**Community work as street level bureaucracy: Discretion in the context of political conflict**

**Abstract**

Scarce research has examined community workers as Street Level Bureaucrats and their discretion use to provide services in communities affected by high levels of political conflict. Given the deep transformations affecting urban communities in the 21st century, such examination is highly relevant. This qualitative study addresses this gap in current research by examining public community workers patterns of discretion within the complex context of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. This group of professional public workers organize, build, and develop communities to create social changes. The study underscores the ways workers' images of communities come into play in their use of discretion as they respond to issues of structural inequalities, ethno-cultural diversity, and a violent political conflict. It suggests a conceptualization to understand community workers' discretion in highly conflicted urban settings. The study also reveals community workers' limits of discretion when engaging with communities affected by ethnonational conflicts.

Keywords: Street Level Bureaucracy; Contested cities; Political conflict; Community work; Discretion

**Introduction**

Street level bureaucrats (SLBs) are public service workers who regulate access to services, having substantial discretion in the execution of their work (Lipsky, 2010). Interpreting policy when interacting directly with citizens, frontline workers become informal policy decision-makers who play key role in constructing policy from bottom-up. Given current processes of globalization, international migration, and growing racial and ethnic diversity within urban communities around the globe, SLB scholarship has paid increased attention to SLBs use of discretion within these contested environments (Strier et al. 2021; James & Julian, 2020; Belabas & Gerrits, 2015). The current study examines the understudied topic of community workers as street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) within highly contested urban settings. The study has two major contributions to SLB theory. First, the study joins the scarce research examining the role of public community workers as SLBs and their patterns of discretion. While SLB literature has widely discussed frontline workers’ patterns of discretion when interacting with individuals, it has understudied the mezzo level of how SLBs use their discretion to organize and shape the communities in which they work (but see: Durose, 2011; Aviv et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2021). One of the main groups of frontline workers who are engaged in such practices are community workers. This group of professional public workers implement policies on the community level and engage in processes that create social, economic, and political changes (Hardcastle et al. 2004; Gamble & Weil, 2010). Community workers' engagement with the community as a central unite call to expand our understanding of core issues in SLB literature such as the patterns of discretion and the factors that shape their decision-making processes, their involvement in policy entrepreneurship and their influence on macro issues of social inequalities (Lotta & Pires, 2019; Cohen, 2021).

Second, the current study joins the growing line of research examining the ways SLBs use their discretion in response to issues of majority-minority relations, diversity, and social inequalities (Lotta & Pires, 2019; Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Choi & Hong, 2020). More specifically, this article contributes to the efforts to better understand SLBs execution of discretion within highly contested urban settings riven by racial, ethnic, and political conflicts. This issue is especially relevant, given the diverse urban communities of the 21st century, and SLBs implications of ethnic divide and social inequalities.

Thus, the current study asks how do public community workers exercise discretion in highly conflicted urban settings characterized by structural inequalities and ethnic divide? It examines this question within the complex settings of Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities. These cities are home to a wide range of racial, cultural, religious, and ethnic groups, and are site of an ongoing violent national conflict. They are characterized by Jewish-Arab neighborliness, intergroup tensions, urban spatial disputes and structural inequalities (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003). Therefore, exploring community workers' patterns of discretion in these cities, can shed light on how they interpret and shape the urban community in highly contested settings.

**Street-level bureaucrats**

According to Lipsky's (2010) foundational work, when formal policy is ambiguous or contains various contradictory objectives, and when frontline workers can exercise discretion and have relative autonomy from organizational authority, the actions of the latter become the actual policy (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010; Hupe & Hill, 2007). In this sense, SLBs, such as teachers, social workers, and police officers, de facto become informal policy players who influence the policy process. Unlike other public workers, SLBs enjoy a considerable degree of discretion that enables them to determine 'the nature, amount and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies' (Lipsky, 2010. P.13). Since Lipsky first indicated SLBs’ essential role as informal policymakers, discretion became a theoretical key concept in street-level bureaucracy studies. Scholars have widely developed the concept, highlighting the contemporary dynamic environment in which SLB's work (Cohen et al. 2016), the crucial role of professionalism (Evans, 2015), the nature of collective discretion (Rutz & Bont, 2020), creativity within the use of discretion (Visser & Kruyen, 2021), and SLBs’ involvement in policy entrepreneurship (Arnold, 2020; Cohen, 2021).

SLBs’ studies widely discussed the multilayered factors that influence frontline workers' discretionary decisions and coping mechanisms. Cohen (2018) classified these factors and distinguished between personal characteristics, organizations' characteristics, and the environment. Studies have suggested that workers' personal characteristics such as beliefs, values, perceptions towards clients, as well as their socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds shape their use of discretion (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Keiser, 2010). With regard to the organizational settings, studies have shown that organizational constraints and conditions, supervisors and organizational support, as well as relations with colleagues affect use of discretion (Lavee et al. 2018; Keulemans & Groeneveld, 2019; Brodkin, 2011; 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 (Strier et al. 2021; Cohen et al. 2016; Cohen, 2018).

Alongside the specific factors that influence SLBs’ choices, their execution of discretion has far-reaching implications on macro issues of inequality and social justice (Lotta & Pires, 2019). Brodkin (2013) offered to view 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. They are sites in which individuals claim group recognition, as well as negotiate socio-political status such as race, class, and ethnicity (Brodkin, 2012; Watkins-Hayes, 2011; Marston, 2013).

SLBs’ interpretation of policy in the diverse societies of the 21st century has been portrayed in the literature in a dual mode. Studies have identified cases in which SLBs exercise their discretionary power to promote equality and social justice to achieve more just and professionally acceptable practices. In these cases, SLBs work in favor of disadvantaged communities, resisting structural inequalities and discriminatory practices (Arnold, 2020; Aviv et al. 2021; Cohen, 2021). For instance, Lavee et al., (2018) describe Israeli public social workers’ efforts to fix policy in the area of urban renewal that in their view harms their clients. Alongside, studies have shown that in some cases practitioners and managers cope with SLBs constrains, by adapting to working practices that reproduce structural inequalities and discriminate against minorities (Musil et al. 2004; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). For example, Monnat (2010) explored the individual and contextual roles of race in welfare sanctions and found that Black and Latina women are at the greater risk of being sanctioned, compared to white women.

Given the crucial role of SLBs in the policy process, SLB scholarship has paid increase attention to frontline workers' discretionary decision-making in response to issues of diversity and ethnocultural, class, and social inequalities (Lotta & Pires, 2019; Strier et al. 2021; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Predominantly, it has examined SLBs patterns of discretion when interacting with individuals from diverse backgrounds in terms of race, culture, nationality, and religion (James & Julian, 2020; Belabas & Gerrits, 2015). However, it has understudied the mezzo level of how SLBs use their discretion when engaging with ethno-culturally diverse communities in which they work (but see: Durose, 2011). Such investigation is especially relevant, given the highly contested communities of the 21st century and SLBs implications on ethnic divides and social inequalities. One of the main groups of professionals that are engaged in such practices are community workers. Rather than focusing on the individuals, the mission of these public workers revolves around the 'community' as the central unit, which is a polysemic, contested concept that can be understood in diverse ways. Primarily, they help community members to collaborate around shared interests and create social change on different levels (Hardcastle et al. 2004; Gamble & Weil, 2010). Thus, the current study examines community workers’ policy implementation in order to shed light on SLBs’ nature of discretion when operating on the community level.

**Community and community practice**

Community is a ubiquitous term. It is widely used by politicians, the media, and the public to describe groups, frame the relations between citizens and the state, express aspirations for shared future, and justify policies. However, 'community' is a contested, elusive, and polysemic concept (Blackshaw, 2010). The term, originally developed by classic sociologists, such as Durkheim (1984), Marx (1963), and Tonnies (1955), is portrayed both as a real social reality that can be seen in people's everyday lives, as well as an idea and imagined entity (Jansen, 2019). Community 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' that bring people together (Weil, 2005). Community as place refers to people who share a physical site with geographic boundaries such as a neighborhood, town, or city. Another representation of community is more functional. From this perspective, groups of people sharing common traits, such as identity or a specific concern, can become a community. Namely, common beliefs, norms, practices or grievances, may be translated into communities acting collectively (Strier, 2009).

Communities, however, can also be understood as metaphors; imagined, symbolic, and interpretive units (Anderson, 1991; Freie, 1998). According to Bauman (2001), in the world of liquid modernity characterized by inequality, collision of cultures, and political instability, communities turned defuse and individualized. Therefore, community becomes largely a representation or image in people’s mind, at the expense of a concrete physical manifestation. Bauman believes that in the current era people’s longing for community reflects their desire to gain stability in the insecure world (Blackshaw, 2010). From this romantic popular view, community is associated mostly with positive image of a warm and comfortable place (Bauman, 2001). It is portrayed as a social entity that gather people regardless of differences, and symbols solidarity, partnership, intimacy, and collective action. At the same time, the imagined element of community often functions as a discriminatory tool. Communities' boundaries, 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 the evasive nature of the concept, it becomes evident that community is an inherently political concept. Depending on the specific point of view and people's understanding of the term, community can be charged with political ideology and used to promote public policies that directly affect issues of social justice and inequality (Jansen, 2019). More practically, the discourse about community frames public policies and shapes the relationship between citizens and the state (Hancock et al. 2012; Lynn, 2006).

'Community' lays at 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 very inception, community practice has been one of the main methods in the social work profession. This macro practice focuses on the community level, based on the belief that citizens should be active agents and influence their environment (Meade, et al. 2016). Community workers are engaged in strategies of community organizing, planning, development, capacity building, and social action (CSWE, 2018). They do so to enhance disadvantaged communities' wellbeing as well as to create social, economic, political, and cultural change (Meade et al. 2016; Hardcastle et al. 2004; Gamble &Weil, 2010). In some cases, governmental community workers face conflict of loyalties: they promote social change and at the same work for public authorities (Popple, 2015). Community workers in the 21st century work in highly challenging environments, subjected to growing inequality, neoliberalism, and immigration trends. Consequently, they engage daily with increasingly contested multiracial and multicultural communities (Gutiérrez and 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 and Weil, 2013).

Given the polysemic nature of community as a concept and field of work and the interpretive space policy implementation requires, it makes sense that they allow room for community workers to construct community's images in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, despite the political aspects of any community and the growing trend of community-focused policies followed by community-based services (Banks & Butcher, 2013), exploration of community workers’ patterns of discretion remained scarce in SLB scholarship. Among the few scholars who examined these professionals within the context of SLB theory, Durose’s (2011) significant work explored the strategies of frontline workers in local governments and neighborhood managements in responding to demands of engaging with the community. 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 neglects to analyze public community workers' patterns of discretion in the highly conflicted urban settings of the 21st century, that is characterized by structural inequalities and ethnic divide. Moreover, it understudied the polysemic nature of 'community', and the ways in which community workers' images of community come into play in their use of discretion. The current study aims to fill this gap by examining community workers' execution of discretion within the context of Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities.

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

Globalization and immigration trends of recent decades have caused many cities worldwide to become highly contested with racial, ethnic, national, and cultural conflicts. The current study examines the specific case of Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities, which are characterized by ethnic division and are at the heart of a national conflict. These cities are populated by a majority of Jews and a minority of Arabs (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities have complex histories and have undergone drastic demographic transitions which their detailed description is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, prior to the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which ended in the establishment of Israel, most of the residents of those cities were Arabs. Following the war, however, many Arab residents were expelled or fled from their homes. Accordingly, these mixed cities are currently populated by a Jewish majority and an Arab minority (Yiftachel and Yacobi, 2003). Our study examines four mixed cities whose Arab composition ranges from 11 to 31 percent: Acre, Haifa, Lod, and Ramla.

Even though Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities are hometowns for both Jewish and Arab residents, the literature depicts them as polarized. They are characterized by intergroup tensions accompanied by struggles over public spaces and resources, clashing historical narratives, and continuing struggles over cultural, religious, and national identities of the city (Yiftachel & Yacobi, 2003; Monterescu, 2015; Yacobi, 2007). Studies have indicated that municipal policies often reproduce segregation between the two populations and trying to preserve the Jewish majority within the cities. Moreover, they show that structural discrimination towards the Arab population is reflected in urban planning policies, the labor market, and distribution of resources and social services (Leibovitz, 2007; Yiftachel & Yacobi 2003; Shdema et al. 2018).

**Methodology**

The study adopted a constructivist grounded theory approach. This approach aligns with the 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 when working in these cities. Moreover, interviews elicited participants' perceptions of the urban community and their responses to ethnic-national challenges.

Participants were recruited through the municipal social services. The purposive sample were predominantly female and consisted of twenty Jewish participants and twelve Arab participants from four mixed cities: Ramla, Haifa, Acre and Lod. The participants engaged in a variety of community practices, such as 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 and 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 information that could identify the interviewees was excluded from the final report.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis program, was used to analyze the transcripts. Data was analyzed across participants' national affiliations and across cities. We followed several steps in the data analysis process. First, 'open coding' was used to identify initial categories that developed inductively from the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). addittionaly, constant comparisons were made within each transcript and among different interviews. Then, we used an 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 as they implement policy and build the community’s identity and character. Their interpretations play greater role given the ambiguous national and municipal formal policy that regulated the work of community workers within Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. The analysis uncovered three main images of the urban community: community as encounter of cultures; community as unequal power relations; and community as nationally conflicted relations. Each image generated two common patterns of discretion, demonstrated in this section. Some participants hold one central image, while others carry a combination of them.

**Community as encounter of cultures**

The first image that emerged in our study was community as consist of cultural encounters. This image of community blurs national differences and views the Arab population not as a distinct national group, but as one cultural group among many other that inhibit the urban landscape. Most of the research participants, Jews and Arabs, described the urban community as mosaic of cultures, and emphasized the interactions between a variety of cultural groups, not necessarily Jews and Arabs. In the following quote, a Jewish participant illustrates this perception:

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

This representation of community was common among interviewees. Some participants emphasized the local identity of the urban community describing it as multicultural not necessarily in a negative manner. One of the Jewish participants described this local collective identity:

"There is a strong local identity here […] it is not related to politics, but to the shared lives, to the neighborliness. […] (this urban identity) crosses cultures, and the multiculturalism in the city does not composed only of Jews and Arabs, but also of religious and seculars, immigrants from Caucasia. Highly diverse multiculturalism."

This image of the 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 participants' discretion, as many of them work to strengthen the urban community's cultural sensitivity and allow the shared existence of ethnocultural groups. They have done 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 sought to initiate community activities that enable Jewish and Arab residents to cooperate with each other, get to know their respective cultures, and consequently weaken intergroup hostility. They have done so mainly by organizing activities that highlight the common ground between Jews and Arabs in the city and cultivate a shared urban identity, as illustrated in the words of a Jewish participant:

"Many times, we work on the shared needs, and the multicultural encounter […] occurs as part of the joint work. Even if in the beginning the encounter revolve around the shared interest, it also develops 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 the shared coexistence and sought to promote tolerance in the urban community. Other participants shared they initiated ethnic-cultural events to strengthen multiculturalism and bring together the Jewish and Arab residents. For instance, in the following quote an Arab participant explains her choice to organize an 'Iftar' meal, traditionally celebrated every evening during Ramadan, for both Arabs and Jewish residents in a mixed neighborhood in order to promote the shared existence:

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

*Promoting cultural and linguistic accessibility*

Participants put their efforts in removing cultural barriers and actively adjusting their community activities linguistically and culturally. Some of them indicated that they advertise their activities in various languages and use the service of interpreters in community meetings. Furthermore, some of the participants noted that they take into account holidays and cultural or religious codes while planning community activities. For example, one Arab participant described the development of a municipal community mediations group. Alongside Western oriented mediation training usually used in Israel, he insisted on developing a parallel course that is culturally adjusted to the Arab society's norms, as described in the following quote:

"When we in the city council decided that we want 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 the Israeli norms for mediation and to dress it on the Arab society. It doesn't work […] because in the Arab society we have community leaders, we have a pardons committee […] before we use the law we use […] the religion as a mediation tool. It was hard to accept it originally 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, shared that they work to promote cultural accessibility through employing staff that represent the diverse ethnic groups in the city. They believed that such an institutional diversity would expand minority populations' identification and constitute a role model for the urban community, as illustrated in the words of a Jewish manager:

"The team consists only of residents […] and they do represent the diversification of the communities that exist here. […] It was a statement that this home […] it has a place for everyone […] we are all different and we're all coming from different places […] and if we are successful in creating a common language between us that's accepting and enabling and allowing to be then this is something that we can go out with to the community as well"

In sum, many participants perceived the urban community as culturally diverse and used their discretionary space to strengthen the shared existence. They have done so through promoting community activities of 'knowing the other' and developing cultural and linguistic accessibility. While prevalent as a community practice discretion, focusing on cultural differences and sensitivity avoids targeting issues of inequality and dealing with the national conflict.

**Community as unequal power relations**

Some participants highlighted a second image of community. According to this perspective, 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 lack of municipal resources and public services. Some of them shared that they view the Arab neighborhoods as external to the city, and in practice described two separate urban communities, as illustrated in the word of a Jewish participant:

"(Between the Jewish and Arab neighborhoods) there is a boundary. 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 is exaggerated. The rail is extremely wide, eight tracks, and there is no built passageway […] there in no bridge. No path […] you just cross, walking on the rail itself."

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

"When it comes to areas with Arab population (the police says) ok there is a fight, 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, nor garbage can. […] But when my mom sold the house and moved to a neighborhood with 80% Jewish population, you cannot believe the order and cleanliness; they have daily (municipal) garbage pick-up."

This image of community acknowledges the unequal power relations between the Jewish majority and the Arabs minority, while overlooking the present of the national conflict. Analysis shows that this image of community is reflected in participants use of discretion. Some participants, mostly Arab, actively operated to reduce, challenge, or resist inequalities. They have done so in 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 national services for the Arab population. Primarily, they develop community services bottom-up, organize community members to fight for services, and pressure municipal policymakers. For instance, an Arab participant shared she organized residents to fight for the establishment of playground and community center for children and youth in Arab areas in the city. In the following quote she illustrates her practice and its underlying rationale in promoting municipal justice:

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

Similarly, given the high crime rate in an Arab neighborhood and lack of law enforcement activity, 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 and city council and police representatives, as described in the following quote:

 "What helped and promoted it (to establish new police station) is that more than 50 women who lost a son or husband to murder, signed (the letter) and went and spoke (In the meeting with the city council representatives). Everything had to be done covertly since if someone had known that these mothers and widows spoke, they would have been killed. […] following, the police realized that if they come to the neighborhood, the people there will assist them."

In other cases, participants shared they develop the public services themselves to attend to the communities’ needs. For example, an Arab manager of a community center that provides services for the Arab population, established an Arab cultural center, as described in the following quote:

"I advanced many initiatives […] that in practice promoted equality […] for example, we opened a center of Arab cultural shows and events […] it made a revolution for the city's Arab population".

*Promoting access to and redistribution of public resources*

Some participants shared that when planning community activities, they decide to allocate resources such as budgets and spots in community programs, striving to promote equality between the Jewish and Arab populations. In the following quote an Arab manager illustrates this practice and its underlying rationale:

"When I received a budget to promote social health […] I put in front of me 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 come and say that I'm building one plan for a specific neighborhood […] nobody is making me do otherwise because there's no policy."

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

"Because of the community’s fears from evacuation, and that […] they won’t be allowed to come back. So, 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 would be completed."

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

**Community as nationally conflicted relations**

The third image of community is shaped by the nationally conflicted relations between the Jewish majority and Arab minority. Urban communities in the 21st century around the globe deal with the implications of ethnic, racial or political conflicts. In our case, SLBs' depiction of community is formed within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict.

Most of the research participants hold that the community learned to detach the national level of the conflict from their urban daily life. From that perspective, the community created an alternative, a unique sphere within Israel that enables Jewish-Arab neighborliness based on mutual respect that maintains the status quo.

However, many of these participants identified the national conflict as an underlying sensitive factor that could easily cause hostility and tension between residents. Daily interactions between the Arab population and the establishment, as well as between Jewish and Arab residents, can easily escalate and surface disagreements rooted in the national conflict. In the following quote an Arab participant illustrates this perception:

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

Moreover, participants indicated that the Israeli-Palestinian national conflict is expressed in demographic struggles within the mixed cities. Many of them shared that the urban community experience struggles over the urban space regarding issues of dominance, segregation, and integration. They described struggles over municipal resources, around cases of residents refusing to sell apartments on a national basis, and over changes in minority-majority composition within the city. In the following quote, a Jewish participant demonstrates this complexity:

"This tension (of the struggle for urban space) is very string 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 it be "owned" by Jews or Arabs? […] Every case like that is a political struggle".

This image of the urban community acknowledges the present of the national conflict. However, given the controversial nature of this issue, most of the participants choose to avoid calling attention to the conflict. They believe that direct engagement in this sensitive issue is unprofessional, might flaw their ‘neutrality’ and is not part of their role. Still, some that hold this image do use their discretion to mitigate tensions and preserve the status quo. This image is reflected in two common patterns of discretion: mitigating tensions between the Jewish and Arab populations and considering whether to conduct segregated or integrated community activities.

*Mitigating tensions between Jewish and Arab populations*

Multiple participants initiated community activities to preserve the status quo, 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' to the Jewish 'Yom Kippur', both characterized by fasting, some participants organized activities to raise awareness regarding the public space and its usage, to prevent an argument. In another case, a Jewish participant organized a municipal ethnocultural leaders' group, that aims to intervene in times of municipal crises. In the following quote she described this forum's intervention after a Muslim youth killed a Jewish resident. Her words illustrate how this community initiative operates to bring down the flames in the urban community:

""A Jew went outside with his dog. There were around 7 teenagers (Muslims) […] an argument was developed between them, they called one of their friends that arrived with a gun […] In the same morning I'm getting phone calls […] from leaders of the Jewish society and Arab society […] and in less than 24 hours we gathered here (for a meeting) […] the group signed together on a declaration that calls the residents of the city to keep living in coexistence. Moreover, a group of leaders from the Arab society went to the family for a condolence visit. […] And, of course, after every meeting as such each leader goes back to his community and transfers the message."

Moreover, following the Arab population's lack of trust in the establishment, some participants shared that they organized dialogue meetings between Arab residents and municipal officials such as police officers. One of these examples 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 place some of the soldiers in a school located in an Arab neighborhood, angered the Arab residents. In the following quote, he explains his conscious choice to organize a dialogue meeting between Arab's community leaders and decision-makers:

""From a moral perspective this is excellent, the Home Front Command came […] (to help) reducing the infection rate […] but what did we get from the field? […] that in the end of the days they are soldiers […] and it is hard for the Arab population to deal with it. […] 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 society […] 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 is brings parties closer. A unifying conversation."

*Segregated or integrated 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. In line with the demographic struggle many participants indicated that the Jewish residents asked them to provide separate community activities. Additionally, in some cases when practitioners conducted mixed activities, Jewish residents abstained from participating. Participants, predominantly Arabs, shared that they aim to conduct mixed community activities, to promote coexistence within the city. In the following quote an Arab participant described 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 saying that is coming from the Jewish Orthodox community that we need separation […] 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 shared a situation where the activity she organized had to move to a new place that was associated with religious right-wing Jewish movement. This new location 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:

"That was the instruction from the Social Department but it came from the major. […] 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 that I will move there […] I insisted […] The groups that moved there are exclusively Jewish groups. […] I received (From my team leader) the instruction to move there. They also told her that perhaps the group there won't have any Arabs. So when I heard it I got upset even more."

A few participants, however, shared that they decided to conduct the activities separately. The reasons were sometimes vague or not explicit revolve around negative past experience with trying to mix the two populations or respect the community's preferences for separated activities. In the following quote a Jewish participant shares such an experience, struggling to establish a joint group of women who suffers from domestic violence. She explains why she stopped recruiting Arab women:

"We recruited Jewish and Arabs women […] with time the [Jewish] women didn't want to interact with the Arab women. […] as the group continued to meet, 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 image of the urban community in the context of the national conflict was reflected in some participants' patterns of discretion. Specifically, they dealt with conflict's implications in two main areas: preventing of tension escalation between Jewish and Arab populations and organizing activities in segregated or integrated ways, depending on the situation or approach. Acknowledging the present of the national conflict, these participants' practice focused on bringing down the flames and preserving the status quo.

**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 divide. It has done so by analyzing the ways public community workers exercise discretion in Israeli Jewish-Arab contested mixed cities. The study underscores the ways community workers' images of community come into play in their use of discretion and reveals their limits of discretion when engaging with contested communities. The study confirms that public community workers are SLBs who have 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). Particularly, against the background of ambiguous policy, community workers initiated activities that construct policies from the bottom-up. The study also joins a growing line of research showing that socio-political context often shapes SLBs use of discretion (Cohen, 2018; Cohen et al. 2016). By highlighting the different images of community that practitioners hold, it emphasizes the significance of SLBs' context interpretations to policy implementation. It reveals that SLBs images of community were highly present 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 who focus on the 'community' as a central unite, interpret, and construct the term in a variety of ways. In line with their understandings of the urban community, SLBs use of discretion effects, strengths or changes these representations of community. In that, they actively shape the character and identity of the urban community as well as construct the relationship between citizens and the state (Hancock et al. 2012; Lynn, 2006). The study sheds light on how SLBs interpretation of the socio-political environment, shapes their exercise of discretion (Freie, 1998; Bauman, 2001). Hence, to better understand SLBs patterns of discretion, SLBs scholarship do not only need to be aware of the context, but also take into account SLBs' images and representations.

We identified three main images of community, generating six common patterns of discretion. The first image is 'community as encounter of cultures', which views the urban community as mosaic of cultures and focuses on ethnocultural sensitivities and differences. In line with this representation of community, SLBs who hold this perspective become cultural brokers. They use their discretion to strength the shared existence of ethnocultural groups through '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 present of the national conflict. The second image is 'community as unequal power relations', that views the urban community as characterized by structural inequalities and institutional discrimination against the Arab population. These SLBs become inequality change agents who are engaged in policy entrepreneurship, influence the design of policy (Cohen & Aviram, 2021). They use their discretion to reduce inequalities through two main strategies: 'developing public services for the Arab population' and 'providing access to and redistribution of public resources'. While acknowledging social inequalities and power relations, this image of community overlooks the present of the national conflict. The third image is 'community as nationally conflicted relations'. This representation acknowledges majority-minority relations within the context of ongoing violent Israeli-Palestinian national conflict. In response to this image, 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 preserve the status quo. Based on our findings, we offer a conceptualization of community workers' patterns of discretion in highly conflicted urban settings:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Nationally conflicted relations | Unequal power relations | Encounter of cultures | **Image of community** |
| Conflict buffers | Inequality change agents | Cultural brokers | **SLBs role** |
| SLBs acknowledge the present of the national conflict and focus on mitigating tensions and preserving the status quo. | SLBs reduce and resist structural inequalities between the Jewish majority and the Arab minority, while overlooking the present of the national conflict.  | SLBs strength the urban community's cultural sensitivity and allow the shared existence 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** |

This conceptualization helps to better understand SLBs execution of discretion within highly contested urban settings, particularly affected by structural inequalities and ethnopolitical conflicts. Building 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 consequences of discretionary choices, directly reduced social-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 images, developed intergroup cultural encounters and reduced inequalities while tend to overlook the presence of the national conflict. Community interventions that focus on cultural aspects, were the most common and perceived as highly acceptable. Patterns of discretion that aims to reduce inequalities, mostly economic, perceived as subversive and were less common, but still legitimate. The third image of community acknowledges the conflict and its implications. Despite this awareness, SLBs tend to minimize their engagement in the subject and put their efforts to bring down the flames and mitigate tensions and preserve the status-quo.

Their lack of engagement in the political nature of the community, may seems 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 (Brodking, 2012; Lotta & Pires, 2019). Community workers in particular are expected to achieve ‘active communities’ (Butcher et al. 2007) while promoting inclusion, social justice, and equality. Hence, at first glance we would assume that community workers, in which their primary role is to organize community members around shared interests and create social and political changes, would not avoid the conflict and initiate interventions around the topic (Hardcastle et al. 2004; Gamble &Weil, 2010). In practice, SLBs do not use their discretion to directly handle the conflict, get involved in policy entrepreneurship (Cohen, 2021) and initiate dialogue but to seek to protect the community from its' conflictual nature. Participants explanation to this approach highlights the role of professionalism in their use of discretion (Evans, 2015), as they believed that as public servants, they need 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 research (2019), SLBs discretion may reproduces 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, that reduces the present of the national conflict, is well illustrated in the absence of any formal national policy regarding the role of public social services in these cities (Strier et al. 2021). We therefore suggest, that the Israeli hegemonic atmosphere shapes SLBs patterns of discretion and covertly constructs discretions' limits. In that sense, interventions that directly manage the national conflict and challenge it are portrayed as out of limit. The study shows that when implementing policy within highly conflictual and sensitive environment, SLBs discretion has clear, yet sometimes covert boundaries. In that sense, SLBs can use their discretion in ways that do not exceed the national hegemony.

This study has certain limitations. First, since this 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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