor as members of the socioeconomic middle class. Despite the low rate of participation, most social workers in the study supported the protest's goals because they considered them relevant to their own financial situation and consistent with their values of social justice. However, most social workers responded that they were not integrating issues related to the social protest into their professional work. Furthermore, they had not seized the opportunity presented by the protest to be on the same side as their clients who were living in poverty. Two main questions arise from these findings: The first centers on the reason for the low rate of participation in the social protest. The second focuses on the reason for not seizing this opportunity to engage in joint social action with clients in poverty. These questions were addressed from two viewpoints: the professional and the personal.

From the professional perspective, one might argue that by refraining from organized professional participation, social workers were ignoring one of the basic commitments of the profession, namely the struggle for social justice (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022). This argument is particularly significant given the ongoing discourse of the past 2 decades calling for a shift in focus of social work interventions from micro and mezzo to the macro level and for participation in social action aimed at promoting social justice (Dominelli, 2021; Fook, 2022; Koeske et al., 2005). Although this discourse seems reasonable and consistent with social work goals, values, and ethics, most social workers continue to implement micro- and mezzo-centered practices (Fook, 2022; Weiss-Gal & Gal, 2014). Some social work researchers and theoreticians explain this practice as an outcome of the focus of social work education (Krumer-Nevo & Barak, 2007). However, the findings of this study indicate that the causes might be rooted also in the structure of many organizations that employ social workers.

Most organizations that employ social workers—and all departments of social services in Israel—belong to various state or municipal institutions. Thus, participation in a social protest that criticizes the policy implemented by their institutions is inherently conflictual and politically charged. Criticism of the government's socioeconomic policy and demands to change this policy might be perceived by social workers' employers (i.e., the government or municipal authorities) as action against them. Social workers might feel that taking such action might jeopardize their status or even their jobs. Indeed, most of the participants

reported that there had been no official activities related to the social protest within social services departments, and some even claimed that their directors had asked them not to join the social protest on a professional basis. Thus, social workers are caught between their professional commitment to champion the rights of their clients in poverty and their commitment to serve, represent, and promote current social policy as implemented by the institutions that employ them. Following their training, social workers may experience this tension as cognitive dissonance and may treat it as emotional stress rather than recognizing it as a more systemic tension inherent to their profession.

This tension in professional commitments, however, does not explain why so few participants joined the social protest on a personal level. One explanation centers on the specific timing of the social protest in Israel—4 months after the failed social workers' strike, which had an emotional impact on many social workers and was identified as a traumatic experience (Livneh, 2013). Thus, non-participation in the social protest may have been an act of self-protection against further disappointment, possibly reflecting social workers' disempowerment.

The second question of why social workers did not seize the opportunity to act jointly with clients in poverty is more complicated and may require further research. This study worked on the basic assumption that social workers' perceptions, attitudes, and feelings toward poverty, in general, and specifically toward people in poverty, are shaped within their social context (Pierce et al., 2014; Gergen, 2001, 2009). Accordingly, social workers are nested within the social context of Israel and are influenced by current neoliberal public discourse that places the blame on people in poverty for their socioeconomic status (Feldman & Greve, 2022; Bracha-Sadowitz et al., 2023; Fook, 2022; Strier & Binyamin, 2010). This might also explain why social workers did not use the COVID-19 crisis to fight for or, at least, to call for a change in socioeconomic policy to reflect welfare state principles. A reasonable question is how this social discourse affects social workers' perceptions and attitudes toward poverty and how these perceptions and attitudes are then manifested in their encounters with people in poverty.

Is it possible that, despite their professional socialization, social workers do believe, on an undeclared level, that people in poverty are somehow responsible for their socioeconomic situation? Is it also possible that social workers, who belong to the lower or middle socioeconomic classes, are afraid of sinking into poverty themselves and wish to disassociate themselves from people in poverty? This could explain why they avoided joint activities with clients in poverty during the social protest. In other words, aligning themselves with clients in poverty may have unconsciously created a sense of anxiety among low-income social workers. These questions call for further studies on the encounter between social workers and people in poverty, both within and beyond the professional setting, such as in the context of the social protest.

**Limitations**

The current study has two main limitations. The first relates to the timing of data collection, 2 years after the social protest. The passage of time might, on one hand, have shaped perceptions of the events and, on the other hand, may have provided participants with a broader perspective and sharper conception of the experience. The second limitation stems from Israel's unique social context and its specific political, social, and historical attributes. Although parallel social protests in other countries reflected the impact of neoliberal social

policy as well, each country has its specific, characteristic way of implementing neoliberalism, and their conditions for the employment of social workers vary as well.

## Implications and Conclusion

Social workers must maintain loyalty to their professional values and commitments, as well as to their employing organizations, which are often run by governments or municipal authorities whose policies lead to social injustice. This complex situation leaves social workers in a no-win situation and, possibly, undermines any inclination they might have toward involvement in social or political action aimed at changing social policy. Additionally, it may distance social workers from populations in poverty unless their professional roles are clearly defined, and a hierarchical relationship is established. Thus, it is important to create a discourse within social workers' unions to clarify this issue and to guide social workers who feel trapped between their professional commitments and their employers' regulations. Social services directors need to be aware of the complexities and must seek ways of enabling social workers to fight for social justice in a manner suited to the social context in which the service operates. One way to do this is to maintain a dialogue with social work employers regarding professional values and commitments. Another way could be to change this regulation which, in effect, restricts social workers from participating in political activities. In addition, social work educators need to draw attention to this complexity and discuss its implications, including the threat to future employment.

This study demonstrates the conflict facing social workers in their commitment to professional values and to their roles as representatives of government and municipal authorities. This conflict may be an inherent strain for social workers, in general, and is reinforced within the context of neoliberal social policy and the welfare cuts it entails. Moreover, by focusing on the context of social protest, this study has revealed how professional commitment depoliticizes the very same people who could potentially be agents of change. Nonetheless, the following questions are posed in conclusion: If nearly 10,000 social workers had participated in the protest, would the state and municipal authorities have fired them? Or if social workers had criticized the socioeconomic policy, highlighting its deficiencies and damages during the pandemic, would they have been fired? One may speculate that the answer to the question is negative; first, because there is power in numbers and second, because of the crucial nature of social workers' work, even in the context of a shrinking welfare state under a neoliberal welfare regime. Future studies are needed to understand social workers' attitudes and participation in social protests in other social and cultural contexts and in other neoliberal welfare regimes. In addition, further research is necessary to expand the knowledge regarding situations that create conflicts of loyalty between social work values and workplace demands, as most social workers are employed by state and local authorities that oppose protests that undermine their policies.

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