**Social Services in Mixed Cities: Street-Level Bureaucracy at the Crossroads of**

**Ethno-Political Conflict**

**Abstract**

There is a paucity of research examining street-level bureaucracy in cities affected by ongoing ethno-political conflict. This study addresses this limitation by exploring the work of social workers in the public services of ethnically mixed cities in Israel. It shows the interconnection between ambiguous institutional policies, varying workers’ views of the role of social services, and changing discretion patterns. Findings also suggest that episodes of conflict escalation intensify staff ethnic sectarianism, as well as increasing workers’ own ethnic biases, which affect the ways in which they act as a liaison between the welfare system and citizens through their use of discretion.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucracy; discretion; public services; political conflict; mixed cities

This study investigates the understudied topic of street-level bureaucracy in the context of on-going severe ethno-political conflict. Based on extensive qualitative research involving 80 public-sector social workers in three ethnically mixed cities in Israel, it examines social workers’ practices as street-level bureaucrats, the impact of political conflict on their routines, the way these workers construe their role, and their discretion patterns in these complex settings.

**Social workers as street-level bureaucrats**

The literature portrays public-sector social workers as classic examples of street-level bureaucrats (Campbell, Ioakimidis, & Maglajlic, 2019;  Lavee, Cohen, & Nouman, 2018; Lipsky, 1980; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). These professionals regulate recipients' access to welfare programs, services, and benefits in the context of highly bureaucratic and hierarchical organisational cultures (Evans, 2010a). Most specifically, as noted by Lipsky (1980), the ways in which social workers manage complexity, the strategies they use to cope with uncertainty, the routines they establish to navigate grey zones of policy, and the mechanisms they create to reconcile professionalism with practice all influence the policies they actually carry out (Lipsky, 1980). Such tensions occur in organizational settings where resources are constantly insufficient; goals are ambiguous, changing, and usually unattainable; and clients' needs always exceed the unstable supply of services (Ellis, 2007).

Discretion is a key concept in the street-level bureaucracy approach, and hence a main line of research has examined what influences frontline workers' decision making and choice of strategies (Moore, 1987). The street-level worker’s personal values, emotions, ethnic and socioeconomic background, and professionalism; the organizational setting; and the broader socio-political environment have all been suggested as important factors in shaping their choices (Cohen, 2018; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lavee et al., 2018; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). Evans (2010a, 2010b) argues that this literature ignores the important role of professional discretion in the field of social work. To deliver more just, trustworthy, transparent, and accountable public social services, managers and frontline workers need to exercise not only high levels of professionalism—as embodied in continuous training, specialisation, implementation of evidence-based practices, and increasing awareness of diversity and inequalities—but also discretion (Evans, 2010a).

Research shows that in some cases institutional logics supply the moral categories and legitimate practices that play a key role in shaping the quality of services provided to vulnerable client groups (Garrow & Grusky, 2013). The ambiguous milieu of the public social welfare sphere in which programs may be determined more by politics than by need confronts both managers and frontline social workers with serious ethical and practical dilemmas regarding social and ethnic inequalities. Public social welfare services may even be fertile ground for the reproduction of inequality and the dissemination of ethnic biases, presumably with detrimental effects on attempts to address diversity needs, depending on the specific context in which they develop (Hall, Slembrouck, Haigh, & Lee, 2010). In many cases, public or hybrid social services may embody a biased system of social provision that reinforces racial and ethnic inequalities (Neubeck & Cazenave 2001; Schram, Soss, & Fording, 2003). Street-level bureaucrats are not immune to practicing social and ethnic discrimination, and their racial background affects how they perceive their programs or their clients' rights (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). For example, Schram, Soss, Fording, and Houser (2009) demonstrated how case managers apply welfare sanctions and financial penalties to individuals who fail to comply with program rules and how their implicit racial biases shape officials' decisions to impose sanctions.

In ethnically mixed societies, Vigoda-Gadot, Shoham,  Schwabsky, and Ruvio (2008) assert that street-level bureaucracies play a major role in shaping political attitudes; they also mediate clashing racial, ethnic, or national claims (Brodkin & Marston, 2013). Studies also show that street level workers may also use discretion to professionally resist discriminatory practices that violate their ethical principles (Campbell et al., 2013). For example, Anasti (2020) showed how the emotional and moral discourse surrounding sex workers has shaped the response, which is sometimes in conflict with agency and field policies, of street-level bureaucrats who work with this population.

Despite the growing interest in how socio-political factors shape street-level bureaucrats' use of discretion in response to issues of diversity, as well as to social and ethno-cultural inequality (Belabasa & Gerrits, 2017; Brodkin, 2013), limited research has examined street-level bureaucrats' work within the context of mixed ethnic cities characterised by ethno-political conflicts. This study directly addresses this limitation by examining their work within a society shaped by harsh and sometimes violent ethno-political conflict, which challenges social workers’ professional policy implementation and use of discretion. It examines the strategies that Jewish and Arab social workers in managerial and frontline roles adopt to grapple with cultural diversity and structural inequalities in public social services provided in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities, characterised by an omnipresent national-political conflict over space, culture, identity, and existence.

**Ethno-nationally mixed cities**

Ethno-nationallymixed cities are the focus of research in various disciplines, including urban planning, geography, public policy, sociology and education (Calame & Charlesworth, 2012). Mixed cities have a population comprised of different ethnic, national, and/or religious groups, all of which confront various degrees of intergroup tension or conflict (Rekhess, 2007; Stroschein, 2007). In certain contexts, mixed cities may be seen as divided or contested, with clear political and social differences and rivalries between the ethnic groups that comprise them (Adelman & Elman, 2014). In many instances, mixed cities are at the centre of an ongoing political conflict; for example, Belfast, Mostar, Beirut, and Jerusalem. Such mixed cities are likely characterised by multiple interethnic tensions, open competition for public resources, and ongoing conflict over the hegemonic definition of their cultural, religious, and national character (Solitsiano & Gofer, 2009). Ethnically mixed, yet ethno-politically contested, cities pose complex challenges related to municipal management, majority–minority relations, and urban justice. To deepen our understanding of how social workers serving as street-level bureaucrats in different roles cope with diversity, inequality, and national violent conflict, this study analyses their work in mixed cities in Israel.

**Social work in the context of multiethnic settings**

The social work profession has become increasingly aware both of the ethnic diversity of social workers’ clientele (Sue & Sue, 2003) and that some social workers engage in ethnic discriminatory practices. It has responded to these challenges by developing more multiculturally competent interventions, services, and policies. According to Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) there are three approaches to ethno-cultural diversity, as it influences social services delivery: conservative, liberal, and critical multiculturalism. The first strengthens the dominant discourse and hegemony, thereby hindering the equal delivery of social services to ethno-cultural minorities. The liberal approach does not impose unity but rather appreciates diversity and accepts the otherness of the “other,” thus facilitating development of a culturally competent social services system. The critical approach strives for social justice and equality, which are arguably achievable only through dealing in depth with structural issues related to the wider socio-political context.

The social work profession seems to have adopted the second approach: liberal multiculturalism emphasizing cultural competence. The U.S. National Association of Social Workers, for instance, defines cultural competence as "the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each" (NASW, 2007, p. 12). Models of cultural competence are based on principles of knowledge, attitudes, and skills (Sue & Sue, 2003) and on intrapsychic processes of intersectionality and self-reflection involved in the acquisition of cultural competence (Garran & Rozas, 2013). An increasinghave received training ining-

Despite the significant contribution of liberal cultural competence training to effective welfare service delivery, vital issues remain unresolved in the context of multi-ethnic societies characterised by ethnic, national, and/or religious tensions that can sometime take an extreme or violent form, such as in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. The present study responds to this challenge in light of critical theories that illuminate the biased political and ethnic nature of these services (Baines, 2008; Campbell et al., 2019). Specifically, through application of the street-level bureaucracy theory, this study analyses the role of social workers as street-level bureaucrats in the management of cultural diversity and structural inequalities in public social services in three Israeli mixed cities: Haifa, Acre, and Jerusalem.

**Study Context: Haifa, Acre, and Jerusalem**

Israel’s population numbers 9,199,700 residents (75% Jews and 2 % Arabs; Israel Bureau of Statistics, 2019). In general, the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority are characterized by bolt structural inequalities. For instance, 53% of the Arab families live in poverty compared with 14% of Jewish families, and 66% of Arab children live in poverty compared with 20% of Jewish children. Such differences are clearly present in most mixed cities in Israel (Monteresecu, 2015; Rabinovitz & Monterescu, 2008; Tzfadia, 2011; Yacobi, 2013).

Haifa, Acre, and Jerusalem are all officially defined as mixed cities, but they are perceived and portrayed as each having its own identity and image. Whereas the city of Haifa is usually portrayed as a city of coexistence (Haifa Foundation, 2020), Acre is represented as a city of multiple inter-ethnic tensions (Kidron & Linder-Yarkony, 2019). But still both cities hold the shared public image of mixed cities. Jerusalem is seen as a highly contested city: it is often at the heart of national and international conflict (Rabinowitz & Monterescu, 2008).

Haifa is Israel's third largest city, with 279,600 residents, 89% of whom are Jews and others (non-Arab), and 11% are Arabs (Haifa Municipality, 2018). Although in 1946 almost half of Haifa's residents were Arabs, after the 1947 war that ended in the birth of the State of Israe,l only 3,500 Arabs remained in the city (Leibovitz, 2007; Margalit, 2014). From the 1950s to the 1980s many Jewish immigrants were resettled in Haifa. Currently, Haifa has a diverse mixed population in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religion, including Jews, Muslims, and Christians (Kallus, 2013). During the Second Intifada in 2000, several terrorist attacks were perpetrated in Haifa, and in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, the city suffered losses and damage from substantial missile attacks. Yet there is onethat , and Haifa is still perceived by Jewish Israelis as a city of Jewish-Arab coexistence (Kallus, 2013).

Acre is one of the world’s ancient cities. Until the Arab-Israeli war in 1947, Arabs made up more than 90% of the city's population. According to the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, which was proposed in 1947, Acre was supposed to be included in the Palestinian state (Botzer, 2006), but this plan was never accepted. During the 1947 war, many Arab residents were forced to leave Acre, and later many Jewish immigrants were resettled in their place (Falah, 1996; Torstrick, 2000). The city has presently 47,500 residents, 68.6% of whom are Jews and others (non-Arab), and 31.4% are Arabs (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The two populations mostly live in separate neighbourhoods, and Acre's welfare department provides separate services to Jewish and Arab residents. The city suffers from multiple ethnic tensions, more than in Haifa, and has experienced several acts of violence between Jews and Arabs.

Jerusalem is also one of the world’s ancient cities and is considered holy by the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is also a highly contested mixed city (Klein, 2001). Divided into eastern (Jordanian) and western (Israeli) parts after the 1947 war, East Jerusalem was then occupied by Israel following the 1967 Six Day Arab-Israeli War. Today, East Jerusalem Arab residents have residency status rather than Israeli citizenship (Association for Civil Rights in Israel, 2010). Moreover, the city lies at the core of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, because both Israelis and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital.

Jerusalem has 882,700 residents, 62% of whom are defined as 'Jews and others' and 38% as 'Arabs'. Sixty-one percent of the city's population live in East Jerusalem (60% of them Arabs), and 39% in West Jerusalem (99% of them Jews; Jerusalem Institute for Policy Research, 2018). East Jerusalem Arab neighbourhoods are characterised by insufficient public services (e.g., health and welfare) and a severe lack of essential resources (Asmar, 2018). Jerusalem's welfare department provides separate services to Jewish and Arab residents. Since 1967, Jerusalem has been the site of numerous terrorist attacks, many of them carried out by residents of East Jerusalem.

This brief background gives a hint of the complex urban context in which social workers as street-level bureaucrats manage cultural diversity, structural inequalities, and different levels of national conflict.

**Methods**

This study uses a constructivist grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) to provide an emic, post-positivist, interpretive analysis of the research topic. Using constructivist grounded theory enables the theoretical framework to evolve inductively from the body of data; this approach emphasizes multiple realities, participants' and researchers' positions and subjectivities, and the contextual nature of knowledge. The study is based on both participants' and researchers' meanings—going deeper than surface and presumed meanings; examining views and actions; and analysing beliefs and ideologies, situations, and structures (Charmaz, 2000).

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**Participants**

The purposive sample consisted of 20 managers and 60 frontline social workers at different levels of seniority and roles, representing both Jews and Arabs. Most of the research participants were serving one of the following three populations: children at risk, domestic violence victims, and the elderly. Participants were predominantly female and were between 25 to 60 years old; they had worked in social work practice from 3 to 25 years. All participants were certified social workers who had a bachelor's or master's degree in social work. The research team consisted of a mixed group of Jewish and Arab academics, who had years of work and research experience with social services in Israel, which facilitated their access to the interviewees. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours and was conducted by the first two authors and by experienced Jewish and Arab research assistants. Some were conducted in Arabic and translated into Hebrew before data analysis was carried out. Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Haifa's Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences, and all the participants voluntarily consented to take part in the study.

**Data Analysis**

Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data provided by the interviews and focus groups were analysed across cities and within cities, as well as across social workers by role (frontline workers versus managers). To efficiently manage the considerable data generated by the large number of interviews, interviews were transcribed and their data uploaded to Atlas, a software program that assists researchers in organising transcribed materials into thematic categories.

The data analysis had four stages. First, after uploading the interview transcriptions to Atlas, the researchers identified main thematic categories through an inductive stage of open coding. Themes and subthemes were identified through a process of constant comparisons (Padgett, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Second, we identified/extracted the parts relevant to the research aims: they constituted the “units of meaning” (Tesch, 1990), such as those related to social workers’ management of diversity and inequality. Third, we merged all units of meaning with similar content/ideas. This was done, as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998), through axial coding in which the researchers detected associations between categories and sub-categories related to context and content. Finally, we created links between themes through a process of comparison, confrontation, and reflection associated with the various themes, such as working with clients from the rival ethnic group (LeCompte & Preissle, 1994). This stage, grounded in participants’ narratives, completed the higher level of analysis from which we developed typologies and substantive perceptions (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990). Findings from the different sets of analyses were presented to and discussed with a focus group of interviewees to frame the overall theory emerging from this research.

**Findings**

This section refers to four main themes: social workers as street-level bureaucrats, the impact of national conflict, the role of social services in mixed cities, and discretion patterns in mixed cities.

***Social workers as street-level bureaucrats***

As in many other research projects on public services in Israel, the principal investigators, to obtain access to frontline workers, met with the directors of the research and documentation divisions of each agency. These meetings revealed how innovative and even provocative was the nature of this research project. The first reaction of many of the directors was to question the need for such a study. Most did not perceive social work practice in mixed cities as essentially different from that in other towns in Israel that also have some degree of ethnic diversity. Additionally, most directors were not aware of any national formal or official guidelines that regulated or guided the work of social workers in mixed cities. Moreover, participants in different positions stated that they defined the policies guiding their work at the local level according to what they perceived to be the needs and characteristics of each city. Most participants admitted that the interview made them aware for the first time of the need to define the role of social services in these complex and unique cities. It seems that the lack of formal policy left room for them to improvise, invent, and develop their own paths to manage the complexity and uncertainty and to find ways to handle grey areas of policy. In many of these meetings, interviewees shared multiple strategies they use to bridge professionalism with their street-level practices. In other words, in the total absence of written official policies, these welfare directors have become in some sense, policy makers. A Jewish social worker, serving at an upper management level in the Jerusalem welfare services bureaucracy told us that social service delivery was primarily determined by the social workers themselves, either in the absence of formal guidelines or in covert opposition to the formal guidance:

*“East Jerusalem was always denied and neglected in terms of services and infrastructure. Much of what you can see today was our own initiative. We couldn’t stand seeing the abandonment of children, the rate of poverty and unemployment and the differences between both parts of the city.”*

This narrative of policy entrepreneurship was a recurring theme. An Arab Israeli social worker, presently retired from the public services, was one of the first social workers to develop welefare services in East Jerusalem, after Israel annexation. He commented that he was sent to establish new social service programs without any official guidelines:

*“I remember that as staff, the municipality offered me a very old Jewish religious clerk from the Welfare Ministry, [with] no Arabic-language proficiency, no cultural affinity with the new population, nothing. In addition, the Israeli Army sent armed soldiers to build a position on the roof of the building to protect the personal security of the staff from the hostile Arab population. They also wanted to set up an Israeli flag on the top of the building. I, immediately, urged them to leave the building, to take down the flag, and to let me build trust with the population.… These were the first days of welfare service in East Jerusalem.”*

A Jewish welfare service director shared her views of how welfare services in mixed cities should function:

*"There is no national specific welfare policy for mixed cities. But for me, as director, the main concern is fairness. I used to divide the welfare budget for the city exactly according to the percentage of Jews and Arabs. I checked it every year…no discrimination.”*

These statements exemplify participants’ work as street-level policy makers in a context of great complexity, personal exposure, uncertainty, and unclear lines of policy. Participants shared stories in which they found creative ways to reconcile professionalism, ethics, and practice. These findings indicate the routine use of discretion and autonomy, all taking place in the context of tensions between top-down unclear formal policies and ad-hoc bottom-up policies.

***The impact of the conflict***

The absence of formal policies is particularly striking in light of the omnipresence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their work routines and encounters with both colleagues and clients. Their professional practice was particularly affected at times of escalation of the conflict, when tensions and feelings of suspicion, hostility and fear increased in the work setting. An Arab social worker illustrates those complex feelings:

*"Every time there is an escalation of the national conflict, it is reflected directly in our social service and the tension between the colleagues increases. In situations such as war or terror attacks, they (Jewish colleagues) look at us as we were guilty and responsible."*

Despite these tensions, most participants indicated that the policy is to avoid any discussion of the national conflict in the work setting. They explained that this silencing is aimed at preventing hostility and divisiveness between colleagues, as illustrated in this statement by a Jewish participant:

*"Everyone has his own opinions. He keeps them deep in his heart. He knows that he works in a mixed city with a mixed population with mixed colleagues. Therefore, it is extremely important to maintain normal relations, based on mutual respect."*

In the absence of a formal open dialogue, many Arab interviewees commented that in times of tension they minimise their interactions with Jewish colleagues. They refrain not only from talking specifically about the conflict but also from general communication between colleagues, even on work matters:

*"The atmosphere is unpleasant.… If it is not an urgent matter, I prefer to postpone it for later …workers can sit in their rooms and gossip…. [I don't get into thinking whether] I'm hurt or not, so I just stay away from the subject; I don't enter the room."*

Moreover, participants indicated that sometimes managers have to intervene in specific situations in order to reduce tensions between colleagues. For instance, an Arab participant said that during a military operation in Gaza, some workers posted racist comments on a colleague’s WhatsApp group. As a result, the manager had to intervene:

*"I remember there was joke about Muhammad.… I'm an Arab Christian but I felt that something inside of me… All of the Arab workers left the group.… It seems that the manager didn't know how to handle it. I told her that this behaviour is really offensive, that as an Arab I should not be exposed to those jokes.… She then asked everyone to stop sending personal stuff in the work’s WhatsApp group."*

Furthermore, the study found significant differences in participants’ interactions with clients during times of conflict escalation, based on the urban characteristics. Participants from Haifa and Acre tended to minimize the presence of the conflict and to say that conflict escalation was a marginal factor in their professional routines. They explained that their clients are often so preoccupied with their own needs and how they can be helped by social services that the national conflict is less likely to figure in their agenda.Nevertheless, the interviews showed that the national conflict has a strongly present in the participants’ experiences. For example, Jewish participants said that during times of conflict escalation they change some of their professional practices and avoid visiting Arab homes. In that sense they practically limit their delivery of services:

*"In periods of tension, I'm really afraid to visit Arab homes. It scares me, and I'm not willing to risk my life."*

Moreover, they said that despite the desire to leave the national conflict out of the workplace, the conflict remains present. For example, a Jewish director from Haifa reported on the difficulties she experienced when a military operation was ongoing in Gaza:

*"Twelve Israeli soldiers died; half of them were friends of my son, soldiers in his own division. At the same time, I had to participate in a community event, a party in one of the Arab neighbourhoods.... At some point they stood up in solidarity with the Arab casualties in Gaza. I also stood. Suddenly I said to myself, ?Listen, it's like being in a psychotic state. Now you stand for the Arabs in Gaza and from here you have to run hysterically to reach the soldiers’ funerals on time.”*

Interviewees working in Jerusalem reported that, during times of escalating conflict, their roles and the nature of their relationships with clients are shaped to a greater extent than reported by participants working in Haifa and Acre—indicating that their experience is influenced by the city's characteristics, because Jerusalem is usually viewed as the centre of the political conflict. One of the Jewish workers exemplified the complexity of being a social worker in the midst of a state of conflict:

*“Once I had to escort an Arab family to identify the corpse of a family member who was killed in an Arab terrorist attack in the city. Think about that. I, a Jew, have to help an Arab family in the morgue recognizing the remains of a relative who was the victim of an Arab terrorist act.”*

In sum, interviews show there is no formal official policy regarding the way social workers in the public sphere in mixed cities should deal with the presence of the national conflict in the work setting. However, the silenced presence of that conflict affects their relationships both with colleagues and and with clients.

***The role of social services in mixed cities***

The interviewees were also asked about how they perceived their role in delivering public social services in mixed cities. The lack of clear top-down national or local policies was reflected in the great variation in their definitions of their role. After analysis of their perceptions, attitudes, and practices, we developed a typology of three main approaches: universal, culturally sensitive, and critical.

*Universal approach*

Some participants—almost all of them Jewish social workers in Haifa and Acre—hold that the mission of social services in mixed Israeli cities should not be different from that of social services delivered in cities that are relatively free of conflict. Their approach is based on the core values of professionalism. Accordingly, they consider that social services should provide universal and equal services to all service recipients, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, or national origins. Therefore, this approach, which tends to minimize the complexity of mixed cities, remains committed to ensuring the universal and equal provision of services to both the Jewish and Arab populations. In their opinion, social services must function independently of the cultural and socio-political context, lest their universal, egalitarian, and professional attitude towards all their clients be compromised. In the following quote a Jewish participant explains her conscious choice to provide equal services to all clients, regardless of ethnic affiliation:

*"As social workers, it is very important that we will judge a person according to his needs and not his background. It doesn't matter if I am an Arab or a Jew, I judge a person according to his needs."*

According to these participants, social services should focus on the social problems that clients face, regardless of cultural or national background. For instance, addressing issues such as domestic violence does not necessarily require a unique cultural adaptation or consideration of the urban context. In the following sentence, a Jewish participant illustrates this view:

*"Even if sometimes I don't understand certain Arab cultural codes, then it turns out that it has nothing to do with a lack of understanding of Arab culture, but rather a lack of understanding of some codes of criminal, violent, delinquency culture.”*

These participants believe that the professional and ethical basis of social work is sufficient to provide fair, equal, and just services to all recipients in a mixed city. In their views, professionalism alone provides a solid ground to handle diversity, even in the complex and troubled context of mixed cities.

*Cultural competence approach*

In contrast, most of the research participants—both Jews and Arabs from all three cities— perceive that social services in a mixed city should provide a unique response to the clients living there that takes into consideration their ethnicity, culture, and religion. In light of their recognition of ethno-cultural diversity, these participants ascribe great importance to the cultural adaptation of the services they provide to the various communities. They believe that social workers in mixed cities must value multiculturalism and develop the skills required for culturally competent interventions, so that they can provide services to their clients according to their needs, in a non-judgmental manner. The following statement represents a Jewish participant’s view of the importance of cultural competence in mixed cities:

"*What characterises our services is our cultural sensitivity, so anyone working in a mixed city should be culturally sensitive, to respect any culture that is different from yours, …and not judge them by their cultural affiliation."*

The cultural training of social workers was a recurring theme of these interviews. Moreover, they also believe that, alongside culturally sensitive services, social workers should engage in effort to build bridges between different cultural groups; this belief is based on the assumption that one of the functions of social services in a mixed city is to promote a multicultural society and foster communication among the various communities in the city. An Arab participant speaks about the importance she attributes to creating a joint training group for Jewish and Arab volunteers:

*"It was important for me that among the volunteers in my program I would have Arab and Jewish volunteers. Today we have a mixed women's club. Even if Jewish women come and try to learn a few words in Arabic, it is meaningful.”*

While acknowledging the need to adapt services to different cultural groups, this group of social workers tends to overlook structural inequalities between Jewish and Arab residents and to ignore the impact of majority–minority unequal power relations and structural inequalities in the city, as reflected in the lack of social services for the Arab population.

*Critical approach*

A few participants, mostly Arab participants, followed a third approach. According to this critical perspective, social services in mixed cities deliberately ignore larger structural inequalities between Jews and Arabs, neglect silenced historical narratives of the indigenous Arab population, and deny the conflicted nature of mixed cities. Therefore, social services in mixed cities should address socio-political issues such as unequal majority–minority relations and national and municipal discrimination against Arab residents. In that sense, one of the major roles of social services in mixed cities is to reduce structural inequalities between Jews and Arabs and acknowledge unjust power relations. An Arab interviewee shares that the role of social services is to promote genuine social inclusion of the Arab community and to help residents combat discrimination and exclusion:

*"To look at them [at the Arab population], to give them space, to provide a cultural space, to integrate them into the city's identity, to help them be part of the place and not marginalise them and exclude them."*

The critical view was most prevalent among Arab participants from East Jerusalem, where the neighbourhoods receive insufficient public services and resources and the local Arab population lacks basic civil and social rights. Those participants perceive their role in a more active and militant way:

*“We work in these services in order to take care of a segment of the population that doesn't receive its rights from the Israeli occupier. We assist East Jerusalem residents on social, financial and emotional levels. Politically, we help them with realising their rights and applying for permits for family reunification rights that were stolen from the Palestinian people.”*

These participants thus expressed a deep identification with the oppressed population they serve and assign an active role to public social services in the construction of a more equal and just society.

In sum, participants differ in their perceptions of the role of social services in mixed cities; these perceptions are shaped by their nationality and the specific urban context in which they work. Although some Jewish participants from Haifa and Acre hold a universal approach, most of the participants from the three cities believe that social services should be culturally competent. However, Arabs from East Jerusalem hold a critical approach, claiming that social services should have the aim of reducing asymmetrical power relations and inequalities. The absence of a formal policy seems to intensify the role of social workers as street-level bureaucrats and policy makers.

***Discretion patterns in mixed cities***

In general, participants’ degree of discretion was directly linked to three central issues: redistributing resources between Jews and Arabs, increasing the number of Arab social workers and the amount of services delivered to the Arab population, and adapting welfare programs to the needs of mixed cities.

*Resource redistribution*

Participants raised the issue of distribution of funds as one of the most common areas of discretion in their practice with Jewish and Arab population. They perceive that the current policy of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Social Services on the national level does not reflect the unique needs of these cities and does not allocate sufficient funds to Arab populations in mixed cities. As a result, many of the Arab population's needs are not being properly met. Furthermore, participants mentioned that at times the government launches special programs that focus on new Jewish immigrants, leaving a smaller proportion of the budget to address the needs of Arab residents. In the following quote, a Jewish participant from Acre illustrates this situation:

*"In terms of budget allocation, the criterion is usually based on rigid formulae such as the number of residents, the socioeconomic status of the city, etc. But there is no criterion that says, 'Okay, it doesn't matter that there are only 50,000 residents, the city's complexity does matter.'... We have specific programs, but these are usually directed at the Jewish immigrants, and less at the Arab population. We have programs for Ethiopian Jews, for Georgian Jews, all supported by the Ministry of Absorption.”*

Some participants, both Jews and Arabs, shared an array of strategies they used to deal with the limited resources in the face of unmet needs of the Arab population in mixed cities. They used their professional discretion to manipulate the allocation of resources from one program to another at different organisational levels—modifying existing budgets according to the characteristics and needs of the mixed city. In the following quote, one of the Jewish managers from Acre described this practice and its underlying rationale:

*"I'm aware of the hardships of our Arab clients. Therefore, sometimes we decide to initiate a sort of 'affirmative action.' Somehow, I manage to bridge budgetary gaps…. For example, let's say the Arab population in the city is just 30%, but I decided to split the budget 50% for the Arab population and 50% for the Jewish population …in the knowledge that the level of distress among Arab society is much higher.”*

Another way to exercise discretion is to reallocate funds given by private foundations. Because they felt it was harder to raise funds for the Arab community than for the Jewish community, some participants decided to use their professional autonomy to informally distribute to the Arab population donations that were actually raised for the Jewish population. This informal channel of action was more dominant in frontline social workers’ narratives. This micro-practice was illustrated in the following quote of a Jewish participant from Haifa:

*"For instance, issues of food insecurity. So there are food donations usually on Jewish holidays. But we decided that our Arab clients should also get food donations on Jewish holidays such as Passover.... We do it through the community centre…. That way everything we provide, benefits and services, is available to all the residents."*

Participants were clearly aware that Jewish private foundations and NGOs often designate their contributions to a specific target population, usually a Jewish population. This request raises a serious ethical dilemma for social workers, who have the authority to decide how these donations will be distributed. On one hand, if they accept these significant donations for the Jewish population, they may harm the principle of equality and discriminate against the Arab population. On the other, if they refuse to accept these donations, the Jewish population in greater need in mixed cities may be have an inadequate food supply for the holidays, whereas Jewish clients in non-mixed cities are eligible for these donations. The following quote of a Jewish manager from Haifa illustrates this dilemma:

*"If someone tells me that an NGO’s policy makes Arab clients ineligible for food, then I ask the direction of the Volunteer Division to check it out, but to say 'we will take food packages only if NGOs that distribute food donations for Jews will also provide food packages for Arab families.' It's a problematic decision[... since it also harms the other population, and it's also conflictual from a municipal-political perspective."*

In this case a manager, based on her official position, played the role of policy and politics mediator on the street level. Notably, neoliberal policies in Israel have institutionalised fundraising for and distribution of NGO food donations and local fundraising as part of public social workers' role descriptions. Participants from East Jerusalem commonly engage in fundraising as the following quote demonstrates:

*"My staff and I … are among the most active workers in fundraising projects in the city. We actively recruit donors, volunteers, and develop … leadership in the community to raise funds to help our families. Still, it only helps cover basic needs."*

*Enlarging Arab representation among clients and staff*

In the absence of clear policies and procedures regulating the ethno-national composition of the programs, managers play a critical role in increasing Arab clients’ accessibility to services. Additionally, they use their professional discretion to hire more Arab social workers in what was likely a predominantly Jewish staff. In the following quote, a Jewish manager of one of the social services in Haifa described her decision to adopt a personal policy of affirmative action and to hire more Arab social workers:

*"We have no official standards (guidelines in term of staff ethnic composition).… When I interview new workers and there is an Arab worker, I employ affirmative action and try to hire more Arab social workers.”*

Furthermore, some of the participants noted that in their work they must decide whether to have joint programs for Jews and Arabs or separate programs for both populations. This is illustrated by an Arab participant from Acre:

*"We organised a community conference and invited a mixed group of Jewish and Arab residents. It was the first time something like that had been done. We also mixed more Jewish middle-class, mainstream population with more low-income Arab clients and let them raise their voices. When the conference ended, one program coordinator said to me, 'I had fun holding this conference in both Arabic and Hebrew.'”*

Similarly, one Jewish participant said that she decided to allocate an equal number of places for Arab and Jewish participants in a leadership training program. Her decision was based solely on her personal beliefs and values, as can be seen from the following:

*"We have sixty families in a special two-year program. We decided that half, thirty families, would be from the Arab community. You know, to deal with the whole thing of living together. It was our kind of choice, to promote equality because this is a mixed city. But when they suggested that I coordinate the program, they never told me how to screen the future participants. They said 'sixty families.' So for me it was completely natural to understand that I would take thirty–thirty."*

Clearly, this quote shows that, in addition to respondents’ views of social services in mixed cities, study participants’ own personal values shaped their exercise of discretion.

*Adaptation of welfare programs to the needs of mixed cities*

Participants described several anecdotes of street-level management of policy in the service of adapting existing programs to the needs of mixed cities. Research participants from all three cities reported that they made significant changes in national programs to address the unique characteristics of the communities in which they worked. One of the Jewish participants described how a program for new immigrants was modified to enable the city's Arab population to participate:

Participant: *"This is a program that works well. But by definition it was a program for immigrants, to promote the integration of the local Jewish community with the new Jewish immigrants."*

Interviewer: *"I want to understand. You changed a program that came from the national level, and adapted it to the city—instead of integrating veteran and new Jewish residents you expanded it to new and veteran Jewish and Arabs residents?"*

Participant: *"Right, exactly.*"

Furthermore, one Jewish participant noted that, as part of organising a cultural event for the elderly, she requested that the same amount of funds be allocated for Jewish and Arab artists. She explained that the institutional default is usually to address the needs of the Jewish population. Without her street-level mobilisation of resources, the Arab community would not have the opportunity to participate in cultural events. Furthermore, some of the research participants from East Jerusalem noted that the official policy of the Ministry of Welfare is not consistent with the complex reality of life in East Jerusalem. To bridge this gap between policy and actual circumstances, they adapt institutional welfare programs in a way that suits the system's goals but simultaneously fosters the well-being of East Jerusalem residents.

Moreover, Arab participants from East Jerusalem indicated that escalation of the national conflict exacerbates their professional dilemmas. In this case, animosity increases ethnic separation and limits workers to serving only their own ethnic group. For example, several participants shared that they had received a large budget to develop a new program for Arab children and youths; the program’s formal goal was to reduce the young people’s involvement in violent nationalist-motivated activities. Some participants felt the incorporation of national goals within the social services sphere was inappropriate. As a result, they developed their own services. As described in the next citation, one participant decided to include youngsters who did not fit the formal criteria in the new program:

*"The mayor initiated the care centre, in order to evacuate East Jerusalem youth from the streets, so they won't be involved in violent national activities against the armed forces. We chose to view it as a therapy initiative …. me, in person, didn't even look for youth who arre involved in such activities, but youngsters who need a therapy service. In the end I obtained my goal and the residents' goal, and not the objective of the mayor."*

The lack of formal policies, the nature of public services as distributed by street-level policy makers, and the perceptions of social services were also reflected in participants' uses of discretion. Interviewees who held the universal view seemed to exercise discretion to increase the level of professionalism of their practices to address structural inequities. Participants who defined the role of social services in mixed cities as based on the cultural competence paradigm used their discretion to promote more culturally sensitive services for both Jews and Arabs clients, whereas participants who held a critical approach tended to use their discretion to combat discrimination and different forms of oppression.

Clearly, participants’ perceptions of the role of social services were also related to each city’s unique character. Social workers in Haifa, which is usually perceived as a city of coexistence, tended to perform universal discretion based on professionalism. Social workers in Acre, which is usually characterised by inter-ethnic tensions, gave more testimonies of cultural competent discretion. Finally, Arab social workers in East Jerusalem, which is overtly identified as the core of the violent national conflict between Israelis and Palestinian and contains multiple structural inequalities as reflected in Arab residents' non-citizenship status, high poverty rates, and unequal municipal services, displayed clear patterns of critical discretion. These social workers showed deep concern and identification with the local Arab population.

**Discussion**

Research on street-level bureaucracy historically has tended to ignore the impact of national macro-institutional factors on shaping bureaucrats’ role as the liaison between the state and the citizens (Hupe, 2019). Responding to this limitation, this study examined street-level bureaucracy theory in the context of severe ongoing ethno-political conflict. It focused on four intertwined issues: public social workers in mixed cities as street-level bureaucrats, the impact of national conflict, the role of social services in mixed cities, and discretion patterns in mixed cities. The study shows the close relationship between the lack of official national welfare policies for these cities, workers’ perceptions of their role in these cities, the presence of the ethno-national conflict, and the discretion practices they implement to navigate through the complex context of ethno-national diversity, structural inequalities, and national conflict.

*Public social workers in mixed cities as street-level bureaucrats*

The study found the absence of any formal national policy regarding the role of public social services in mixed cities. This policy void enhances the uncertainty and insecurity of delivering social services in these cities, but also enabled participants to deploy a wide gamut of strategies and practices to navigate the turbulent urban context. Social workers in the study— regardless of their position, urban context, or ethnic background—enjoy a great deal of professional freedom to interpret, modify, and sometimes invent policies to meet the needs of their constituencies. The study also confirms that, despite the high level of institutionalization of social work in the public sector, social workers still have discretion in the execution and delivery of their professional tasks (Brodkin & Marston, 2013). Study participants shared multiple examples of how they controlled clients’ access to welfare activities and programs, developed and modified services and benefits, and even reallocated funds in the context of their routines. These findings confirmed that even in these conflicted areas, social workers at both the managerial and frontline level of work are street-level policy makers.

*The role of social services*

The study found three different conceptions of the role of social services in a mixed city: universal, culturally competent, and critical. The conception and differential practice of these approaches exemplify how social workers function as street-level bureaucrats in these troubled urban settings. The *universal approach*, prevalent mainly among Jewish participants from Haifa and Acre, maintains that there are essentially no differences between the role of social services in mixed cities and in other cities. This position relies on the centrality of professional and ethical discretion to ensure integrity in the service of diverse populations: the most important task of social workers is to provide equal and respectful services to all, regardless of religious, cultural, or national differences.

According to the *cultural-competence conception*, that most prevalent among participants from the three cities, the main role of social workers in mixed cities is to use cultural discretion to ensure that intervention programs, services, and policies are appropriate for the cultural characteristics of the city's population groups. The cultural-competence conception is in line with current discourses of diversity in social work literature, presenting an approach that focuses on the following issues: social workers' awareness of their own culture and values, as well as knowledge of their clients' culture, and the development of cultural competence skills (Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2003).

According to the *critical approach*, prevalent mainly among Arab participants from East Jerusalem, the main function of social services is to deal with the structural inequalities and unequal power relations that characterise encounters between Jews and Arabs in these cities. Namely, social services should address issues of power distribution, conflict-ridden majority–minority relations, cultural and national oppression, and discriminatory policies toward the Arab minority. According to the critical approach, professional and cultural competence are insufficient to address the critical question of how and when social workers in ethnically tense mixed cities should face structural and institutionalised discrimination (Baum, 2007).

*The impact of the national conflict*

Findings show that the national conflict has a strong presence among social work staff, especially in times of conflict escalation. Participants admitted that there are no formal guidelines shaping how the professional Jewish-Arab staff should jointly address the impact of these tensions. In these sense, the study show how social workers’ discretion functioned to buffer the tensions that emerge from the Israeli-Arab national conflict, thereby providing a neutral or safe political space in which they can transcend the divisive impact of the conflict in their professional lives, as is also evident in other studies (Barberis & Boccagni, 2014).

*Discretion patterns in mixed cities*

The study confirms earlier research that showed that the macro-national context shapes the ways in which street-level bureaucrats act as the liaison between the state and the citizens, especially through the exercise of discretion, especially among the most vulnerable groups (Hupe, 2019). Participants’ use of discretion and autonomy takes place within the context of explicit and latent strains between their own national affiliation (Jewish or Arab), professional values, and national tension as reflected in the urban context of mixed cities. The workers redistributed resources between Jews and Arabs; increased the number of Arab clients who received services and Arab social workers on staff; and modified welfare programs to better meet the needs of mixed cities. These practices align with the conception that social workers' discretion and coping strategies are shaped by their own ethno-national identities and biases (Watkins-Hayes, 2011). In the absence of a formal policy, social workers, except in East Jerusalem, seem to work within the framework of sharp structural inequalities that characterise the relations between the Jew and Arab population in these cities, making tweaks around the edges. Although several participants were actively involved in resisting and reducing inequalities, most avoided engaging with pervasive socio-political factors that reproduced the exclusionary status quo of the Arab minority.

In sum, the study shows the deep connection between public social workers in mixed cities as street-level bureaucrats, the impact of national conflict, the perceptions of role of social services in mixed cities, and discretion patterns in mixed cities. Our study shows that, in the light of the vague social services policy developed on the national level, the conflict present in Israeli mixed cities intensifies the roles of social workers as street-level bureaucrats who act as informal policy decision makers (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018).

In addition to these theoretical insights, the current research has some practical and policy implications. In response to globalisation, frequent local and global crises, and the increasingly contested nature of multi-ethnic cities, we recommend developing public social services, and the policies guiding them, that respond to the sharp structural inequalities and intense cultural tensions that characterize the work of public services in these urban settings. Furthermore, there is a need to develop tailored training in public administration that aims to reduce social workers’ cultural and ethnic biases and guides their appropriate use of discretion in policy implementation, especially in the context of on-going political conflict.

A few research limitations should be noted. First, although this study is based on a relatively high number of interviews in three cities, generalisability of the findings to all Israeli mixed cities is limited. Secondly, there is a need to further study the role of social workers as street-level bureaucrats in delivering public welfare services in Israel and other countries and contexts; the perceptions of the users of these services should be investigated as well. We envisage that such research will deepen understanding and enable research-informed social services that are suitable for urban, culturally dynamic, and contested environments.

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