RESEARCH ARTICLE

When active representation is not enough: ethnic minority street-level workers in a divided society and policy entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Can street-level workers from an ethnic minority in a divided society act as policy entrepreneurs and affect policy *design*? How their shared values with the homogeneous local government play a role in enabling policy entrepreneurship? Active representation refers to bureaucrats promoting the interests of the clients with whom they share the same characteristics or background. The assumption is that the behaviour of the bureaucrats—rather than their background, per se—affects citizens' responses. However, in such cases, although they are active, street-level workers are fighting to change outcomes within institutions established by others. With regard to Arab social workers in Israel, we provide a new perspective on how ethnic minority street-level workers in a divided society may go beyond active representation in an attempt to directly influence policy design as entrepreneurs. We also identify the conditions that drive policy entrepreneurship and the strategies used to accomplish these goals.

Keywords Street-level workers · Policy entrepreneurship · Active representation · Ethnic minorities

Introduction

Representative bureaucracy has long been considered an indicator of equality of opportunity, open access to government, and government by the people (Mosher, 1982). Scholars consider representative bureaucracy a significant factor influencing public perception concerning a state's legitimacy and its ability to effectively implement policy (Groeneveld & Van de Walle, 2010). It has been claimed that representative bureaucracy benefits both public organizations and citizens (Atkins & Wilkins, 2013; Keiser et al., 2002; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). While minorities benefit from being served by bureaucrats who share their

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background (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016; Selden, 1997; Wilkins & Keiser, 2006), active representative is possible only when the bureaucrats can exercise discretion in implementing policy (Meier, 2019; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

Street-level workers exercise considerable discretion in their work (Portillo, 2012; Sager et al., 2014; Thomann & Rapp, 2018), which is put into practice when interpreting policies for specific situations (Brodkin, 1997; Raaphorst et al., 2018). The decisions made play a major role in how policy actually works, as opposed to how it was designed (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). However, over the last decades, policies in many countries around the world and in various fields are being delivered through nongovernmental organizations, for profit firms and mixed public–private partnership operating in competitive and performance-oriented settings (Considine et al., 2015). Therefore, although street-level workers are frontline service providers, in many cases, they can no longer be considered merely as bureaucrats (Hill & Hupe, 2014). Moreover, studies have found that over the last decades, factors related to the broader socio-political environment, such as new public management ideologies and reforms, general culture, and national political conflicts, influence the decision-making of street-level workers (Cohen, 2018; Nouman et al., 2019; Strier et al., 2021).

Previous literature demonstrates that the complexity of street-level workers jobs, and their rules, instructions and guidelines, are inadequate in determining how a policy should be carried out (Cohen, 2021). Therefore, under certain conditions, street-level workers may be innovative, not only in implementing policy (Arnold, 2015, 2021; Durose, 2007; Petchey et al., 2008; Tummers, 2011), but also in employing strategies to influence the design of the policy (Cohen & Klenk, 2019; Cohen, 2021; Frisch-Aviram et al., 2021; Lavee et al., 2018). In some cases, they will do so when they believe that the current policy harms the well-being of the citizens clients (Lavee & Cohen, 2019), specifically, when they feel alienated from new (Tummers, 2012) or ongoing (Cohen, 2021) policies. As with other policy entrepreneurs (Mintrom, 1997; Sætren, 2016; Zahariadis, 2008), street-level workers use innovative strategies not only to promote their own interests but also to create new opportunities (Cohen, 2021).

In the present study, the literature on street-level policy entrepreneurship is linked with that of active representative bureaucracy. Studies in the latter area show that minority groups are often underrepresented in public agencies (Andrews et al., 2005; Grissom et al., 2009; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Roch et al., 2010; Theobald & Haider-Markel, 2009). These studies also indicate that the match between the backgrounds of the bureaucrats and their clients has a strong effect on minority groups (i.e., the citizens) (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Rocha & Hawes, 2009).

However, much less attention has been devoted to the question of whether street-level workers from an ethnic minority group in a divided society can act as street-level policy entrepreneurs to influence policy outcomes. Thus, two questions were examined: Can minority street-level workers in an ethnically divided society act as policy entrepreneurs and affect policy *design,* and under what conditions? How their shared values with the homogeneous local government play a role in enabling policy entrepreneurship among such workers? In addition, the present study aims to understand what strategies these workers adopt in order to influence policy design.

These questions are examined in reference to Arab social workers in Israel who provide social services to Arab citizens in the country. These classic street-level workers share both language and culture with their citizens/clients (in this case, Israeli Arab citizens). Israel is an interesting case study because the country is an example of a deeply divided society, and the population encompasses various ethnic and cultural groups (Neuberger,

2007). While there are many social rifts in this multicultural society, one of the major divisions is the residential segregation between the majority (Jews) and the minority (Arabs) (Lewin-Epstein & Semyonov, 1992). Although Israeli law declares that all citizens have equal rights, Jews constitute the majority in the country. The Israeli Arab minority suffers from discrimination and social marginalization (Levy & Massalha, 2010).

The present study makes several contributions to the literature. First, the discussion on active representation is broadened by focusing on the possibility that street-level workers belonging to an ethic minority in a divided society may act as policy entrepreneurs. In fact, the common culture, values and worldview of bureaucrats and citizens may lead street-level workers not only to deviate from the formal policy when implementing it, but also adopt innovative strategies aimed at influencing the design of a benevolent policy for minority citizens. This study not only analyses the strategies used to promote policy change, it also identifies the factors that promote street-level policy entrepreneurship. Second, the discussion on street-level policy entrepreneurship is expanded on by exploring how the potential clash between the formal policy that ethnic minority street-level workers are supposed to enforce in a divided society, and their values as part of this minority group, lead them to act as policy entrepreneurs. The present study maintains that in such instances, street-level workers tend to behave in a manner that challenges the official policy by actively attempting to influence its design.

Literature review

Active representative bureaucracy and street-level policy entrepreneurship

Active representation usually refers to the degree to which civil servants actively promote the interests of the clients similar to them (Selden, 1997). In such situations, passive representation leads to active representation for minority clients (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2016; Selden, 1997; Wilkins & Keiser, 2006). In these cases, it is the bureaucrats' practices that will affect their clients' well-being (Selden, 1997).

More recent research has suggested that passive representation itself may have substantive effects on clients, without any action taken by bureaucrats, through the alternative mechanism of enhanced trust and cooperation on the part of citizens, a process known as "symbolic representation" (Gade & Wilkins, 2012; Riccucci et al., 2014). This symbolic representation hypothesis leads to the expectation that citizens will be more willing to cooperate and thus coproduce more effective policy outcomes when their gender, race, ethnicity, or even shared identity is represented in a government bureaucracy (Riccucci et al., 2016).

Indeed, scholars suggest that minorities benefit from being served by bureaucrats who share the same background (Meier & Bohte, 2001; Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Roch et al., 2010). These benefits may occur even though institutional variables discourage minority bureaucrats from acting in the interests of their own group (Nouman & Azaiza, 2021; Wilkins & Williams, 2008). Nevertheless, active representative is possible only when civil servants can exercise discretion in implementing policy (Meier, 2019; Meier & Bohte, 2001; Sowa & Selden, 2003).

Discretion in implementing policy is perhaps the most common characteristic of all types of street-level workers (Lipsky, 2010). The literature points to various factors influencing this discretion: (1) personal characteristics, such as the ideology, attitudes,

preferences and values of street-level workers; (2) organizational factors, such as administrative requirements and constraints in the enterprise; and (3) environmental characteristics, such as the influence of various actors outside the workers' bureaucratic agencies (for a review, see Cohen, 2021).

The cultural background of street-level workers may also play a major role in their behaviour (Cohen, 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2011). Studies indicate that minority street-level workers actually reinforce majority values more strictly to fit in (Watkins-Hayes, 2011; Wilkins & Williams, 2008). They may belong to different social groups, so that social forces and processes occupy the space between the "law on the books" and the "law in action" and interfere with their use of discretion (Lotta & Pires, 2019). As a result of these insights, scholars have taken various sociological perspectives on public servants' use of discretion. Examples of these perspectives include their worldview (Schneider & Ingram, 2005; Stone, 2002) and their social history (Harrits & Møller, 2014; Møller & Stone, 2013).

Studies indicate that stereotypes about minority group service users result in their being evaluated and/or treated more harshly than majority-group service users (Dubois, 2010; Harrits & Møller, 2014). From this perspective, the discretion of street-level workers is a complex moral process, where identity-based reasoning determines how laws, procedures and policies are implemented, or who gets what services and who is ignored (Baumgartner, 1992). Thus, social inequality might affect how street-level workers implement policy with minority group members (Lotta & Pires, 2019).

However, what happens when street-level workers themselves belong to an ethnic minority group in a divided society and share the same values? Findings from representative bureaucracy literature, together with the connection between the background of the officials and their decision-making regarding minority groups, might provide insights. Representative bureaucracy theory posits that the socio-demographic background of public servants affects their values and, hence, their administrative decisions. In addition, through early socialization, people sharing social demographic backgrounds share certain values (Meier & Morton, 2015; Mosher, 1982). Therefore, it can be expected that in a divided society, street-level workers from a minority group interacting with service users from that same group will not apply negative stereotypes because they share the values of the service users and identify with them (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019). Furthermore, when minority member street-level workers in a divided society encounter problems with the policies they are supposed to enforce with their fellow minority group members, and in turn, feel alienated from policy design (Tummers, 2012), they may become motivated to act as policy entrepreneurs and influence policy design.

Although research emphasizes the relationship between discretion and the workers' cultural background (Cohen, 2018; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019), it focuses on the policy implementation stage, not on policy entrepreneurship or policy design. The present study posits that street-level workers not only deviate from the formal policy when implementing it, but also try to influence its design as they see fit. The conditions under which they choose to act and the strategies they use depend on their culture, values and worldviews.

Street-level workers' policy entrepreneurship and ethnic minorities

Research does indicate that minorities try to influence policy outcomes, especially through the third sector (ACOSS, 2010; Craig, 2011; Jamal, 2017; V4C, 2011). They are motivated

by factors such as solidarity with the social problems and hardships of minority citizens with whom they share a common ethnic identity (Jamal, 2017; Munson & Bent-Goodley, 2014). Their goal is to promote the equal distribution of national resources and access to social services, empower the minority society they belong to, and strengthen their political participation (Blackburn & Ram, 2006; Hart et al., 2008).

Policy entrepreneurs identify a policy problem, create an alternative to address the problem, and act in various ways to influence the design of the policy (Monaghan, 2008; Zimmeck et al., 2011). They utilize strategies such as participation in coalitions, sponsorship of workshops and conferences, activities to represent the population (ACOSS, 2010; V4C, 2012), media campaigns, political alliances, mediation processes and the promotion of legislation (Beeri-Sulitzeanu & Darawshe, 2013; Craig, 2011; Lukes, 2009).

Studies have also identified the need for a supportive organizational environment for street-level workers from minority groups as a prerequisite for policy entrepreneurship (Awad-Elias & Nouman, 2023; Nouman & Azaiza, Accepted). The conditions under which street-level workers from an ethnic minority in a divided society feel alienated from policy design and act as policy entrepreneurs are the focus of this article. In addition, the study examines the action strategies used, with the assumption that the cultural background of the street-level officials from minority groups plays a key role in social entrepreneurship strategies.

The context: Israeli Arab social workers as street-level workers

In Israel, the Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs (the Ministry) provides personal and social welfare services to individuals, families and communities through the social service agencies of the local authorities. Each of the local authorities, i.e., local council, regional council, and municipality, maintains a social welfare office for the care of, and the extension of relief to, indigent persons (Section 2 (a) of the Welfare Services Law, 1958). The Ministry's Division for Personal and Social Services is responsible for setting policy, developing personal and social welfare services, and supervising and controlling the implementation of policies. In addition, the Division provides professional advice and guidance to social services departments in local authorities and participates in the financing of services (The Ministry of Welfare & Social Affairs, 2021).

Social workers employed in social services departments are defined as street-level officials who meet citizens who contact them as part of their work routine, and they provide public goods and services as an implementation of policies regulated by decision-makers. They exercise discretion and adapt policy practices to emerging needs. The social and personal services provided in social services departments by social workers are vast and varied, and include individual and family care, care for the elderly, the disabled, children and adolescents, immigrants, people with addiction and girls in distress, as well as youth rehabilitation, treatment for domestic violence, and more. Today, there are 251 social services departments throughout the State of Israel, including 84 departments in Arab localities.

Israeli Arab citizens are the main minority group in this State, numbering 1.9 million citizens who constitute 21% of the population (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2019). This minority tends to live in separate communities and has its own culture, religion, language and educational system (Azaiza, 2013; Lavie, 2016). Despite increased levels of interaction between Jewish and Arab societies in Israel, there are major differences between them that are reflected in social and economic stratification and the unequal distribution of resources and budgets allocated to welfare, education, healthcare, housing and employment

(Beeri-Sulitzeanu & Darawshe, 2013). Thus, this is not a case of multiculturalism but rather, a context of a divided society with an ethnic conflict. Over the years, this conflict has led to violent clashes between Jewish and Arab citizens. For example, in May 2021, severe violence erupted during the Israel–Palestine crisis, most notably in mixed cities. These violent episodes occurred in the context of escalating tensions between Israel and Hamas, pending evictions of Arabs in East Jerusalem, and clashes between Arab citizens and police forces at the Al-Aqsa Mosque. These incidents resulted in multiple injuries and serious property damage. Jewish and Arab citizens violently attacked each other on the streets, and torched and damaged houses, cars, places of worship, and public buildings.

Arab citizens of Israel face many more difficulties than their Jewish counterparts. These difficulties include unemployment, poverty, delinquency, disease, lack of basic infrastructure, and the weakening of informal support systems (The Galilee Association, 2018). Studies have documented the unequal distribution of resources and funds from the Ministry to Arab clientele compared with Jewish clientele. As a result, in the Arab community there are fewer public resources for social needs (Gal et al., 2017). Lack of support from the central government means that the Arab local authorities have fewer resources to allocate to social welfare activities (Mahajne et al., 2021). The lack of money is exacerbated by the lack of adaptation of the Ministry's intervention methods to the social structures, values and religious norms of Arab society (Mahajne, 2018).

The hierarchical structure of the local government in general, and in Arab localities in particular, involves two major players: the elected political echelon and the professional echelon. In most cases, the mayor is the one who employs social workers and other professionals, rather than direct managers in the organizational hierarchy, such as human resources managers or even department heads. Hence, social workers are required to have direct contact with the mayors, a requirement that often leads to conflicts of interest regarding political and professional considerations. Studies have documented that the bureaucratic hierarchy and dominance of local political leadership in Arab localities greatly influence the professional conduct of social workers and social service departments. Therefore, political initiatives for change, designed to address scarcity in the community, are often avoided by the leadership because they are interpreted to be in defiance of the formal social and religious institutions in the community (Nouman & Aziaza, 2021).

Arab social workers employed in public welfare agencies in Arab local authorities share a common identity, language and culture with their minority clients. They are required to implement policies dictated from above that are often not beneficial to the population. This study seeks to examine how the potential clash between the formal policy that minority street-level workers are supposed to enforce, and their values as part of this minority group, lead them to act as policy entrepreneurs. To accomplish this goal, three cases were examined in which Arab social workers employed by public welfare agencies in Arab localities succeeded in bringing about a change in policy. Focusing on the successful redesign of a policy makes it possible to identify the factors that motivate street-level policy entrepreneurship and analyse the strategies used to promote policy change.

Methods

Between 2017 and 2019, the first author conducted a large-scale study dealing with understanding the role of social workers from the Arab minority group as providers of social welfare services in Arab localities and their methods of operation. This study,

which included qualitative interviews with 78 Arab social workers, led to the understanding that while many operate as service providers, only some of them act as policy entrepreneurs to challenge the official policy and influence its design.

The present study focuses on the social workers who acted as policy entrepreneurs in the previous study and expanded the sampling framework. This was done using case study methodology consisting of several stages. In the first stage, the transcripts of the interviews conducted with Arab social workers in the previous study were reviewed to identify conditions under which they acted as policy entrepreneurs and succeeded in changing policy. From these transcripts, experienced research editors and research assistants from the Arab community identified three key areas that met this criterion:

(1) The promotion of policies for women caught in the "cycle of violence". Arab social workers acted as policy entrepreneurs in the local arena to persuade decision-makers to adopt policies aimed at protecting and supporting Arab women exposed to domestic violence. They did so by addressing their unique needs, including adapting the policy to reflect their clients' language and culture. These efforts led to the establishment of a comprehensive joint municipal body of social workers, and representatives from the community and the police who coordinate activities for the protection and support of women.

(2) The establishment of services for people with disabilities in Arab villages. The Ministry is responsible for establishing services for the disabled in the country. However, existing services for people with disabilities are located in Jewish communities that are further away from the Arab villages and do not provide for Arabic speakers and their cultural needs. As a result, people with disabilities in Arab villages have found it difficult to take advantage of these services. To address this issue, Arab social workers acted as policy entrepreneurs vis-à-vis local governments to persuade the leaders to allocate resources to establish culturally adapted services in Arabic for residents with disabilities. These efforts led to the establishment of centres for the disabled in five Arab villages.

(3) The promotion of employment opportunities for women in the villages. Arab social workers acted as policy entrepreneurs in the local arena to persuade local leaders to adopt a policy promoting employment opportunities for women living in poverty in the villages. Over the years, using various state-funded welfare programs, social workers employed in public welfare services have trained many women living in poverty to enter the labour force. Nevertheless, these women did not enter the workforce due to cultural barriers in a traditional patriarchal society in which it is not customary for women to work outside the village. The efforts of the social workers led to the promotion of an urban policy that works to establish industrial centres in the villages by providing tax incentives for companies that move their factories to the villages.

In the *second* stage of the case study, in-depth interviews were conducted with the social workers who were identified in the first stage in order to pinpoint the conditions that motivated them to adopt entrepreneurial strategies. In addition, chain referrals were used to contact other social workers who acted as policy entrepreneurs in any of the three areas, inviting them to participate in the study. A total of 28 social workers from the Arab minority were sampled, nine of whom were identified from the transcripts in the first stage, and the rest from snowball sampling.

In the first area, seven social workers employed in two localities were sampled, in the second area, 13 social workers employed in five localities were sampled, and in the third instance, 8 social workers employed in two localities were sampled. The majority of the participants were women (81%), between the ages of 25 to 75 ($M = 38$; $SD = 10.1$), and years of seniority ranged from 3 to 25 years ($M = 14$: $SD = 9.8$). Most represented the Muslim religion in Arab society (78%) and the rest were Christians or Druze. All the participants were certified social workers with a bachelor's or master's degree in social work.

The interviews were conducted between January 2019 and July 2019. Half of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in social services departments in Arab communities and the other half were conducted by telephone. Each interview lasted an hour to an hour and a half. The interviews focused on understanding the role of social workers as street-level policy entrepreneurs, determining their motivations to act as policy entrepreneurs, and identifying the strategies they used in the entrepreneurial process.

In the third stage, the transcripts of the interviews were analysed according to content analysis principles based on the constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This process, which was compiled using Atlas software, included several phases. In the first phase, initial coding of the data was defined. To this end, all the statements in all of the interviews were coded. In the second phase, the codes were grouped according to conceptual categories that reflected commonalities among them. In the final phase, the concepts and categories extracted from each interview were examined and then consolidated axial coding followed to compare and connect the categories to identify the themes in the interviews. The analysis continued until no new themes emerged (Green & Thorogood, 2018). Several reviewers then examined the themes to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings.

Ethics of the study

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the author's university. Compliance with ethical requirements was adhered to at all stages of the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants signed an informed consent form. To protect the participants' identities, identifying information and the data provided were kept in separate protected files and removed from the findings section.

Findings

Motivations for policy entrepreneurship

Analysis of the interviews revealed that the cultural background of the street-level workers from the minority group played a key role in their policy entrepreneurship. In all three areas, the clash between the formal policy that they were supposed to enforce and their values as part of this minority group led them to act as policy entrepreneurs. We identified three conditions that motivated street-level policy entrepreneurship: (1) solidarity with and responsibility for minority citizens experiencing distress; (2) a supportive organizational and political environment; and (3) being part of a professional network.

Solidarity with and responsibility for minority citizens experiencing distress

A key factor that motivates street-level policy entrepreneurs is their solidarity with and sense of responsibility for fellow members of their minority group in distress. In all of the interviews, the participants noted that the formal policy they were expected to enforce was not adapted to the social structure, values and social perceptions of Arab society. This failure exacerbated their clients' distress and called for an immediate response from the social workers.

The motivation to act as policy entrepreneurs in the area of women in the cycle of violence stemmed from the concern women raised to the social workers about their safety and the possibility that their spouses would harm them. The policy in the area of domestic violence includes referring women to file a complaint with the police, and in area of real danger, placing them in a shelter for battered women. However, many Arab women refuse to use these means of protection as it is not condoned by the Arab community and is seen as a violation of their spouse's dignity.

> *Most women do not file a complaint with the police and do not agree to go to the shelters as it is considered to be crossing a red line for which they pay a very high price of exclusion from the community. The women are not willing to pay that price and they are helpless* (Interview 3).

Another social worker stressed the need to adapt methods of intervention to the cultural norms:

> *When I meet these women in welfare and see their fear and helplessness, I can't just sit back and do nothing. As a professional Arab woman, there is no way I can let Arab women continue to be harmed and not act to change policies to address complex cultural issues* (Interview 15).

These feelings led the social workers to try to change the policy in a culturally appropriate manner using diverse action strategies that include policy entrepreneurship through, for example, the recruitment of local leadership and the formation of coalitions, as presented below.

In the second area, the social workers were exposed to the acute hardships of individuals and families with disabilities due to the substantial gap between the existing policies and the realities of the Arab communities. The existing services for the disabled established by the state through the Ministry are located in Jewish communities far from the Arab villages. In addition, they are not physically accessible to the population via public transportation, are not provided in Arabic, and do not take their cultural norms into consideration.

> *There are clients with physical or mental disabilities and the existing services are not suitable because they are inaccessible and only Hebrew is spoken. They are at home and their distress is severe, so who do they turn to? They turn to us social workers, and we are expected to take responsibility and act to change the situation with the head of the local Arab authority* (Interview 21).

In the third area of promoting employment opportunities for women in the villages, the social workers described the considerable efforts invested in training women living in poverty for employment through various workshops and training programs. However, these efforts were wasted due to the cultural barriers that prevent women from working outside the village.

In our village, there are no academic studies, women don't have a high school matriculation certificate, and 25% of the families live below the poverty line. We have gone through a women's empowerment process, preparing them for the labour market and motivating them to conquer the world. But the labour market is not suitable for women who have been housewives for 20 years and are now expected to start working shifts day and night, so they simply stay at home, and this exacerbates poverty. It is important that we help them and work with everyone we need to in the villages to promote a policy that creates jobs for women in the villages (Interview 8).

This situation led the social workers to try to create and expand women's employment in the villages.

Supporting organizational and political environment

Another motivating factor for street-level policy entrepreneurship is a supportive organizational and political environment. Many participants noted that in the context of the organizational and political environment, the Department of Social Services where they are employed is influenced by external cultural, political and economic forces. As social workers, they are therefore expected to be committed to the values of the profession, while simultaneously being committed to the head of the local Arab authority, who in many cases is the one who hired them. The implicit or explicit consent of both the professional and political echelons motivates social workers' involvement as policy entrepreneurs.

Everything that is customary in the village is dictated by political and professional constituents, who also act out of a commitment to the mayor and the political echelon. In fact, everything we do in the field depends on them. We will work to influence policy change only if they legitimize it (Interview 23).

Another participant added:

Politics in the village includes various political elements that affect my department, and one needs to examine things carefully and walk a thin line. Once all the political elements are in place, for me it means a green light from the higher hierarchies, and it encourages me to act toward influencing policy design (Interview 17).

In the three key areas described in this study, the social workers received legitimacy to operate in policy arenas. In two of the area—policy initiatives to establish services for the disabled in Arab villages and policy initiatives to promote employment opportunities for women in the villages—the director of the Department of Social Services not only provided the legitimacy for the social workers to operate in these policy arenas, but also participated as a policy entrepreneur along with middle managers and other social workers who led the process of changing the policy.

The director of the Department views the issue of employment and poverty as his top priority. He wants to see change and therefore supports the initiative and actively participated with us as policy entrepreneurs (Interview 6).

In the area of the promotion of policies for women in the cycle of violence, the social workers began their activities as policy entrepreneurs in the local arena, with the aim of establishing a municipal body that brings together relevant bodies such as community and police dignitaries to promote beneficial policies.

Belonging to professional networks

Belonging to professional networks is another key factor that drives street-level policy entrepreneurship. In all of the interviews, the participants indicated that they belonged to professional networks such as the Association of Social Workers or an Arab social workers' group, as well as to local social work organizations. These networks provide knowledge-based resources and skills relevant to the pursuit of policy entrepreneurship. According to the participants, social ties formed in these professional networks also align mutual expectations and generate collective action to express shared identities.

> *The common discourse and understanding its consequences for exacerbating the conditions of poverty and the distress of families in Arab society promote critical awareness and the understanding that we must act to change policies* (Interview 12).

In all three key areas, the participants noted that belonging to professional networks also made it possible to process shared experiences and discuss creative ways to change policy. This situation strengthened their perceptions about being empowered politically and taking steps to challenge policy.

> *We would not work for change if we did not receive support and encouragement from the social workers or the women in the groups we belong to. I, for example, am a member of a group of Arab social workers and the Druze Women's Lobby, which both encourage and support participation in policy change activities* (Interview 5).

Strategies of policy entrepreneurs

Social workers as street-level entrepreneurs have adopted diverse strategies in their efforts to challenge policy and influence the design of more beneficial policies. These strategies that accord with the cultural norms and values of the Arab society include policy entrepreneurship through local leadership, activating the community from within, and forming coalitions.

Policy entrepreneurship through local leadership

In all three key areas, the street-level workers as policy entrepreneurs engaged local community leaders, such as religious leaders or village dignitaries, to put direct pressure on policymakers in the central government and prompt them to adopt policies designed to address their clients' needs. According to our participants, these leaders can influence policymakers. Therefore, they can raise public awareness of the social issues and motivate policymakers to make changes.

> *A very important part of our society is community leaders. If you manage to meet with the leaders and religious leaders in the village, raise their awareness of change and manage to instil in them a true concept of developing services and working for the populations, they will be committed and will use their connections to change policy* (Interview 8).

In the area of the best policy for Arab women in the cycle of violence, the social workers met several times with the dignitaries and clergy of the village. In the meetings, they presented the failures and shortcomings in the existing policy and their concern for the safety

of the women, and together discussed ways to change it. At these meetings, written material was distributed describing the problem and its scope and implications for the women. As a result, an idea arose for the establishment of a municipal body that included the police, Civil Guard, and welfare services. It is important to note that, initially, the local authority saw this issue of protecting women in the cycle of violence as the sole responsibility of the Ministry, not as an issue that they should address. However, in light of the pressure that the social workers put on the city officials through the religious leaders and village dignitaries, the head of the local authority adopted the proposed policy, which included escorting these women to the police station and funding for a social worker to be employed at the police station to support women experiencing domestic violence.

> *The dignitaries in the village come from within the community and understand the reality and the cultural norms, and they helped us convince the mayor to promote an appropriate policy. It is important to leverage their full power and their ability to promote change* (Interview 1).

Similarly, in the area of setting up services for people with disabilities in the villages, the social workers engaged with the dignitaries in the village, particularly those who had a disabled family member. After gaining legitimacy for the proposed changes, the social workers and village dignitaries held joint meetings with decision-makers in the local authority. As a result, resources were allocated for the establishment of local services for the disabled.

Activating the community from within

This strategy of social action was used by street-level policy entrepreneurs in two of the areas—promoting employment opportunities for women in the villages and establishing services for the disabled. The purpose of using this strategy was to empower clients and turn them into an action group that worked together to promote policy change. Policy entrepreneurs used this strategy in various ways and in all stages of trying to change the policy. In the early stages, social workers organized seminars and conferences with clients dealing with the problem. These seminars and conferences were aimed at raising community awareness of the failures and shortcomings of the current policies and jointly formulating policies tailored to the clients' needs.

> *Over 50 women here in the village participated in professional employment training that we organized for them on behalf of the welfare services. However, despite our huge investment, they do not go out to work because there are no factories here in the village and it is not culturally acceptable for a woman to work outside the village. These are women living in poverty who are greatly in need of basic necessities, such as food and medicine. To deal with the situation, we organized meetings with the women, we highlighted the problems, and together we formulated the necessary policy to deal with the situation* (Interview 14).

In the later stages, the social workers encouraged clients to form an action group that would work together to promote policy change by putting pressure on municipal decision-makers. In the area of setting up services for the disabled in villages, the social workers helped form a client leadership group that would use methods such as print and non-print media to highlight the problem and encouraged the active participation of the clients in decision-making meetings.

After several meetings with the clients, we assembled a group of activists and guided them in a more organized manner: how to change policy, who to talk to, who to contact, and what to do. We also discussed how to use the media, and the importance of attending meetings and putting pressure on the majority (Interview 21).

Formation of coalitions

Finally, the street-level workers created social change coalitions to redesign the policies. Civil organizations in Arab society play a key role in the lives of Arab residents and provide answers to needs that the state does not provide. Social workers therefore see these organizations as an important resource in influencing policy change. This strategy initially included identifying organizations and associations operating in Arab society involved in and concerned about the areas in which policy change was required. In the second stage, the social workers approached these organizations to collaborate toward the common goal of influencing policy design. They approached potential participants who believed in the need to change the policy and were willing to work together as part of a goal-oriented coalition. They held joint meetings with them to determine the steps needed to change the policy and work together to influence decision-makers. In the area of the establishment of services for the disabled in the villages, one of the participants described his activities in establishing a coalition:

I was looking for social associations and organizations from Arab society that aim to promote the disabled in order to help me lead the policy change. We did the field work to find organizations to recruit, holding meetings with them, assigning tasks to the different members of the coalition, contacting policymakers and exerting pressure in various ways toward changing policy and the establishment of new services in the villages (Interview 7).

In the area of promoting policies for women in the cycle of violence, the social workers operated in the local arena together with the non-profit organization Arab Women Against Violence in order to formulate a policy at the local level and convince the local authorities to adopt it. These activities included writing letters and emails to policymakers, as well as attending municipal meetings to establish a municipal body.

We worked in a coalition we formed to persuade the mayor to change an urban policy that would provide an appropriate response to those young women who are experiencing domestic violence. In our Arab society, if a woman decides to complain, we must guarantee her protection and we must provide a unique and culturally sensitive service to those women (Interview 25).

This municipal body, which includes representatives from social welfare organizations, the police and the community, coordinates collaborative actions to help protect and support Arab women who are victims of violence. It includes the use of a municipal vehicle to accompany the women who file a complaint to the police station, or municipal funding for a social worker to accompany women throughout the process in Arabic.

Discussion and conclusions

The goal of the present study was to connect the literature on street-level policy entrepreneurship with active representative bureaucracy. Hence, we examined the possibility that, in the context of active representative bureaucracy, street-level workers from a minority group in a divided society might act as street-level policy entrepreneurs to influence the design of a policy that produces better outcomes for the members of the minority group they serve. This question was explored with regard to Arab social workers in Israel who work in public services in Arab communities and provide social services to citizens with whom they share a common language and culture. The conditions that drive their policy entrepreneurship were identified, along with the strategies they use to accomplish their goals.

The findings indicate that the social workers' Arab cultural identity influences their worldview regarding their responsibility to act as agents promoting the welfare of their minority group. It also influences their understanding of the need to act in accordance with cultural norms. Thus, they only choose to act as policy entrepreneurs when they receive the support of the organizational, political and cultural environment. From this perspective, street-level workers from minority groups are at the intersection of their group's expectations and the conditions needed for acting as policy entrepreneurs.

These conditions are not surprising and, in fact, may be explained based on the literature on representative bureaucracy. Two assumptions underlie this theory. The first is that early socialization processes lead people with the same social demographic background to share certain values (Mosher, 1982). The second is that public servants will work in accordance with their values and seek to maximize the values that are salient to them in making decisions (Meier & Morton, 2015). Our findings, similar to previous research findings (e.g., Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Keiser et al., 2002), confirm both of these assumptions. Indeed, ethnic minority street-level workers in divided societies might be motivated to help more, not only due to their own shared ethnic identity, but also because they have had similar experiences to those of their clients, e.g., they may have suffered domestic violence or witnessed it in their own surroundings.

In addition, whereas previous literature on street-level workers has underscored the role of street-level workers' stereotypes regarding service consumers from minority groups and how these stereotypes affect the level of service they receive (Lotta & Pires, 2019), the situation in the present study was different. The shared ethnic identity of the street-level workers and their clients may, in fact, motivate policy entrepreneurship, provided that it is supported by the political and cultural environment. These findings were confirmed by previous studies that indicate the importance of the support of the socio-political environment of bureaucrats who belong to minority groups in driving entrepreneurship in their country (Awad-Elias & Nouman, 2023; Nouman & Azaiza, Accepted).

Furthermore, street-level workers' strategies for influencing policy design are closely related to their cultural background. Being part of a collectivist, hierarchical, patriarchal society that promotes the commitment of the individual to the collective and subordination to community leaders requires a unique strategy for influencing policy design. These strategies include involving leaders from the local community, activating the community from within, and establishing coalitions. Previous studies have noted the role of these three intertwined strategies in the context of street-level workers (e.g., Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2015). However, our findings highlight the sensitivity of street-level workers to the cultural context and the importance of adapting their strategies to cultural norms. The cooperation

between minority citizens and bureaucrats to promote more effective policies, as indicated in the findings of the present study, is not surprising and actually reflects the trust the citizens have in the officials in the public welfare agencies. In fact, according to the representative bureaucracy theory, the use of the key concept "symbolic representation" implies that shared demographic characteristics between bureaucrats and citizens can create a greater level of trust in government agencies and increases willingness to produce social services collaboratively (Bradbury & Kellough, 2008; Riccucci et al., 2016). This trust, as shown in the research, leads to cooperation between community leaders, residents, and social organizations for policy entrepreneurship aimed at promoting more effective policies.

Our findings have several important implications. First, we make a novel argument that the cultural background of street-level workers has a considerable influence on their policy entrepreneurship. Previous literature indicates that the match between the backgrounds of the bureaucrats and their clients has a strong effect on minority groups. Racial matching may affect, for example, program effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2009; Molina, 2016), as well as reductions in inequality (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2017; Rocha & Hawes, 2009). Much less attention has been paid to the question of whether street-level workers from an ethnic minority group in a divided society can act as street-level policy entrepreneurs to influence policy outcomes.

The findings of the present study reaffirm that in a fragmented society with bureaucratic divisions, those who share a common identity with their clients might be more motivated to engage in policy entrepreneurship for several reasons. Firstly, they are more closely acquainted with their clients' needs, so they are the first to recognize that the policy as designed may fail to meet these needs. Secondly, they feel solidarity with the minority struggling with hardships due to inadequate and unsatisfactory policies. Thirdly, they feel they represent their clients' interests and are responsible for them. In fact, street-level bureaucrats, as the findings indicate, not only deviate from the formal policy when implementing it, but also strive to influence the design of new policies that may be more beneficial to minority populations. Previous studies have examined the street-level workers' background characteristics at the policy implementation stage (e.g., Cohen, 2018; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2019), but not how these characteristics motivate them to engage in policy entrepreneurship. Similarly, policy entrepreneurship literature has not examined the impact that street-level workers sharing a minority identity with their clients has on their motivation to engage in street-level policy entrepreneurship.

Our second contribution is in identifying the conditions that motivate street-level workers from ethnic minority groups to act as policy entrepreneurs for minority citizens. This argument maintains that the motives for policy entrepreneurship are embedded in sociopolitical contexts and cultural norms. It adds to the literature by emphasizing how the background characteristics of street-level workers, and the context in which they operate, may affect their policy entrepreneurship. Finally, the theoretical contribution of the study is in providing a better understanding of the strategies that street-level entrepreneurs use to influence policy design. The present study demonstrates how street-level entrepreneurs living in collectivist, hierarchical, patriarchal societies must show cultural sensitivity when attempting to change a policy. They can succeed in doing so when they act in accordance with cultural norms.

The main limitation of this study, as with many qualitative studies, is the "screen capture" representation of conditions that motivated street-level policy entrepreneurship and action strategies that prompted and supported minority social worker involvement in policy practice at a given time. Thus, a complete picture of additional influencing factors that may have promoted engagement and other action strategies that may have been adopted was not

available. In addition, the sample was mainly based on snowball sampling. This approach enabled accessibility for policy entrepreneurs representing the researched phenomenon, but it does not represent the entire population. Finally, the data presented here are embedded in a specific time and place—the case of social workers from the Arab minority group in Israel. Nevertheless, by focusing on this group of social workers, we were able to collect rich information on the subject.

Future research should conduct similar studies with other minority groups with an eye to determining the role of the cultural background of both the street-level workers and their clients. Comparative studies of different cultures and countries, as well as different professions such as teachers and nurses, would also add to our knowledge in this area. Future studies should also use additional methodologies, such as large-scale quantitative studies or a combination of several research methods. Another conclusion from the findings is the need to develop a cultural perspective on street-level policy entrepreneurship in the public sector. Models and culturally adapted operational approaches are needed to help street-level workers develop strategies for improving the design of policies that meet the needs of the target populations under their care.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest The authors declare they have no conflicts of interest/competing interests.

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