

Social Work Around the World: Israel

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hi, and welcome to the second episode of the new mini-series, *Social Work From Around the World*, part of The Social Work Community podcast. I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, careers editor here at Community Care. We continue the conversation with Yohai Hakak, senior social work lecturer and MSc Social Work Lead at Brunel University, London, and part of the BASW diaspora social workers' special interest group. Along with his social work students, Yohai is conducting research on the migration of social workers to and from the UK, and you can hear about this in the previous episode. So do go back and have a listen.

We begin this episode with him talking about his PhD, and what working in Israel was like as a mental health social worker. So let's pick up where we left off. [0:00:49.3]

Yohai Hakak: My own research dealt with a very particular community, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish religious community, who in a way made an internal migration within the society. So, the time where I...during which I was studying was the time in which thousands of these young, Jewish, Ultra-Orthodox men were sort of leaving religious seminaries. There was a spike in the number of young, ultra-Orthodox men who were considered dropouts.

Also, in order to deal with that, there was a set range of other frameworks that were attempting to absorb them. So, some of these were special higher education settings that were set up just for these people. There were some others. There was a sort of, like an army training course for these particular people.

Basically, these new frameworks were based on secular, modern ideas, whereas they came – after often many, many years, beyond just high school years – of studying within a religious seminary which focuses solely on religious stakes.

So, what I'm trying to say is that these people were migrating from one cultural context, that it's a very sort of segregated world, religious world, that really puts a lot of emphasis on trying to avoid or minimise interaction with the secular world.

So these men were moving from that particular, very closed world to a very different world. In that respect they had to almost...it was a kind of migration, internal migration, but culturally a very sharp migration. And they had to try and adjust to that.

The things that I was very much aware of the cultural aspects of migration. And this is how I tried to observe my own experience.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: You grew up and studied and practised social work in Israel. How is social work different there compared to the UK? [0:03:22.1]

Yohai Hakak: It's different. There are some similarities. So, Israel sort of adopted the British welfare state in certain ways. So, there is still sort of a public health system and public education system. So, you know, you don't need...you pay very little for your healthcare, which is phenomenal and...

But social workers' salaries are really low. Very, very low. It's really hard to sort of make a living. The social work as a profession, I think, is more sort of influenced by the American model, rather than sort of the British model. And what I mean by that is that there is more emphasis on sort of clinical, therapeutic skills...

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay.

Yohai Hakak: ...as part of your training. And many more social workers...also, because of the difficult financial circumstances of social workers employed by the state, many of them move into psychotherapy or do combine some kind of social work practice with psychotherapy or family therapy work that they do privately.

So, you know, this is one kind of difference. I think there is much less intervention, much less of this top-down intervention, for all kinds of reasons. I think, yeah, there's much less willingness, I think, by the average person to follow endless procedures and regulations and the bureaucratic, yeah, procedures. So there is much less of that. Much more emphasis on community and group work.

So, you know, the differences are in many different areas.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And what are the kind of things you used to come across? You know, for example here we see a lot of domestic abuse, which is prevalent in, I think across the country domestic abuse is one of the biggest factors. What kind of things came up when you were working there? [0:05:51.2]

Yohai Hakak: Well, I worked as a mental health social worker in a...started in a psychiatric hospital. I don't think that generally there are vast differences. Domestic violence is definitely an issue. You know, you need to remember that Israel is a country that is in sort of a constant state of lots of internal tensions, lots of internal tensions. So, this psychiatric hospital that I worked in – and this was, you need to remember this was in the mid-nineties, so quite a while back – but it had...it was sort of outside Jerusalem and the population they had in it were Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Palestinians from the area, and what we call Mizrahi Jews. So Jews originating from Arab countries. And there is a real correlation between, well, all of those groups are socioeconomically marginalised. So there are, you know, clear correlations between those issues and mental health and wellbeing. And it's very...in some ways there are similarities to the UK. So on the one hand these were the population of the service users. But in terms of the staff, then you would see at the top of the hierarchy – so the psychiatrists and the psychologists – were what we call Ashkenazi Jews, so Jews from western, sort of European origin. And well, all the others were also represented. So Mizrahi Jews were part

of the staff members, and Palestinians would also be there. Usually nurses or cleaners. It's a strange world sociologically.

But you've learnt a lot. I learnt a lot. It was a really interesting world. But you know, just to maybe sum it up, this hierarchy, you know. One of the things that I remember very clearly was how in this...so I worked in this hospital with long-term patients, people for whom the hospital became really their home for many, many years. It was really a very old-fashioned institution, unfortunately, and people had very little privacy. So in their room they had a tiny little cabinet with all their belongings. And it was...in that respect, well, quite difficult.

But every Friday we...you know that Jews hold, like, a meal on Friday to receive the Sabbath.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah.

Yohai Hakak:

So, regardless of the fact that there were lots of Palestinians there, we held this...like a session with everyone sitting in a group, all the service users that were at the time in the unit. This was a weekly ritual event, in which they would all sing Jewish Ashkenazi Zionist songs! Which...all of these groups who were there couldn't be further away from these songs. But this is what they sang. So you know, Palestinians, ultra-Orthodox Jews and Mizrahi Jews, these songs...none of these songs ever spoke to them but they were actually taught to sing Ashkenazi Zionist songs. And I started introducing a whole new range of songs.

I did all kinds of other things. So for example, because I worked as a journalist at that time parallel to...so I worked part-time in the hospital and I worked as a journalist. So I had some connections with local newspapers. And I arranged, like I created a library and got donations. But I also got local newspapers to donate newspapers. So I got religious, Ultra-Orthodox newspapers and some Palestinian newspapers. And this didn't come up very easily. So it was sort of...made people raise their eyebrows. But at the time my role in the newspaper was I was writing about religion. And I was aware of how you can utilise people's religious beliefs and tendencies to therapy. In Israel there's quite a lot that has been written about that.

So I tried to do all kinds of things around that. There was like a rabbi who was very much involved in all kinds of therapeutic communities. And we wanted to set up like a prayer with him in the hospital for the...to wish or to pray for the healing of those religious patients. And well, this has really brought me to the attention of the head psychiatrist. And I was severely told off for trying to...what was the...? I'm trying to collaborate with the psychotic parts in the psyche of the religious patients because God forbid they should pray for their healing and...I don't know. I don't know how relevant all of this is.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

What was it like working in a place like Jerusalem where there's instability politically and security-wise? Did that affect how you practice social work? [0:12:09.6]

Yohai Hakak:

I left Israel in 2007. I worked as a social worker until 2004. Initially I started in a psychiatric hospital. I worked there for two years. For two years at the Beit Amin psychiatric hospital. But then I worked for six

more years in an outpatient clinic that was mainly focused on working with long-term mental health service users who were army veterans. And quite a few of them had PTSD or had family members who died. So they were the children of veterans or...most of them were themselves just veterans who had difficult experiences during their service.

So in that respect, well yeah, I was affected. Most of these people were Mizrahi Jews, so again Jews descending from Arab countries, or their families or their parents came from Arab countries. And usually, as I mentioned, this group, which is the majority of Jewish people living in Israel, they are also, socioeconomically speaking, they are less privileged maybe. Let's say it this way. So there is some correlation between poverty and the development of all kinds of mental health problems, and we know that. [0:14:01.7]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

In this next section, Yohai explains the background of a paper he's published, showing how social workers in Israel are used to implement the segregation of Israel's Jewish and non-Jewish populations.

You wrote a research article in 2015 for *The Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, titled 'Battling against interfaith relations in Israel: religion, therapy and social services'. Why would social services get involved in an interfaith relationship? [0:14:29.7]

Yohai Hakak:

Israel as a country is very interested and concerned to maintain this Jewish majority. So there's a lot of attention to the demographic situation or to demography. So, one of the things that Jewish organisations, well, including the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, are very concerned with is intermarriages between Jews and Arabs. Could be sort of Palestinians who are either Muslims or Christians, but also other minority groups like Druze and Bedouins.

So, there's a lot of growing focus on this issue. Because of the complete separation in educational systems and in places where people live, for many years there were very, very few such couples. But in the last decade there are just a few more.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Why would that be the case? [0:15:47.2]

Yohai Hakak:

This is due to, well, the fact that it's a very small country and people just meet. Particularly what's happening is that Palestinian men, or men from other minority groups, move or go to work often in sort of Jewish cities, and they meet Jewish women and relationships develop.

Initially I thought that only religious organisations saw that as a problem. But as I started sort of studying this, I realised that the state itself sees that as very problematic.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So how has this been implemented? [0:16:30.3]

Yohai Hakak:

So, the state agency for youth that is not in education or work or training – NEETs, the equivalent for that in Israel – there is a governmental department. And for many years it used to advertise what it would consider as the risk factors for this group. So you would

be considered at risk if you met these risk factors. And one of the key risk factors was associating with what we call in Hebrew 'nai muitim' so people from minority groups. If you associated with, in this case with people from these groups, you would be considered at risk.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

How is this linked to social work? [0:17:23.8]

Yohai Hakak:

Like any other country, the state often feels much more confident to intervene when we're talking about people from the lower socioeconomic sort of groups. They are much less likely to interfere in such relationships when we're talking about middle- or upper-class people.

Now, what I did in this study, I analysed many Israel Knessets, so Israeli parliament committee meetings that were held, and the discussions that were held on these issues. It was very clear that this issue comes very often. And so it comes up in the educational committee and they think, 'Well, maybe we can start educating children against that.' And then they realise that if you still want to be a democracy you can't do that 'cause, you know, people should have the freedom to choose, you know, who they fall in love with.

And then they think of...maybe it goes to a different committee, a legal committee. Maybe they can create laws against that. And this, of course, would also make Israel to be clearly undemocratic. So they also decided not to do that.

But then always they go back to the solution that social workers are an excellent way to resolve this problem because you can say, 'Well, we have no laws against it but in this case and in that case of this young woman and that woman and the other woman and the one after that, these women were very young and we couldn't really trust their emotional state and therefore we can't really trust their consent, their ability to really make an informed consent, and therefore we need to safeguard them.' And this safeguarding, on some occasions, includes quite harsh measures. You know, of sectioning them.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Sectioning for that. I mean, how many cases are we talking here? [0:19:50.1]

Yohai Hakak:

I don't know the exact numbers. But this was clearly discussed in these committee meetings. And there are intervention programmes funded by the government that the criteria for being able to go into these programmes are just what I described, those risk factors. So if you are associating with people from minority groups you are much more...you meet the criteria. Yeah. So all of those things were found, I found them, of course, very worrying. And that's the article.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Well, I don't really know what to say to that. It's shocking. I could speak to you all day about this but I think we should leave it there. It's been so insightful speaking to you, Yohai. Thanks so much for sharing your knowledge and experience with Community Care. [0:20:49.8]

Yohai Hakak:

Thank you inviting me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That was Yohai Hakak, talking about his experience living and working in Israel as a social worker. We have some really exciting episodes coming up in this series, including social workers from Australia, from India, South Africa, so do keep listening. If you want to keep up to date with all our podcasts then do follow us on wherever you're listening to this. And you can also check out the podcasts page on www.communitycare.co.uk.

That's it for now. See you next time.