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

**Ethno-Political Conflict**

**Abstract**

Scarce research has examined street level bureaucracy in cities affected by on-going ethno-political conflict. This study addresses this limitation by exploring the work of social workers in the public services of mixed cities in Israel. The study 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 and workers’ own ethnic bias in the ways in which they act as liaison between the welfare system and the citizens through the use of discretion.

Keywords: Street-Level Bureaucracy; Discretion; Public Services; Political Conflict; Mixed Cities.

**Introduction**

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

**Social workers as street-level bureaucrats**

Studies portray public social workers as a classic example of street-level bureaucrats (Lypsky, 1980; Lavee, Cohen, & Nouman, 2018; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Authors, 2019). 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 become the policy they 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 prevail over the unstable supply of services (Ellis, 2007).

Discretion is a key concept in street-level bureaucracy approach, and hence a main line of research has examined what influences front-line workers' decisions-making and strategies (Moore, 1987). As indicated by some studies, personal values, emotions, ethnic and socio-economic background, organizational settings, the broader socio-political environment (Cohen, 2018; Lavee et al., 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), and street-level bureaucrats' professionalism (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018) are counted as important factors that might shape their choices. Evans (2010a, 2010b) has criticized the street-level bureaucracy approach for neglecting the important role of professional discretion in the particular field of social work. In this regard, to contribute to more just, trustworthy, transparent and accountable social services, managers and front-line workers of public social services try to handle their tasks by developing high levels of professionalism, as embodied in continuous training, specialisation, implementation of evidence-based practices and increasing awareness of diversity and inequalities (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). However, the vague and uncertain institutional milieu of the public social services confronts both managers and front-line social workers with serious ethical and practical dilemmas regarding social and ethnic inequalities. Studies have shown that 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 (Watkins-Hayes, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). These studies indicate that public social services may be a 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 et al., 2010). In many cases, public or hybrid social services may embody biased system of social provision that reinforces racial and ethnic inequalities (Neubeck & Cazenave 2001; Schram, Soss, &Fording, 2003). For example, Schram, Soss, and Fording (2009) demonstrated how case managers implement welfare sanctions and financial penalties applied to individuals who fail to comply with welfare program rules and how their implicit racial biases shape officials' decisions to impose sanctions. Vigoda-Gadot et al. (2008) assert that street-level bureaucracies perform a major role in the determination of political attitudes particularly within contested societies. In these complex societies street-level bureaucracies play a significant role in the mediation of 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 according to the ethical principles (Authors, 2013). For example, Anasti (2019) showed how the emotional and moral discourse surrounding sex workers has shaped the response of street-level bureaucrats that work with this population, sometimes in conflict with agency and field policies.

Despite the growing interest in how socio-political factors shape street-level bureaucrats' discretion on issues of diversity as well as social and ethno-cultural inequality (Brodkin, 2013; Belabasa & Gerrits, 2017), limited research has examined street-level bureaucrats' work within the context of mixed ethnic cities characterised by ethno-political conflicts. In this regard, this pioneer study directly addresses this limitation by looking the specificity and reality of mixed ethnic cities, particularly when this is accompanied by a harsh, violent, ethno-political conflict, shaping or challenging in turn social workers’ discretion and their professional policy implementation. The study examines the strategies that Jewish and Arab social workers in local managerial and front-line roles adopt to grapple with cultural diversity and structural inequalities in the public social services provided in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities, characterised by an omnipresent national-political conflict over space, culture, identity and existence.

**Mixed cities**

Mixed cities are the focus of research in various disciplines, including urban planning, geography, public policy, sociology and education (Calame & Charlesworth, 2012). Studies portray mixed cities as cities with a population comprised of different ethnic, national and/or religious groups, all of whom are confronted with 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 of which they are comprised (Adelman & Elman, 2014). In many instances, mixed cities are at the centre of an ongoing political conflict, as manifested in the cities of Belfast, Mostar, Beirut and Jerusalem. In such instances, mixed cities are likely characterised by a multiplicity of inter-ethnic tensions, open competition for public resources, and an ongoing conflict over the hegemonic definition of the city's cultural, religious and/or national character (Solitsiano & Gofer, 2009). The reality of ethnically mixed, yet ethno-politically contested cities raises complex issues related to municipal management, majority-minority relations and urban justice. To deepen understanding of how social workers serving as street-level bureaucrats in different roles cope with diversity, inequality, and national violent conflict, this study analyses the similarities and differences that social workers experience in their work in mixed cities in Israel.

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

The social work profession has become increasingly aware of the ethnic diversity of social workers’ clientele (Sue & Sue, 2003) and the presence of ethnic discriminatory practices by social workers. The profession has responded to these issues through the development of more multicultural competent interventions, services and policies. Theoretically, Jenks, Lee, and Kanpol (2001) identified three main approaches to addressing ethno-cultural diversity, thought to influence social services delivery: conservative, liberal and critical multiculturalism. The first strengthens dominant discourses and hegemony, and thus limits 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’, and thus encourages a culturally-competent social services system. The critical approach strives for social justice and equality, which are arguably achievable only through in-depth dealing with questions related to the wider socio-political context.

The social work profession seems to have adopted the second approach, i.e., liberal multiculturalism emphasizing cultural competence. The American 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). The social work profession has consequently increased the number of practitioners who are competent to handle diversity-related issues in many multiethnic settings (Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). 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).

Despite the significant contribution of liberal cultural competence training in welfare service delivery, vital issues remain unresolved in the context of multiethnic society specifically characterised by ethnic, national and/or religious tensions that can take an extreme form, such as in Israeli Jewish-Arab mixed cities. Consequently, the present study responds to this challenge in light of critical theories which illuminate the biased political and ethnic nature of these services (Baines, 2008; Authors, 2013). 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.

 **Context: Haifa, Acre and Jerusalem**

Israel population counts 9,199,700 residents (75% Jews and 21 % 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. However, these cities are usually portrayed in the public sphere as having different societal images. 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. Differently, the view of Jerusalem as a mixed city is highly contested. Jerusalem is usually at the core of the 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% Arabs (Haifa Municipality, 2018). While in 1946 almost half of Haifa's residents were Arabs, following the 1947 war which ended in the birth of the State of Israel only 3,500 Arabs remained in the city (Margalit, 2014; Leibovitz, 2007). Primarily throughout the 1950s and 1980s many Jewish immigrants were settled in Haifa. Currently, Haifa has a diverse mixed population in terms of ethnicity, culture and religion, including Jews, Muslims and Christians (Kallus, 2013). Moreover, in Haifa the same social services department provides mixed-integral services for both Jewish and Arab residents. During the second intifada in 2000 several terrorist attacks were perpetrated in Haifa, and in the Second Lebanon War the city suffered losses and damage in substantial missile attacks. Nevertheless, Haifa is conceived in the general Israeli society as, relatively, 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 were a majority in Acre and constituted more than 90% of the city's population. Interestingly, according to the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, proposed in 1947, Acre was supposed to be included in the Palestinian state (Botzer, 2006). However during the war, many Arab residents were forced to leave Acre, and many Jewish immigrants were settled in the city (Falah, 1996; Torstrick, 2000). The city has presently 47,500 residents, 68.6% of whom are Jews and others (non-Arab) and 31.4% 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 experienced several acts of violence between Jews and Arabs.

Jerusalem too is one of the world’s ancient cities and considered holy by the three main monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. However, Jerusalem’s definition as a mixed city is highly contested (Klein, 2001). Divided into eastern (Jordanian) and western (Israeli) parts in the 1947 War, in 1967 following the Six Day Arab-Israeli war, Israel occupied East Jerusalem. 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, since both Israelis and Palestinians claim Jerusalem as their capital. Jerusalem has 882,700 residents, 62% of whom are defined 'Jews and others' and 38% '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 the different levels of national conflict.

**Methods**

In order to answer the research questions, the study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007), to provide an emic, post-positivist, interpretative analysis of the research topic. The reason for the utilisation of constructivist grounded theory relates to the need to develop a theoretical framework that evolves inductively from the body of data and emphasizes multiple realities, participants' and researchers' positions and subjectivities, and the contextual nature of knowledge. The approach looks at both participants' and researchers' meanings, going beyond surface and presumed meanings, examining views and actions, as well as analysing beliefs and ideologies, situations and structures (Charmaz, 2000).

**Participants**

In this study, 80 semi-structured in-depth personal interviews were conducted with managers and social workers at varying levels of seniority from the three aforementioned Israeli mixed cities: Haifa, Acre and Jerusalem. The interviews addressed participants’ perceptions of the challenges and coping strategies that characterise the work of social services in mixed cities, and the interviewees’ response to structural-institutional inequality and the needs of culturally-diverse yet tense populations. In order to strengthen the credibility of the study’s findings, three focus groups were also conducted in each city to triangulate data and analyses. The purposive sample consisted of 20 managers and 60 front-line social workers at different levels of seniority and administration, representing both Jews and Arabs. Most of the research participants were involved in one of the following three domains of social welfare services: children at risk, domestic violence, the elderly population. Participants were predominantly female who aged 25 to 60 years old and their length of working in social work practice varied between 3 years to 25 years. All participants were certified social workers who attained a bachelor's or master's degree in social work. The research team consisted of a mixed group of Jewish and Arab academics. Authors have lengthy experience involving work and research with social services in Israel, a matter that assisted the research team in receiving access to the interviewees, who voluntarily consented to take part in this study. Interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours and were conducted by the first two authors and by experienced Jewish and Arab research assistants. Part of the interviews 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.

**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 across social workers by role (front-line workers versus managers). To efficiently manage the considerable data generated by the large number of interviews, interviews were transcribed and data uploaded to 'Atlas', a qualitative software program that assists researchers in organising transcribed materials into thematic categories. The data analysis followed *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 (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Padgett, 1998). Second, the parts relevant to the research aims were identified/extracted, and they constituted the “units of meaning” (Tesch, 1990), such as those related to social workers’ management of diversity and inequality. Third, all units of meaning with similar content/ideas were merged. 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, links between themes were created 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 towards the development of 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 finally draw 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 in the public services in Israel, research principal investigators usually had to meet some formal requirements to get access to interviewees, including personal meetings with the directors in charge of the research and documentation divisions of each agency. These meetings unveiled how innovative and even provocative was the nature of the research project. The first reaction of many of participants in these preliminary meetings was to question the need for such kind of study. For in their early views, mixed cities were not perceived as essentially different from other towns in Israel which also have some degree of ethnic diversity. Additionally, most participants were not knowledgeable of any national formal, official guidelines that regulate or guide the work of social workers in mixed cities. Moreover, participants in different positions stated that they have defined their policies at the local level according to what they perceive the needs and characteristics of each city. Most of participants admitted that the interview confronted them for the first time with 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 to them to improvise, invent, and develop own local paths to manage the complexity and uncertainty and to find ways to handle grey zones 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 the high management level of Jerusalem welfare services believes that much of the welfare policy regarding the mixed composition of the city was determined by the social services themselves, usually in the absence of formal guidelines and sometimes in covert opposition to 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 narrative. An informant, an Arab Israeli social worker, presently retired from the public services, was one of the first social workers to start developing services in East Jerusalem, after Israel annexation. He commented that he was sent to establish new social services without any official guidelines:

*“I remember that as staff, the municipality offered me a very old Jewish religious clerk from the Welfare Ministry, 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 setup an Israeli flag on the top of the building. I, immediately, urged them to leave the building, to take off the flag and to let me build trust with the population…these were the first days of welfare service in East Jerusalem”*

Another participant, 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 use to divide the welfare budget for the city exactly according the percentage of Jews and Arabs. I checked it every year…no discrimination”*

These quotes exemplify participants’ work as street level policy makers in the midst of high 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 show 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 lack of formal policies reported is striking in light of the heavy presence of the conflict in their routines. Participants confirmed the presence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their work, both in their encounters with colleagues and clients. This is especially prevalent at times of escalation of the conflict, when tensions and feelings of suspicion, hostility and fear arise in the work setting. In the next citation an Arab participant 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 in the service is to avoid any discussion of the national conflict in the work setting. They explained that this silencing is aimed to prevent hostility and separation between colleagues, as illustrated in the quote of 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 lack of a formal open dialogue, many Arab interviewees commented that in times of tension they minimise their normal interactions with Jewish colleagues. This refraining is not only linked to conversations on the conflict, but also to 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 interfere in the situation:

*"I remember there was joke on 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’ experiences with clients during times of conflict escalation, based on the urban characteristics. Research participants from Haifa and Acre, tended to minimize the presence of the conflict and said that conflict escalation is a marginal factor in their professional routines. They expressed that social service users are too busy with their cases such that the national conflict is less likely to figure in their agenda.Nevertheless, analyses revealed that the national conflict is heavily present in participants’ experiences. For example, Jewish participants said that during times of escalation they change some of their practices and avoid visits in Arab homes. In that sense they practically reduce their 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 in times of a military operation 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'."*

However, participants from Jerusalem noted that during times of escalation the national conflict shapes their role as well as the nature of their relationships with clients to a greater extent. Their experience is shaped by the city's characteristics, since 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 formally official policy regarding the way social services in mixed cities should deal with the presence of the national conflict in the work setting. However, the silenced presence of the conflict affects both the workers’ relations with colleagues and clients.

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

The study inquired about the ways in which participants perceived their role in mixed cities. The lack of a clear top-down national or local policies was expressed in the great variations in the definition of the role of social services. Findings raised three main approaches: universal, culturally-sensitive, and critical approaches. Despite the fact that sometimes participants hold contradicting views, the typology focuses on their core narratives, derived from their perceptions, attitudes and practices.

*Universal approach*

In the perception of some participants, almost all of them Jews from Haifa and Acre, the role of social services in mixed Israeli cities should not be different from other municipal social services. 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 their ethnic, cultural, or national origins. Therefore, this conception which tends to minimize the complexity of mixed city remains committed to ensure 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 they impair their universal, egalitarian and professional attitude towards all their clients. In the following quote a Jewish participant explains her conscious choice to provide equal services to all regardless their 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 these participants, social services should focus on the social problems that clients face, regardless of their culture or national background. For instance, addressing issues such as domestic violence does not necessarily require a unique cultural adaptation or a reference to the urban context. In the following quote, 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 may provide a solid ground to handle diversity, even in the complex and troubled context of mixed cities.

*Cultural competence approach*

Contrary to the universal approach, most of the research participants, Jews and Arabs from the three cities, perceive that social services in a mixed city should provide a unique response to the various clients living in the city, taking into consideration their ethnicity, culture, and religion. In the light of recognition of ethno-cultural diversity, these participants ascribe great importance to the cultural adaptation of the services provided to the various communities in the city. This group believes that social workers in mixed cities must hold values of multiculturalism and foster 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 quote illustrates 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."*

For these participants, the cultural training of social workers is a recurring theme. Moreover, they also believe that, alongside culturally sensitive services, social workers should engage in forming bridges between different cultural groups. This approach is based on the assumption that one of the functions of social services in a mixed city is to promote a multicultural society and communication between the various communities in the city. In the following quote, 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.”*

This group acknowledges the need to adapt services to the different cultural groups but tends to overlook structural inequalities between Jewish and Arab residents and 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, portrayed 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, as well as deny the conflicted nature of mixed cities. According to this view, social services in mixed cities should not silence socio-political issues such as 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. As the following quote of an Arab interviewee demonstrates, 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."*

Moreover, for these participants, social services in mixed cities reflect large socio-political factors that shape its roles. The critical view was most prevalent among Arab participants from East Jerusalem, where the neighbourhoods are characterized by insufficient public services and resources, and 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 expressed a deep identification with the oppressed population they serve and assign an active role to the 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, perceptions shaped by their nationality and the specific urban context. While 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 the services should reduce power relations and inequalities. The absence of a formal policy seems to intensify the nature of social workers as street-level bureaucrats and policy makers.

***Discretion patterns in mixed cities***

In general, participants’ discretion was directly linked to three central issues: developing resource redistribution between Jews and Arabs; enlarging the Arab participation in services and staff; adapting welfare programs to the needs of mixed cities.

*Resource redistribution*

Participants raised the issue of distribution of budgets as one of the most common discretion issues in their practice with Jewish and Arab population. According to their perceptions, the current policy issued by the Ministry of Social Welfare and Social Services on the national level does not refer to the unique needs of these cities and does not allocate any additional budgeting to Arab populations in mixed cities. Therefore, many of the Arab population's needs are not properly addressed. Furthermore, participants mentioned that sometimes 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”.*

In order to deal with the limited resources and the special needs of the Arab population in mixed cities some participants, Jews and Arabs, share an array of strategies to put in practice their professional discretion to manipulate the allocation of resources from one program to another at different organisational levels. They decided to modify the existing budget 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”*.

Furthermore, another avenue of discretion is fundraising from private foundations. According to participants, it is harder to raise funds for the Arab community than for the Jewish community. As a result, 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 micropractice 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 NGO’s often seek to designate their contribution to a specific target population, usually a Jewish population. This request places social workers, who are entitled to decide how these donations will be distributed, in serious ethical dilemmas. 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 will be left in short 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 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 the Arab participation in services and staff*

In the absence of clear policies and procedures regulating the ethno-national composition of the programs, managers play a main role in increasing Arab clients’ accessibility to services. Additionally, they use their professional discretion to hire more Arab social workers in a predominantly homogenous 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 employ 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 make decisions regarding joint programs for Jews and Arabs or separate programs for both populations. This is illustrated in the quote of 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 totally based on her personal beliefs, as can be seen from the following quote:

*"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 were also present in the use of discretion.

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

Participants described several anecdotes of street-level management of policy surrounding issues of lack of adaptation of programs to mixed cities. Research participants from the three cities reported that they made significant changes in national programs in order to address the unique characteristics of mixed cities. One of the Jewish participants described how a program for new immigrants was modified in order 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 an equal budget should be allocated for Jewish and Arab artists. She explained that the institutional default is usually to address the needs of the Jewish population. In that sense, without 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 they sometimes feel that the official policy of the Ministry of Welfare is not consistent with the complex reality of life in East Jerusalem. In order 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 serves the wellbeing of East Jerusalem residents.

Moreover, Arab participants from East Jerusalem indicated that escalation of the national conflict exacerbates their professional dilemmas. In this case, conflict animosity increases ethnic withdrawal of each side and limits workers’ discretion to their own ethnic group. For example, several participants shared that they had received a large budget in order to develop a special service for Arab children and youths. The service's formal goal was to reduce their involvement in violent national-motivated activities. For some participants, the incorporation of national goals within the social services was inappropriate. As a result, participants created their own coping strategies. As describes in the next citation, one participant decided to include in the service youngsters who did not fall directly in the formal criteria:

*"The mayor initiated the care centre, in order to evacuate East Jerusalem youth from the streets, so he 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 is 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."*

Findings also show that the lack of formal policies, the nature of public services as street level policy makers, and the perceptions of social services was also reflected in participants' uses of discretion. Interviewees who hold the universal view seemed to use discretion to raise the level of professionalism of their practices to address structural inequities. Participants who define the role of social services in mixed cities as based on cultural competence paradigm used their discretion to promote more culturally sensitive services for both Jews and Arabs clients whereas participants who hold 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 uniqueness. Social workers in Haifa, which is usually portrayed in public opinion as a city 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. Just 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 sharp 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**

Street-level bureaucracy research historically has tended to ignore the impact of national macro-institutional factors on shaping bureaucrats’ role as 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. The study 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 interconnected relation between the absence 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 working in these cities but also enabled participants to deploy a wide gamut of strategies and practices to navigate the turbulent urban context of these services. Findings show that social workers in the study regardless 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. It also confirms the idea 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 social workers control clients’ access to welfare activities and programs, develop and modify services and benefits in the context of their routines. These findings confirmed that even in these conflicted areas social workers at the managerial as well as the 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 exemplifies 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 to serve diverse populations, and states that the most important task of these services 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 services in mixed cities is to develop 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 the current discourses of diversity in social work literature, presenting an approach that focuses on the following subjects: social workers' awareness of their culture and values; social workers' knowledge of clients' culture; development of cultural competence skills ( Nadan & Ben-Ari, 2013; Sue & Sue, 2003).

According to the *critical approach*, prevalent mainly among Arab participant from East Jerusalem, the main function of social services is to deal with 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, as well as 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 would face structural and institutionalised discrimination (Baum, 2007).

The impact of national conflict

Findings show the heavy presence of the conflict at the staff level, especially in times of conflict escalation. Participants admitted that there is no formal guidelines how the professional Jewish-Arab staff should jointly address the impact of these tensions. In these sense, the study show how social workers’ discretion was functional to buffering the tensions that emerge from the Israeli-Arab national conflict to provide a neutral or safe political space in which they can transcend the dividing impact of the conflict in their professional lives, as also evident in other studies (Barberis & Boccagni, 2014).

Discretion patterns in mixed cities

The study confirms previous studies that showed that the macro-national context shapes the ways in which street-level bureaucrats act as liaison between the state and the citizens, especially through the use of discretion especially among 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. This was evident in the present study in the areas of developing resource redistribution between Jews and Arabs; enlarging the Arab participation in services and staff and adapting welfare programs to the needs of mixed cities. This aligns with the conception whereby social workers' discretion and coping strategies are shaped by their own nation-ethnical identities and bias (Watkins-Hayes, 2011). In the absence of a formal policy, social services seem to comply with the sharp structural inequalities that characterize the relations between the Jew and Arab population in these cities. Namely, while several participants were actively involved in resisting and reducing inequalities most of them avoided engaging with the wide socio-political factors that reproduced the exclusionary status-quo of the Arab minority.

In sum, the study shows the intertwined 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 vague social services policy, the national 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).

Alongside these theoretical insights, the current research has some practical and policy implications. Following globalisation, frequent local and global crisis, and the growing contested nature of highly multiethnic cities, we recommend developing services, and policies for public social services aimed to respond to 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 focus on the presence of cultural and ethnic biases in the professional practice, discretion and policy implementation of public civil servants 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 the participating 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 welfare in Israel and other countries and contexts, include welfare service users' perceptions. 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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