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Engelberg Center For Children and Youth



Ministry of Social Affairs and Services
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Personal Services Division

Family Court Social Services – National Evaluation Study

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The study was initiated by the Research, Planning and Training Division in cooperation with the Personal Social Services Division, Individual and Family Services at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Services and funded with their assistance

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, public services have been developed all over the world including Israel to enable families entangled in legal battles to resolve their disputes outside of the courtroom. Such services have been set up alongside the family courts in response to the increasing awareness among jurists and social service agencies of the complexity and sensitivity of family conflicts and of the limitations of the legal system to cope with them. However, few studies have actually examined the outcomes of intervention by these services.

These Family Court Social Services (FCSS) have been operating free of charge in Israel for the past two decades. Their main function is to bring family disputes to a rapid and consensual conclusion through mediation. This study is the first to examine the outcomes of intervention by all the FCSS units in Israel from the clients' perspective. The study also sought to identify factors that may predict outcomes of FCSS intervention.

2. The Study

Study Goal

The study aims to evaluate the outcomes of intervention by the FCSS with regard to the clients' perception of the mediation process (intermediate outcome) and of reaching an agreement (final outcome), and identify predictors of these outcomes. An additional goal was to examine clients' satisfaction and the stability of the agreement, six months after the termination of the intervention at FCSS.

Study Population

The study population (3,980 clients from a total of 1,950 families) included families that:

- ◆ Were referred to the FCSS between November 2012 and July 2013
- ◆ Received treatment in the area of conflict management (intervention aimed at reaching agreement through mediation) or risk management (families with whom the focus of intervention was domestic violence). These were the majority (66%) of the FCSS clients.
- ◆ Had concluded their treatment at the FCSS about six months prior to the telephone survey.

Sample

A telephone survey was conducted among clients sampled from the study population, as described below:

- ◆ The clients had signed a consent form to participate in the study at the time of referral to the service.
- ◆ 30% of the FCSS clients who met the study criteria had intake forms. In order to be able to analyze important variables included in the intake forms, the study team endeavored to interview all the clients who had gone through the intake process and signed a consent form (445 clients). With regard to those without an intake form, a random sample of 215 clients was selected.

- ◆ The sample included a total of 660 clients, of whom 420 were actually interviewed in the telephone survey (293 with intake forms, 127 without). The response rate was 64%.
- ◆ Among the clients actually interviewed, there were cases where both spouses agreed to be interviewed and others where only one of them consented. In order to avoid giving too much weight to the characteristics of families in which both spouses were interviewed, it was decided to sample one of the couple randomly. The final sample size was 321 families (213 with intake and 108 without).

Study Instruments

- ◆ 9 background interviews: 4 with FCSS clients and 5 with FCSS staff at different levels
- ◆ A telephone survey of clients about six months after the conclusion of the intervention
- ◆ Information from the intake forms completed by the social workers at the beginning of the intervention (which were available for 213 of the 321 clients participating in the study)
- ◆ Administrative data from the FCSS computer system.

3. Main Findings

Trends in the Characteristics of the Total FCSS Client Population

The data in this section are based on the FCSS computerized information system from 2007 to 2013. A steady increase was observed in the number of families referred and the number of families who received assistance from the services during those years. No other changes were observed in the characteristics of the clients and the outcomes of the interventions examined.

Characteristics of the Study Population

The data in this section are based on the telephone survey with the clients and the intake form completed by the social workers.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics

- ◆ 48% of the clients were aged 26-40; a further 42% were 41-60.
- ◆ 93% were Jewish.
- ◆ 75% were born in Israel and 16% were immigrants who had arrived in Israel since 1990.
- ◆ 95% had at least 12 years of education and 30% had a college degree.
- ◆ 45% of the children in families treated at the FCSS were aged 0-6.

Client's Negotiation Tendency (Social Workers' Assessment)

- ◆ 60% of the clients were highly motivated to receive the service.
- ◆ 56% were considered to have personal characteristics conducive to dialogue.
- ◆ 79% were considered to have a high level of confidence in the caseworker.

Characteristics of the Dispute

- ◆ In 63% of the cases, the social workers estimated the level of conflict to be high.
- ◆ In 55% of the cases, the social workers considered the communication between the two sides to be aggressive and ineffective.
- ◆ 78% of the clients reported that they had experienced some form of violence from the other party in the dispute.
- ◆ 21% reported that they had experienced physical violence from the other party in the dispute.

Characteristics of the Intervention Process

- ◆ In 53% of the cases, the intervention addressed more than one aspect of the conflict (such as custody disputes, property disputes, domestic violence etc.).
- ◆ In 74% of the cases, a parental dispute was the focus of intervention, with regard to at least one of the following aspects: Custody, visitation arrangements and/or child support.
- ◆ In 50% of the cases, the intervention addressed domestic violence: in 12%, domestic violence was the focus of the intervention (or one of them) and for a further 38% it was reported that domestic violence was discussed with the FCSS social worker.
- ◆ 87% of the clients reported that the intervention included up to 3 meetings.

Outcomes of the Intervention

Intermediate Outcomes of the Intervention

- ◆ Most of the clients (73%) were highly satisfied with the service at FCSS, and 68% reported that they would recommend the service to others.
- ◆ In the literature, the client's positive perception of the mediation process (e.g., a good therapeutic alliance; significant contribution to improving the relationship) is considered a significant intermediate outcome. The following are some important results in this regard:
 - 73% of the clients reported that they had a good therapeutic alliance with the social worker to a great or very great extent.
 - There was no significant difference between men and women in the overall perception of the therapeutic alliance (good therapeutic alliance: 69% vs 76%, respectively). However, more women than men (80% vs. 68%, respectively) believed that the social worker was neutral to a great/very great extent.
 - 23% of the clients believed that the intervention had improved relationships between them and the other party in the conflict, with no significant difference between the men and women.

Final Outcome of the Intervention

- ◆ Almost half (48%) of the clients reported that they reached an agreement through the services, at least in one area of conflict. These findings highly correlate with the caseworkers' report regarding reaching agreement in the service.
- ◆ Most of the agreements that were reached were parental arrangements – 55% reached agreement in at least one aspect of the parental dispute (custody/visitation arrangements and/or child support).
- ◆ 70%-80% of the clients who reached an agreement about custody, divorce and child support reported that the arrangements were stable. Approximately 70% of the clients who discussed custody, divorce and domestic violence were satisfied with the agreements reached.
- ◆ Only 57% of the clients who reached agreement about visitation arrangements reported a stable arrangement and only 56% of them were satisfied with the agreement in this area.

Outcome Predictors

- ◆ Predictors of a positive perception of the mediation process: 12 years of education (compared to higher levels of education); relatively low-level conflicts; disputes where no domestic violence has been reported; high motivation to receive the service; 6 or more meetings with the caseworker.
- ◆ Predictors of reaching an agreement: younger age; 12 years of education compared to lower and to higher levels of education; relatively low-level conflicts; high motivation to receive the service; 3 or more intervention areas; 4-5 meetings with the caseworker; a more positive perception of the mediation process.

4. Programmatic Directions

Socio-demographic characteristics: The findings demonstrate that the intervention is most successful with clients who have moderate levels of education, as well as with younger clients. Therefore, the service should seek ways to improve the intervention with clients who have low or high levels of education, and with clients in older age groups. Furthermore, the study indicates over-representation of Jewish clients. It is thus recommended that the service be more accessible to non-Jewish clients.

Motivation to receive the service: The client's motivation to receive the service, as assessed by the caseworker during the intake, is a factor that affects the outcome of the intervention. It is recommended that ways be found to increase the client's motivation, so as to improve the outcomes of the FCSS interventions.

Duration of the intervention: The study found a positive association between the number of meetings and the achievement of agreement through the FCSS. It is therefore recommended to consider extending the duration of the intervention where required.

Number of aspects discussed: Multivariate regression analyses show that multidimensional interventions addressing several areas of the conflict increase the chance of reaching agreement in at least one area. It is therefore recommended that the FCSS continue to include a number of aspects in the intervention when the case demands it.

Intermediate Outcome – Positive Perception of the Mediation Process

- ◆ *Perception of the therapeutic alliance:* The vast majority of clients had a positive perception of the therapeutic alliance with no significant difference between men and women, except with regard to the "neutrality of the social worker," which was higher among the women. Thought should be given to ways of strengthening the sense of neutrality among the men receiving services at the FCSS, for example, training the staff in gender-sensitive methods.
- ◆ *Perceived contribution of the intervention to improved relationships:* Only a quarter of the respondents believed that the intervention had contributed to improving their relationship with the other side in the conflict. The current intervention model should be examined and ways found to improve the FCSS outcomes in this important area.

Final Outcomes by Intervention Area

- ◆ *Parental arrangements:* The intervention regarding parental arrangements (custody, visitation arrangements and child support), constitutes the bulk of the social workers' work. Most of the agreements reached in the FCSS concern parental arrangements. The findings reveal a high level of stability in the agreed custody and child support and very high satisfaction with them. In contrast, the satisfaction with agreements on visitation arrangements and the rates of stable agreements in this area were relatively low. The service should seek ways of increasing the stability of agreed visitation arrangements and satisfaction with them.
- ◆ *Domestic Violence:*
 - The findings imply that social workers intervene when there is violence in the family even in cases that were not referred to the FCSS for that reason. However, there are many other cases of exposure to domestic violence (some to physical violence) that are not reported or discussed during the FCSS intervention. Considering the high rates of domestic violence reported in the current study, we recommend that the social workers carefully examine whether the clients have been exposed to violence.
 - With regard to most types of violence, no gender difference was found in the percentage of cases reported. It was also observed that men tend to involve the social worker less in cases of violence against them. It is important to promote FCSS staff awareness of this matter and of the importance of scrutinizing exposure to violence among men.
 - Ways should be found to reduce the feeling of threat experienced at the meetings by clients who have been exposed to some sort of violence by the other party.

- The study findings indicate that clients who have suffered from any form of violence perceived the mediation to be less effective. This must be examined in depth and thought given to ways of improving their perception of the mediation process.

◆ *Divorce and Property Disputes:*

- Matters relating to divorce (deciding about the future of the relationship – divorce, separation or reconciliation) and property are less frequently addressed by the FCSS and the chances of reaching an agreement in these areas is lower.
- The agreements that were reached regarding divorce (i.e., the future of the relationship) were stable in most cases and most of the clients reported a high level of satisfaction with the agreement reached in this area. Conversely, a relative low percentage of clients reported stable agreements about property and satisfaction with the agreement in this area was low.
- The service should consider ways of improving the intervention model in this respect. It may be that intervention in the matter of property should be conducted in collaboration with a lawyer specializing in property law and in mediation.

Accessibility for potential clients: A prominent remark in the background interviews was that the service provided by the FCSSs are insufficiently well-known to the public and that investment should be made in publicizing the service. The affirmative new law, which formalizes mediation interventions by the FCSS in legal domestic disputes, may obviate the need to advertise the service – under the new legislation, all those who require litigation in the case of a parental or spousal conflict will initially be referred to the FCSS for an interview with a caseworker. The family will only be allowed to proceed with the litigation process at the family court after introductory meetings at FCSS. In light of the above, we recommend expediting the assimilation of pre-litigation meetings at the FCSS in order to make the service more accessible to families referring to the court on matters of domestic disputes.

Computerized information system: Many of the indicators collected in the FCSS computerized database are input very partially. Thought should be given to finding ways of substantially improving data input.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Family Court Social Services Abroad and in Israel	1
2.1 Models of Family Court Social Services Abroad	1
2.2 FCSS in Israel	2
2.3 Outcomes of FCSS Intervention	4
3. Study Goals	7
4. Study Design	8
4.1 Study Population and Sample	8
4.2 Sources of Information and Study Instruments	9
4.3 Methods of Data Analysis and Weighting	10
4.4 Study Limitations	11
5. Findings	12
5.1 Trends in the Characteristics of the Population and Services, 2007 to 2013	12
5.2 Characteristics of the Study Population	15
5.3 Outcomes of the Intervention	25
6. Conclusion and Programmatic Directions	39
Bibliography	44
Appendices	46
Appendix I: Description of the Questionnaires included in the Telephone Survey	46
Appendix II: Description of the Intake Form	48
Appendix III: Additional Tables	49

List of Tables

5.2 Characteristics of the Study Population

Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Study Population	16
Table 2: Financial Status Perceived by Respondents Living Separately from their Partners/Spouses	17
Table 3: Background of Respondents Receiving Assistance with Parental Disputes	18
Table 4: Characteristics of FCSS Intervention	23

5.3 Outcomes of the Intervention

Table 5: Satisfaction with the Service	26
Table 6: Outcomes of the Intervention in 2013, by Intervention Category	30
Table 7: Linear Regression to Predict the Perception of the Mediation Process	36
Table 8: Odds Ratio of a Logistic Regression to Predict the Log Probability of Reaching an Agreement on at Least One Issue	37

List of Tables in Appendix III

Table III-1: Missing Data in Administrative Files	49
Table III-2: Associations of the Mediation Process	49
Table III-3: Association of Reaching Agreement	51

List of Figures

2. Family Court Social Services Abroad and in Israel

Figure 1: Study Model	7
-----------------------	---

4. Study Design

Figure 2: Sampling Process	9
----------------------------	---

5.1 Trends in the Characteristics of the Population and Services, 2007 to 2013

Figure 3: Number of Families Referred to the FCSS and Number of Families Treated by them, by Year of Referral	13
Figure 4: Age of Clients, by Year of Referral	14
Figure 5: Age of Child, by Year of Referral	14
Figure 6: Child's Place of Residence	15

5.2 Characteristics of the Study Population

Figure 7: Change in Perceived Financial Status after Separation from Spouse, by Gender	17
Figure 8: Client's Willingness to Negotiate (Social Worker's Assessment at Intake)	19
Figure 9: Intensity of the Conflict and Quality of Communication between the Sides (Social Worker's Assessment at Intake)	20
Figure 10: Reports by Men and Women of Violence Perpetrated by the Other Side	21
Figure 11: Intervention of FCSS Social Worker in Cases of Violence	25

5.3 Outcomes of the Intervention

Figure 12: Positive Perception of the Therapeutic Alliance	27
Figure 13: Positive Perception of the Intervention's Contribution to Improving the Relationship	28
Figure 14: Positive Perception of the Intervention's Contribution to Parental Functioning	28
Figure 15: Success Rate in Achieving Agreement	31
Figure 16: Achieving Agreement, by Number of Subjects Addressed in the Intervention	31
Figure 17: Achieving Agreement, by Subject	32
Figure 18: Stability of Agreement and Satisfaction with it, by Subject of Agreement	33