**Community Work as Street- Level Bureaucracy: Discretion in the Context of Political Conflict**

**Abstract**

This study concerns street-level bureaucrats as informal policy makers in mixed Jewish-Arab neighborhoods in Israel. In this setting, characterized by ethnic and cultural diversity, structural inequalities, intercommunal tension, violent political conflict, and a broader national conflict, community workers must make judgements to best serve their communities while navigating this fraught political environment. This qualitative study uses the concept of ‘discretion’ to analyze interviews with street-level bureaucrats serving these communities. Their narratives are analyzed and classified into a discrete set of perceptions about the nature of the communities they serve, which are shown to directly influence their conception of their role and the discretionary actions they perform within their communities. These classifications, their interpretation, and their consequences for the discretion of the street-level bureaucrats are organized into a conceptual framework with potential to be generalized and applied more broadly to research of community work in zones characterized by political conflict.

**Keywords: street level bureaucracy; contested cities; political conflict; community work; discretion**

**Introduction**

This study examines the understudied role of community workers as street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) within highly contested urban settings. Street-level bureaucrats are public service workers who regulate access to services, who enjoy substantial discretion in executing their work (Lipsky, 2010). Interpreting policy when interacting directly with citizens, these frontline workers become informal policy decision-makers, playing a key role in constructing policy from the bottom up. Given current international processes of globalization, international migration, and growing racial and ethnic diversity within urban communities, SLB scholarship has paid increased attention to SLBs’ use of discretion within these fraught environments (Belabas & Gerrits, 2015; James & Julian, 2020; Strier et al., 2021). Patterns of discretion among frontline workers and SLBs’ interactions with individuals has been widely examined in the literature. However, the mezzo-level of how SLBs use their discretion to organize and shape the communities in which they work remains understudied (cf. Aviv et al., 2021; Durose, 2011; Zhang et al., 2021). Professional public workers can implement policies at the community level and engage in processes that create social, economic, and political change. The mission of these public workers revolves around the ‘community’ as the central unit, rather than the individual, notwithstanding the ambiguities inherent in the term community. Primarily, they help community members to collaborate around common interests and create social change on different levels (Gamble & Weil, 2010; Hardcastle et al., 2004).

Consequently, this study’s first major goal is to add new depth and perspectives to the scant research examining public community workers’ roles as SLBs and their patterns of discretion. Secondly, it joins the growing field of research examining how SLBs use their discretion in response to issues of majority-minority relations, diversity, and social inequalities (Choi & Hong, 2020; Lotta & Pires, 2019; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). More specifically, this article provides insights into SLBs’ execution of discretion within highly contested urban settings riven by racial, ethnic, and political conflicts.

Examining how public community workers exercise discretion in urban settings experiencing conflict, structural inequalities, and ethnic divides, we address this question in the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities, home to a wide range of racial, cultural, religious, and ethnic groups. As sites suffering from an ongoing violent national conflict, they are characterized by intergroup tensions, urban spatial disputes and structural inequalities, but also by Jewish-Arab neighborliness (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). Therefore, exploring patterns of discretion among community workers in these cities can provide insights into how they interpret and shape the urban community in highly contested settings.

**Street-level bureaucrats**

According to Lipsky’s (2010) seminal work, in cases where formal policy is ambiguous or has various contradictory objectives, and when frontline workers, enjoying relative autonomy from organizational authority, can exercise discretion, their actions, in effect, become policy (Brodkin, 2012; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010). In this sense, SLBs, such as teachers, social workers, and police officers, become informal de facto policy makers. Unlike other public workers, SLBs have considerable discretion, empowering them to determine ‘the nature, amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies’ (Lipsky, 2010, p. 13). Since Lipsky first illuminated the essential role of SLBs as informal policymakers, discretion has become a central theoretical concept in street-level bureaucracy studies. Scholars have widely developed the concept, highlighting the contemporary dynamic environment in which SLBs operate (Cohen et al., 2016); the crucial role of professionalism (Evans 2015); the nature of collective discretion (Rutz & Bont, 2020); creativity in the use of discretion (Visser & Kruyen, 2021), and SLBs’ involvement in policy entrepreneurship (Arnold, 2020; Cohen, 2021).

The multilayered factors that influence discretionary decisions and coping mechanisms adopted by frontline workers have been widely discussed. Cohen (2018) classifies these factors and distinguishes between personal characteristics, organizational characteristics, and the environment. Studies have suggested that workers’ personal characteristics, such as beliefs, values, perceptions towards community members, and their own socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds shape their use of discretion (Keiser, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Regarding organizational settings, studies have shown that organizational constraints and conditions, supervisors’ and organizational support, and relations with colleagues affect the use of discretion (Brodkin, 2011; Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2019; Lavee et al., 2018; Rutz & Bont, 2020). Moreover, studies have found that factors related to the broader socio-political environment, such as new public management ideologies and reforms, general culture, and national political conflicts, influence SLBs’ decision-making (Cohen, 2018; Cohen et al., 2016; Strier et al., 2021).

Beyond the specific factors influencing SLBs’ choices, their execution of discretion has far-reaching implications on macro issues of inequality and social justice (Lotta & Pires, 2019). Brodkin (2013) suggests conceiving of SLBs not only as mediators of policy, but also of politics. Positioned at the intersection of the state, its policies, and citizens, street-level organizations construct channels for promoting claims on the state, asserting rights, and pursuing redress. In these channels, individuals can claim group recognition and negotiate socio-political status issues, including race, class, and ethnicity (Brodkin, 2012; Marston, 2013; Watkins-Hayes, 2011).

The literature is dominated by a dual interpretation of SLBs’ role in policy decisions in the 21st century’s diverse societies. Studies have identified cases in which SLBs exercise their discretionary power to promote equality and social justice to ensure more just and professionally acceptable practices. In these cases, SLBs work to help disadvantaged communities, resisting structural inequalities and discriminatory practices (Arnold, 2020; Aviv et al., 2021; Cohen, 2021). For example, Lavee et al. (2018) describe Israeli public social workers’ efforts to correct urban renewal policy that, in their view, harms the community members they service. However, other studies indicate negative consequences. In some cases, SLBs cope with the constraints imposed on them by adopting working practices that actually reproduce structural inequalities and discriminate against minorities (Monnat, 2010; Musil et al., 2004; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). For example, Monnat’s (2010) study of the individual and contextual roles of race in welfare sanctions in the United States, found that Black and Latina women are at the greater risk of being sanctioned than are white women.

**Community as community practice**

*Community* is a ubiquitous term, widely used by politicians, the media, and the public to describe groups, frame the relations between citizens and the state, express aspirations for shared futures, and justify policies. However, it remains a contested, elusive, and polysemic concept (Blackshaw, 2010).

The term, as originally developed by classic sociologists, such as Durkheim (1984), Marx (1963), and Tonnies (1955), is considered a tangible social reality. ,, more functionaldefinition viewsies as., aunstablebecome iffuseCthereby rather thanBauman believes that today, people’s longing for community reflects their desire to attain stability in an insecure world (Blackshaw, 2010). In this popular romantic view, community is associated mostly with positive idea of comfort and belonging (Bauman, 2001).

However, communityical,,,; Jansen, 2019Community in its concrete manifestation is often tied to a specific place or seen as a shared function, depending on the nature of the ‘social glue’ holding people together (Weil, 2005). Concurrently, the imagined element of community often functions as a discriminatory tool. The boundaries of a community, constructed through political processes, can also justify exclusion of populations and promote hostility against ‘others’ based on ethnicity, gender, race, and nationality (Jansen, 2019).

Given its elusive nature, it becomes evident that community is an inherently political concept. Depending on a specific point of view and people’s understanding of the term, community can be charged with political ideology, and used to promote public policies directly affecting issues of social justice and inequality (Jansen, 2019). More practically, discourses about community frame public policies and shape the relationship between citizens and the state (Hancock et al., 2012; Lynn, 2006).

The concept of ‘community’ represents the core of community practice interventions. Community practice refers to processes that stimulate, engage, and achieve ‘active communities’ (Butcher et al., 2007) aiming to promote inclusion, social justice, and equality. Since its inception, community practice has been a leading method in the social work profession, a macro practice focusing on the community level, based on the belief that citizens should influence their environment as active agents (Meade et al., 2016). Community workers engage in strategies of community organizing, planning, development, capacity building, and social action (CSWE, 2018) to enhance disadvantaged communities’ wellbeing as well as to generate social, economic, political, and cultural change (Gamble & Weil, 2010; Hardcastle et al., 2004; Meade et al., 2016 ). In some cases, governmental community workers face a conflict of loyalties in promoting social change while working for public authorities (Popple, 2015). Today’s SLBs operate in highly challenging environments, subject to growing inequality, neoliberalism, and immigration. Consequently, they engage daily with increasingly contested multiracial and multicultural communities (Gutiérrez & Gant, 2018; Shwartz-Ziv & Strier, 2020). In the Israeli context, community workers, mostly employed by the public sector, engage in a variety of practices, including organizing functional communities, neighborhood and community organizing, and community social, economic, and sustainable development (Gamble & Weil. 2013).

Given the polysemic nature of community as a concept and a field of work, as well as the interpretive space policy implementation requires, it is reasonable to expect community workers to construct the idea of community in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, despite every community’s political aspects and the growing trend of community-based services following community-focused policies (Banks & Butcher, 2013), there is little exploration of community workers’ patterns of discretion in SLB scholarship. Among the few scholars who examined these professionals within the context of SLB theory, Durose (2011) some did significant work exploring the strategies of frontline workers in local governments and neighborhood management structures in engaging with the community and responding to its demands. She describes these workers’ use of discretion as ‘civil entrepreneurship’, and identified three main strategies: ‘reaching’, which refers to signposting resources for community groups, ‘enabling’, which refers to building community capacity and skills, and ‘fixing’, which means reinterpreting rules to prioritize local needs. In the same vein, Aviv et al. (2021) and Zhang et al. (2021) examined community practitioners’ practices as street-level policy entrepreneurs. However, SLB scholarship has neglected to analyze public community workers’ patterns of discretion in highly contested and conflicted urban settings of the 21st century, such as mixed Jewish-Arab cities in Israel.

**The context: Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities**

Jewish-Arab mixed cities in Israel, populated by a majority of Jews and a minority of Arabs (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018), and characterized by ethnic division, are situated at the heart of a national conflict. These cities have complex histories and have undergone drastic demographic transitions, a detailed description of which is beyond the scope of this study. Our study examines four mixed cities whose Arab composition ranges from 11 to 31 percent: Acre, Haifa, Lod, and Ramla.

These cities are characterized by intergroup tensions accompanied by struggles over public spaces and resources, clashing historical narratives, and continuing struggles over their cultural, religious, and national identities (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003; Monterescu, 2015; Yacobi, 2007). Studies have indicated that municipal policies often generate or increase segregation between the two populations and work in the interests of preserving a Jewish majority within the cities. Moreover, they show that structural discrimination against the Arab population is reflected in urban planning policies, the labor market, and distribution of resources and social services (Leibovitz, 2007; Shdema et al., 2018; Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003).

**Methodology**

This study applies a constructivist grounded theory approach which aligns with our research goals since it emphasizes multiple subjective realities and the contextual nature of knowledge. Additionally, it allows for the creation of a theoretical framework developed inductively from data (Charmaz, 2016). Forty-seven in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty-two community front-line workers and managers of public community services in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. Fifteen research participants were interviewed twice. Participants were asked about their perceptions of the issues, dilemmas, and coping strategies they encounter working in these cities. Interviews also elicited participants’ perceptions of the urban community and their responses to ethnic-national challenges.

Participants were recruited through the municipal social services. The purposive samples were predominantly female and consisted of twenty Jewish participants and twelve Arab participants from four mixed cities: Ramla, Haifa, Acre, and Lod. The participants were engaged in a variety of community practices, including organizing functional communities (e.g., working with groups of single mothers); neighborhood and community organizing (e.g., organizing building committees); and engaging in community social, economic, and sustainable development (e.g., urban regeneration projects; Gamble & Weil, 2013). Sixteen of the participants were social workers with a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in social work, and sixteen interviewees came from other educational backgrounds, including education, economics, and conflict resolution. Ethics approval was obtained from the [Institute Name] ethics committee. Participants signed an informed consent form, and any identifying information was excluded from the final report.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to analyze the transcripts. Data was analyzed across participants’ national affiliations and across cities. The data analysis process involved several steps. First, ‘open coding’ was used to identify initial categories that evolved inductively from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Additionally, comparisons were constantly made within each transcript and among different interviews. Then, we used axial coding to identify links between categories and subcategories based on context and content. Finally, we established relationships between themes through comparison and reflection.

**Findings**

Participants’ views of the urban community shaped their use of discretion in implementing policy and building the community’s identity and character. Their interpretations play a greater role given the ambiguous national and municipal formal policy regulating the work of community workers within Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. The analysis uncovered three main ideas of the urban community: community as a meeting of cultures; community as unequal power relations; and community as representative of national conflict. Each idea generated two common patterns of discretion. Some participants hold one central idea, while others carry a combination of them.

**Community as a meeting of cultures**

The first idea that emerged in our study was of community as consisting of cultural encounters. This image blurs national differences, viewing the Arab population not as a distinct national group, but as one cultural group among many others inhabiting the urban landscape. Most of the research participants, Jews and Arabs, described the urban community as a mosaic of cultures, emphasizing the interactions between a variety of cultural groups, not necessarily just Jews and Arabs. One Jewish participant observed:

This city is a mosaic of cultures. There is a tendency to say that the city has just Jews and Arabs, but there are many challenges that are not directly related to the Jewish-Arab story. This is a city with many immigrants, languages and cultures.

This representation of community was common among interviewees. Some participants emphasized the local identity of the urban community describing it, sometimes very positively, as multicultural. One Jewish participant described this local collective identity as follows:

There is a strong local identity here […] not related to politics, but to shared lives; to the neighborliness. […] It crosses cultures, and the city’s multiculturalism does not stop only with Jews and Arabs, but also includes religious and secular, immigrants from Caucasia. Highly diverse multiculturalism.

This image of a diverse urban community focuses on ethnocultural differences and sensitivities while overlooking issues of inequalities, majority-minority relations, and the violent national conflict. This representation of community is reflected in the participants’ discretion, as many of them work to strengthen the urban community’s cultural sensitivity and promote coexistence among ethnocultural groups. They do so through two main patterns of discretion: promoting community activities of ‘knowing the other’ and promoting cultural and linguistic accessibility.

**Promoting community activities of ‘knowing the other’**

Participants try to initiate community activities that enable Jewish and Arab residents to cooperate with each other, learn about their respective cultures, and consequently reduce intergroup hostility. They do so mainly by organizing activities highlighting the common ground between Jews and Arabs in the city and cultivating a shared urban identity. A Jewish participant described it as follows:

Often, we work on common issues, and the multicultural encounter […] occurs as part of the joint work. Even if in the beginning the encounter revolves around the shared issue, it also becomes a basis for joint meetings to celebrate holidays, and for deeper acquaintance with […] each culture.

This practice was common among interviewees. Some encouraged discussions regarding shared coexistence and sought to promote tolerance in the urban community. Other participants reported initiating ethnic-cultural events to strengthen multiculturalism and bring Jewish and Arab residents together. For example, in the following response, an Arab participant explains her decision to organize an *Iftar* meal, traditionally celebrated every evening during Ramadan, for both Arabs and Jewish residents in a mixed neighborhood to promote coexistence:

It is not formally part of my role, but it is good for the establishment […] There is coexistence in the neighborhood (as a result of these initiatives). I promoted it. […] No one asked me to organize it. […] The women from the community garden and I cooked. […] We brought food to promote coexistence of Jews and Arabs.

**Promoting cultural and linguistic accessibility**

Participants strove to remove cultural barriers and actively adjust their community activities linguistically and culturally. Some indicated that they advertise their activities in various languages and use interpreters in community meetings. Furthermore, some of the participants noted that they take holidays and cultural or religious codes into account when planning community activities. For example, one Arab participant described the development of a municipal community mediation group. Alongside the Western-oriented mediation training usually used in Israel, he insisted on developing a parallel course that is culturally adjusted to Arab societal norms, as described in the following:

When we in the city council decided that we wanted to have a group of community mediators, the thinking was, ‘Ok, We bring the Israeli mediation (process)’ […] and then here, I brought the new system […] (because) you can’t come and use Israeli norms for mediation and force it on the Arab community. It doesn’t work […] because the Arab community has community leaders, we have a pardons committee […] before we use the law we use […] religion as a mediation tool. First, it was hard to accept, but, in the end, the office and the partners gave in and said ‘Ok let’s have a mediation group to qualify Arabic-speaking people’.

Other participants, mainly in managerial positions, reported that they work to promote cultural accessibility through employing staff representative of the city’s diverse ethnic groups. They believed that such institutional diversity would expand minority populations’ identification and serve as a role model for the urban community. As a Jewish manager explained:

The team consists only of residents […] and they represent the diversity of the communities that exist here. […] It is a statement that this is home. […] It has a place for everyone. […] We are all different and we all come from different places […] and if we are successful in creating a common language between us that is accepting, enabling, and tolerant, then this is something that we can take out to the community as well.

In summary, many participants perceived the urban community as culturally diverse and used their discretion to strengthen coexistence. They did so by promoting community activities aimed at ‘knowing the other’ and developing cultural and linguistic accessibility. While prevalent as a community practice, discretion, focusing on cultural differences and sensitivities, avoids targeting issues of inequality and dealing with the national conflict.

**Community as unequal power relations**

Some participants highlighted another idea of community, according to which the urban community is characterized by structural inequalities and power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority. These participants believe that the Arab population is subjected to institutional exclusion and discrimination, reflected in oppressive policies and a lack of municipal resources and public services. Some of them reported that they view the Arab neighborhoods as alienated from the city, and, in practice, described two distinct urban communities, as illustrated in the following comment from a Jewish participant:

There is a boundary (between the Jewish and Arab neighborhoods): a boundary that is physical; a boundary that is cultural; a boundary that is mental, and is physically marked by the railroad track. […] If it was a movie, I would say that the symbolism was exaggerated. The railway is extremely wide, eight tracks, and there is no underpass […] or bridge. No path […] you just cross, walking over the tracks themselves.

Interviewees noted that the Arab neighborhoods are dense, have poor infrastructure, high crime rates, and lack decent urban planning. In the following statement, an Arab participant describes the discrimination against the Arab population in terms of municipal services and law enforcement:

When it comes to areas with an Arab population (the police say), ‘Ok, there is a battle, a war, there are shootings; we won’t enter there. It’s their business’. […] My parents used to live in the old city […] in their street there was no roadway, no garbage cans […] but when my mom sold the house and moved to a neighborhood with an 80% Jewish population, you cannot believe the order and cleanliness. They have daily (municipal) garbage pick-ups.

This idea of community acknowledges the unequal power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, while overlooking the presence of the broader national conflict. Our analysis reveals that this idea of community is reflected in participants’ use of discretion. Some participants, mostly Arab, actively operated to reduce, challenge, or resist inequalities. They did so following two main patterns of discretion: developing public services for the Arab population and redistributing existing public resources.

**Developing public services for the Arab population**

Some participants play a crucial role in promoting public municipal or state services for the Arab population. Primarily, they develop community services bottom-up, organize community members to campaign for service delivery, and pressure municipal policymakers. For example, an Arab participant reported organizing residents to campaign for the establishment of playgrounds and community centers for children and youth in Arab areas in the city. In the following, she recounts her actions and their underlying rationale to promote municipal justice:

I can testify there are some differences in terms of rights, between the resources for services for the Arab community and the Jewish community. […] We are struggling. […] For example, a few years ago, there was a very neglected (Arab) neighborhood, that didn’t have a playground […]. We fought for it for over a year and a half, and we got the budget.

Similarly, given the high crime rate and lack of law enforcement in one Arab neighborhood, another Arab participant initiated a successful community process leading to the establishment of a police station. To achieve this goal, she used strategies such as organizing residents, writing letters to the Public Security Minister, and organizing a meeting between the residents, city council and police representatives, as described in the following:

What helped and promoted it (the establishment of a new police station), was that more than 50 women who had lost sons or husbands to crime signed (the letter) and went and spoke (in the meeting with the city council representatives). Everything had to be done covertly because if someone had found out that these mothers and widows had been speaking [to the authorities], they would have been killed. […] Following this, the police realized that if they came to the neighborhood, the people there would support them.

In other cases, participants reported developing public services themselves to attend to the communities’ needs. For example, an Arab manager of a community center providing services for the Arab population established an Arab cultural center, as described here:

I advanced many initiatives […] that, in practice, promoted equality […] For example, we opened a center of Arab cultural shows and events. […] It was revolutionary for the city’s Arab population.

**Promoting access to and redistribution of public resources**

Some participants reported that when planning community activities, they decide to allocate resources such as budgets and places in community programs, striving to promote equality between the Jewish and Arab populations. An Arab manager describes this practice and its underlying rationale:

When I received a budget to promote social health […], I looked at all the neighborhoods (in the city), Arab and Jewish, and I split the budget based on the number (of Jewish and Arab neighborhoods). […] What guides me is promoting rights and distributive justice. […] I could have simply decided to spend the whole budget on a specific neighborhood. […] Nobody is making me do otherwise because there is no policy.

Moreover, some participants reported using their discretion to provide access to public resources. One example that was mentioned in several interviews related to an urban renewal project. In recent years, Israel has been implementing a governmental urban renewal process in which residents are temporarily relocated until construction and renovation are completed. Several participants reported that, due to the events in the 1948 Arab–Israeli War, especially the expulsion and fleeing of the Arab population, Arab residents, afraid that the government would not allow them to return to their homes, objected to the plan. To mitigate the Arab residents’ anxiety and enable them to benefit from the public project, some participants reported they led a structural change in urban renewal practice, so that building would begin before evacuation. An Arab participant reported:

Because of the community’s fears surrounding evacuation that […] they would not be allowed to come back, we found a solution: first building and *then* evacuating the residents. […] We adapted the plan in the community. […] We brainstormed regarding the Arab population, because […] we understand very well that the Arabs won’t leave their houses, move to rent, and trust the initiator or the establishment until the construction is complete.

To conclude, some participants, mostly Arabs, perceived the urban community as characterized by structural inequalities, and used their discretion to reduce and resist these by developing public services for the Arab population and providing access to and redistribution of public resources. While acknowledging social inequalities and power relations, this idea of community still overlooks the presence of the national conflict.

**Community as representative of the national conflict**

Urban communities in the 21st century around the globe cope with the implications of ethnic, racial or political conflicts. In our case, the third idea of community among the surveyed SLBs is shaped by the national conflict between the Jewish majority and Arab minority and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Most of the participants maintained that communities have learned to detach themselves from the national conflict in their daily urban life. From this perspective, the communities created an alternative, a unique sphere within Israel that enables Jewish-Arab neighborliness based on mutual respect that ‘keeps the peace’.

However, many of these participants identified the national conflict as an underlying source of friction that could easily translate into hostility and tension between residents. Daily interactions between the Arab population and the state, as well as between Jewish and Arab residents, can easily escalate, bringing disagreements rooted in the national conflict to the surface, as one Arab participant noted:

People talk about coexistence […] but at the level of the community, it’s still Jews and Arabs. It is obvious when there is political tension, when there is an argument between neighbors […] another dimension emerges: […] the nationality. […] Then the argument intensifies.

Furthermore, participants indicated that the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict is expressed in demographic struggles within the mixed cities. Many of them reported that the urban community undergoes struggles over the urban space regarding issues of dominance, segregation, and integration. They described conflicts over municipal resources, cases of residents refusing to sell apartments on a national basis, and changes in the city’s minority-majority composition. A Jewish participant described these complex dynamics as follows:

This tension (competition over urban space) is very strong here. […] For example, […] in the past, there was a primary school for the Jewish community […] and with the changes in the population, slowly there wasn’t any need for the primary school (and it closed) and then started what was almost a war about the facilities. Who will they belong to? Will they be ‘owned’ by Jews or Arabs? […] Every case like that becomes a political struggle.

This idea of the urban community acknowledges the presence of the national conflict. However, given its controversial nature, most of the participants chose to avoid calling attention to the conflict. They believe that direct engagement with this sensitive issue is unprofessional, could compromise their ‘impartiality’ and is not part of their role. Nonetheless, some participants that reported holding such opinions do use their discretion to mitigate tensions and ‘keep the peace’. This idea is reflected in two common patterns of discretion: mitigating tensions between the Jewish and Arab populations and considering segregated or integrated community activities.

**Mitigating tensions between Jewish and Arab populations**

Multiple participants initiated community activities to ‘keep the peace’, mediate conflicts, develop empathy, and prepare for potential disagreements between Jewish and Arab populations. For example, when there was an overlap between the Muslim holiday *Eid al-Adha* and the Jewish *Yom Kippur*, both characterized by fasting, some participants organized activities to raise awareness regarding the public space and its use to prevent arguments. In another case, a Jewish participant organized a municipal ethnocultural leaders’ group to intervene in times of municipal crises. In the following, she described this forum’s intervention after a Muslim youth killed a Jewish resident. Her words illustrate how this community initiative operates to quench the flames of community tension:

A Jew went outside with his dog. There were seven (Arab) teenagers around. […] An argument arose between them, they called one of their friends who arrived with a gun. […] That very same morning I got phone calls […] from leaders of the Jewish community and Arab community […] and within 24 hours we gathered here (for a meeting). […] The group signed a bilateral declaration that called upon the residents of the city to keep living in coexistence. Moreover, a group of leaders from the Arab community paid a condolence visit to the family […] and, of course, after every meeting like this, each leader goes back to his community and disseminates the message.

Moreover, in cases characterized by a lack of trust in the state on the part of Arab residents, some participants reported that they organized dialogues between Arab residents and municipal officials such as police officers. An example of this occurred as part of the municipal response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many cities in Israel, the mixed city’s municipality received assistance from the Home Front Command to raise public health awareness. An Arab participant said that the municipality’s decision to post soldiers in a school located in an Arab neighborhood angered the Arab residents. He explains his conscious choice to organize a dialogue between Arab community leaders and decision-makers:

From a moral perspective, this is excellent, the Home Front Command came […] (to help) reduce the infection rate […] but what did we get from the field? […] That, at the end of the day, they are soldiers […] and it is hard for the Arab population to deal with it. […] It’s like the soldiers are coming to conquer the city again […] and that created some anger. […] I summoned a meeting with the Security Department, with Home Front Command, with the leadership of the Arab community. […] In the end it was decided to continue the activity without having the base itself. […] Our professional role is to bring it to the table; […] to suggest a different conversation that brings parties closer. A unifying conversation.

**Segregating or integrating community activities**

Participants, both Jews and Arabs, described the decision whether to conduct integrated or segregated community activities as one of the most common areas of discretion. Reflecting the demographic struggle, many participants indicated that Jewish residents had asked them to provide separate community activities. Additionally, in some cases, when practitioners conducted mixed activities, Jewish residents abstained from participating. Participants, predominantly Arabs, reported wanting to conduct mixed community activities and promote coexistence within the city. An Arab participant recounted his conscious choice to organize a community event for both Jews and Arabs despite residents’ resistance:

There is a community event that I am supposed to organize (in a mixed neighborhood). […] There’s resistance all the time. […] What I’m saying is that I’m not discriminating, I’m producing the event and inviting the whole neighborhood. […] There’s always this perception emerging from the Jewish Orthodox community that we need segregation; […] we need to have two events. […] I’m saying no. I’m doing an event for everyone and everyone is welcome to come.

Similarly, one of the Jewish participants reported a situation where the activity she organized had to relocate to a location associated with a religious right-wing Jewish movement, which made the Arab participants feel uncomfortable. Later she was asked by her manager to formally use this new location for her activity. She refused to cooperate with the demand, realizing that the implications might be Arab participants leaving the group. She comments as follows:

These were instructions from the Social Department but it came from the Mayor. […] They told me, […] ‘Come and transfer the single moms’ group to there’, and I said, ‘No way. I will lose the group’. There were lots of attempts made to make me move the event there. […] I insisted (that) […] the groups that moved there would be exclusively Jewish groups. […] I received (from my team leader) the instruction to move there. They also told her that perhaps the group there wouldn’t have any Arabs. So when I heard it I got even more upset.

A few participants, however, reported that they decided to conduct activities separately. The reasons are sometimes vague or not explicit, but revolve around negative past experiences trying to mix the two populations or respecting the community’s preferences for separate activities. A Jewish participant shares such an experience with struggling to establish a joint group of women suffering from domestic violence. She explains why she stopped recruiting Arab women:

We recruited Jewish and Arab women. […] With time, the [Jewish] women didn’t want to interact with the Arab women […] (and) continued to meet as a group. The [Jewish] women preferred to develop intimate relationships as a Jewish group and not an Arab one and the Arabs dropped out. […] Then it became an only Jewish group.

It seems, then, that the idea of the urban community as part of the national conflict was reflected in some participants’ patterns of discretion. Specifically, they dealt with the conflict’s implications in two main areas: preventing the escalation of tensions between Jewish and Arab populations and organizing activities in segregated or integrated ways, depending on the situation or approach. Acknowledging the presence of the national conflict, these participants’ practice focused on quenching fires and ‘keeping the peace’.

**Discussion**

This study examined the understudied topic of SLBs’ patterns of discretion when engaging with highly conflicted urban communities characterized by structural inequalities and ethnic divides. We analyzed the ways in which public community workers exercise discretion in Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities. The study underscores how community workers’ ideas of community influence their use of discretion and reveals their limits of discretion when engaging with contested communities. Our findings confirm that public community workers are SLBs who enjoy substantial discretion in the execution of their work (Lipsky, 2010). While organizing communities, they use their discretionary space to interpret their role and shape policy outcomes (Brodkin, 2012). In particular, against the background of ambiguous policy, community workers initiated activities that constructed policies from the bottom up. The study also joins a growing body of research showing that socio-political context often shapes SLBs use of discretion (Cohen, 2018; Cohen et al., 2016). By highlighting the different ideas of community practitioners hold, this study emphasizes the significance of SLBs’ interpretations of their context on policy implementation. It reveals that SLBs ideas of community were highly influential in their use of discretion, as they respond to issues of inequalities, ethnonational diversity, and a violent national conflict. Given the polysemic nature of the ‘community’ concept (Jansen, 2019), SLBs interpret and construct their idea of community in various ways. Reflecting their understandings of the urban community, SLBs use of discretion affects, reinforces, or changes these representations of community. As a result, they actively shape the character and identity of the urban community while building the relationship between citizens and the state (Hancock et al., 2012; Lynn, 2006). In line with the existing literature Bauman, 2001; ,,this study sheds light on how SLBs’ interpretation of the socio-political environment shapes their exercise of discretion in a specific context. Hence, to better understand SLBs’ patterns of discretion, SLB scholarship not only needs to be aware of the context, but also to take into account SLBs’ ideas and representations.

We identified three main ideas of community, generating six common patterns of discretion. The first idea is *community as encounter of cultures*, which views the urban community as a mosaic of cultures and focuses on ethnocultural sensitivities and differences. Reflecting this representation of community, SLBs with this perspective become cultural brokers, using their discretion to strengthen the joint existence of ethnocultural groups by promoting community activities of knowing the other, and developing cultural and linguistic accessibility. Focusing on the community as culturally diverse, this representation neglects issues of structural inequalities and the presence of the national conflict. The second idea is *community as unequal power relations* which views the urban community as characterized by structural inequalities and institutional discrimination against the Arab population. These SLBs become agents of change engaged in policy entrepreneurship and influence the design of policy (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). They use their discretion to reduce inequalities through two main strategies: 1) developing public services for the Arab population, and 2) providing access to and redistribution of public resources. While acknowledging social inequalities and power relations, this idea of community overlooks the presence of the national conflict. The third idea is *community as national conflict*, which acknowledges majority-minority relations within the context of ongoing violent Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. In response to this idea, these SLBs choose to become ‘conflict buffers’ as a way to manage the conflict. They use their discretion to mitigate tensions between the Jewish and Arab population and ‘keep the peace’. Based on our findings, we offer a conceptualization of community workers’ patterns of discretion in highly conflicted urban settings in the table below:

*[TABLE 1 HERE]*

This conceptualization helps to better understand SLBs’ execution of discretion within highly contested urban settings, particularly affected by structural inequalities and ethnopolitical conflicts. Drawing on Lotta and Pires (2019), our findings underscore that SLBs’ policy implementation on the community level overtly and covertly intersects with social inequalities. By initiating strategies of developing public services and redistributing public resources, SLBs’ discretionary choices directly reduce socio-economic inequalities. Additionally, strategies that promote encounters of cultures while overlooking inequalities and the political nature of the community covertly reproduce social and racial inequalities that are inscribed in local cultures. In that sense, operating on the mezzo-level within highly divided settings, community workers become mediators of politics (Brodkin, 2013) in which their discretionary choices affect macro issues of social justice, exclusion, and ethnic division.

Moreover, the study provides us with deeper understanding of SLBs’ discretionary choices in light of ethnopolitical conflicts. In our case, the strategies derived from the first two ideas, developed intergroup cultural encounters and reduced inequalities while tending to overlook the presence of the national conflict. Community interventions that focus on cultural aspects were the most common and were perceived as highly acceptable. Patterns of discretion aimed at reducing inequalities, mostly economic, were perceived as subversive and were less common, but still legitimate. The third idea of community acknowledges the conflict and its implications. Despite this awareness, SLBs tend to minimize their engagement in the subject and put their efforts into mitigating tensions and ‘keeping the peace’.

Their lack of engagement in the political nature of the community, may seem surprising. Street-level organizations are sites in which citizens claim group recognition, directly engage with macro issues of inequalities and social justice, and promote claims on the state (Brodkin, 2012; Lotta & Pires, 2019). Community workers in particular are expected to create ‘active communities’ (Butcher et al., 2007) while promoting inclusion, social justice, and equality. Consequently, at first glance, we would assume that community workers, whose primary role is to organize community members around common interests and create social and political changes, would not avoid the conflict and initiate interventions around the topic (Gamble & Weil, 2010; Hardcastle et al., 2004). In practice, SLBs do not use their discretion to directly handle the conflict, get involved in policy entrepreneurship (Cohen, 2021), or initiate dialogue; instead, they seek to insulate the community from conflict by actively avoiding sources of tension. Participants’ explanations of this approach highlight the role of professionalism in their use of discretion (Evans, 2015), as they believed that as public servants, they needed to remain apolitical and neutral.

We suggest an additional explanation. This choice to avoid the conflict does not happen in a vacuum and should be understood in the context of the broader Israeli socio-political environment (Cohen, 2018). In line with Lotta and Pires (2019), SLBs’ discretion may reproduce social inequalities that are inscribed in regional and national culture. The hegemonic public discourse in Israel tends to view Jewish-Arab mixed cities not as binational but as culturally diverse. This perception, minimizes the presence of the national conflict and ignores the absence of any formal national policy regarding the role of public social services in these cities (Strier et al., 2021). We suggest, therefore, that Israeli hegemony shapes SLBs’ patterns of discretion and covertly constructs limits on SLBs’ discretion. In that sense, interventions that directly engage with the national conflict and challenge it are portrayed as out of bounds. This study shows that when implementing policy within this highly conflicted and sensitive environment, SLBs have clear, yet sometimes covert, boundaries in exercising their discretion. In this sense, SLBs can use their discretion in ways that do not challenge the national hegemony.

This study has certain limitations. First, since it is a qualitative study based on a convenience sample, generalizability of the findings is limited. Second, even though the study includes both Jewish and Arab SLBs from four Israeli mixed cities, the sample size was relatively small. Third, the current setting is the Israeli context, particularly the Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities. In other challenging areas, SLBs’ discretionary patterns might be different. In light of this, SLB scholarship may benefit from exploring SLBs who are involved in contested communities in other social, geographical, political and cultural contexts.

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**. Conceptualization of Community Workers’ Patterns of Discretion**

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|  | | | |
| Nationally conflicted relations | Unequal power relations | Encounter of cultures | **Image of community** |
| Conflict buffers | Inequality change agents | Cultural brokers | **SLBs role** |
| SLBs acknowledge the presence of the national conflict and focus on mitigating tensions and ‘keeping the peace’. | SLBs reduce and resist structural inequalities between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, while overlooking the presence of the national conflict. | SLBs reinforce the urban community’s cultural sensitivity and promote the coexistence of ethnocultural groups,  overlooking issues of inequalities and the violent national conflict. | **Approach to community intervention** |
| Mitigating tensions between the Jewish and Arab populations; considering whether to conduct segregated or integrated community activities. | Developing public services for the Arab population; redistributing public resources. | Promoting community activities of ‘knowing the other’; promoting cultural and linguistic accessibility. | **Patterns of discretion** |