

**Clients' intersectional marginalization and street level bureaucracy: The case of
adolescent mothers**

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Abstract

Social workers employed in personal social services are front line employees of the public administration and are often considered in the literature as street-level bureaucrats. While the socio-economic vulnerability of their targeted populations has been argued to affect social services power and resources, we know very little on how they affect patterns of discretion of street-level bureaucracy that are developed as a result of this encounter. The study addresses these questions through qualitative and dyadic research of adolescent mothers and their respective case managers in social service departments. Our findings show that the lack of clear and suitable policy guidelines for the care of adolescent mothers obliges social workers to take decisions and develop interventions based on their own understandings. Trying to compensate for the lack of formal policy and resources social workers offered their private time and their personal connections to answer teen mom's needs. In addition, the study unfolds the recurring presence of street level bureaucrats' discretion in cases of multiple marginal locations target populations and missing policies.

Keywords: Social Work, Street-level bureaucracy, Inter-Sectional theory, adolescent mothers

Introduction

Social workers employed in personal welfare services, like teachers, nurses, and police officers, are street-level bureaucrats (SLB) who through their discretion exert substantial influence on the way policy is carried out (Lipski, 1969). As front line workers, social workers share various characteristics with other SLB, yet they have also unique traits. Social work literature on SLB has drawn attention to professional identity and how it affects the different ways social workers exercise and manage their discretion.

However, the uniqueness of social workers' discretion is also related to the particular background of their specific target populations and the particular challenges they create. Social workers' clients mostly come from disadvantaged social groups, and are often situated in the intersection of underprivileged social categories such as race, gender, class, age and ability (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Konopka, 1966; Kromer Nevo & Komem, 2012). This article focuses on the impact of clients' characteristics on patterns of social work discretion.

The goal of this paper is twofold: first to conceptualize and illustrate how clients' intersectionality influences the policy context (resources and guidelines) in which street level bureaucracy is carried out. The second goal is to explore how the interactions of social workers with clients and their discretion patterns are affected by clients' intersectional marginalization and by the policy context this creates.

Drawing on insights from political theories of the welfare state (Korpi, 1980; Korpi & Palme, 1998) and combining them with those of the intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991) we theorize that programs targeted at the most disadvantaged populations will tend to lack resources and be innately short on budgets and staffs. We expect that this

pattern that has been documented in comparative studies, in regard to more residual welfare states (Jacques & Noël, 2018; Korpi & Palme 1998) would exist also in personal social services. Furthermore, and in line with the intersectional perspective we suggest that policy deficiency and inadequacy will tend to exacerbate with clients who are situated in an intersection of underprivileged social categories. For SLB social workers who work with these clients, this policy context poses particular challenges, which can be expected to affect the way they carry out their discretion. Professionally committed to the wellbeing of their clients we expect social workers to recognize these policy gaps, be critically of them and attempt to use their professional discretion to compensate on their incompatibility. At the same time however, we expect that clients' social weakness would also have effects for social workers-clients encounter and thus influence the way personal social services are implemented.

These working assumptions were illustrated and further explored through a case study of adolescent mothers and their care managers. In order to grasp the policy context, the research included policy analysis of the formal guidelines informing interventions with adolescent mothers in the Israeli personal services. In addition, and to get a deeper understanding of clients–workers' encounters and social workers discretion patterns, the research developed a qualitative analysis of semi structured interviews of adolescent mothers and their social workers.

The paper is structured in the following manner. We begin with a theoretical review on which we base our initial propositions regarding the relation between client's marginal locations and the exercise of discretion by SLB social workers in the personal social services. We continue with the research design aimed at illustrating and further

investigating the paper's propositions. After presenting the main findings we discuss the theoretical implications of the research for SLB literature in the of social work field.

Street-level bureaucracy (SLB), clients' characteristics and the policy context in which discretion is exercised

The personal welfare services and the social workers who work in them are responsible for the implementation of social policies determined at the central and local government levels (Tzadiki, 2018). These services provide assistance to individuals and families in distressing situations, and the policies and services they carry out have substantial implications to the wellbeing of their clients.

Social workers employed in personal welfare services, like teachers, nurses and police officers are street-level bureaucrats (SLB) whose actions affect the policies of the organizations they represent (Brodkin 2012; Lipsky 1980). As "front line" workers they often operate in arenas characterized by ambiguous and vague policies and are required to develop bottom-up interventions that eventually become the public policies they carry out" (Cohen & Gershgoren, 2016; Lipsky, 2010)

The theory of street-level bureaucracy was first described by Michael Lipsky, a political scientist writing in the USA during the 1970s. Lipsky's work has drawn attention to the fact that front-line workers have considerable discretion in carrying out their work, and that their everyday practices might thus depart from what managers and politicians expect of them. In their daily work and based on their encounters with clients they actually decide what a policy is: the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish and

the ways which they cope with uncertainties and with work pressures effectively become the public policies they carry out (Cohen, 2014; Ellis et al, 1999; Lipsky, 1980).

Research on SLB in social work literature has drawn particular attention to the role of professionalism for SLB discretion (Evans & Harris, 2004; Nothdurfer & Hermans 2018). Different from Lipsky's early works, it recognized non-self-interests motives underpinning SLB's discretion (Evans 2011,2013; Carson et al., 2015). For Lipsky's, the exercise of discretion was seen as a tool to serve SLB's own interests and assist them in managing overload, scarce time resources and numerous pressures that characterized their working conditions (Lipsky 1980, Adami, 2010; Evans, 2011). Against that, Evans and Harris (2004) showed that workers professional status and identity affected both the nature of discretion and the way it was managed. As they explain, professional status influences the extent of freedom exercised by an occupational group and professional identity entails a commitment to values (as the wellbeing of service users) that informs the use of that discretion (Carson et al., 2015; Evetts, 2002 ;Friedson, 2001 ;Noon and Blyton, 2002).

Drawing attention to the role of professionalism revealed that while SLB might have common traits, its particular expressions are different among professional and non-professional workers, as well as among workers from different professions. While we fully accept this premise, we argue that the particular aspects of SLB, at least in the case of social work are related also to the specific background of the clients and the particular challenges this creates.

Customers of personal welfare services and their social locations/characteristics

Social workers clients frequently come from disadvantaged social groups, and are often situated in the intersection of underprivileged social categories such as gender, ethnicity,

class, sexual orientation and nationality (ref). We therefore find the Inter-Sectional theory developed by African American feminist jurist Kimberlee Crenshaw (Crenshaw, 1991) helpful in informing about the challenges social workers' clients typically face.

The Inter-sectional theory seeks to advance the understanding of women's' extreme oppressive situations and in particular those of women who come from multiple underprivileged social backgrounds. 'Intersectionality' refers to the confluence of multiple identities in each individual (Watts-Jones, 2010), and to the positioning of human beings within these multiple 'social categories' or 'difference categories' (Shields, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2011). Within each category, a person may experience herself in either an oppressed or a privileged position (Vernon, 1999).

The theory stresses the relations between the different social categories and their effect on how social power systems operate (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). The core argument is that it is not just the aggregation of marginal locations but the way they intersect that structure the unique states of oppressions, which women experience (Kromer Nevo & Komem, 2012). Research within this theoretical framework is often used as a means of giving voice to oppressed and 'invisible' groups (McCall, 2005).

Intersectionality as a method is grounded in the experiences of people within hierarchical relations, and it adopts a bottom up approach to the formation of social and political order (Crenshaw ,1991). Drawing on political theories to the welfare state we assert that intersectionality of welfare clients affects not only their direct encounter with SLB social workers in the personal services but also the policy context in which welfare services are structures and funded.

Politics, Intersectionality, and the inadequacy of welfare services and provisions

In 1998, Walter Korpi and Joakim Palme proposed a political and institutional explanation to account for why countries who targeted benefits at the poor were less redistributive than countries that provided more universal benefits (Korpi & Palme 1998). The explanation to the 'Paradox of Redistribution' draws on the political underpinnings of social policy, and recognizes that political power and resources are a central factor in mobilizing political support to social programs (Stephens 1979; Korpi 1980).

From this perspective the problem with targeting is that in contrast to benefits and services that are directed at the broad population, benefits that are concentrated on the poor tend to lack the political support needed in order to sustain them and eventually end up being poor benefits (Cassamatta, 2000).

Combining insights of political theories with that of the intersectional theory suggests that the problem of political mobilization can be expected to intensify when the targeted populations are not only poor, but are also located in the intersection of additional underprivileged social categories such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality. The practical meaning of that is that while the objective needs of welfare clients may be substantial, the services and benefits available to address them might be inadequate.

In this paper we seek to understand and illustrate the inadequate policy context in which street level bureaucracy is carried out. In addition we ask how the interactions of social workers with clients and the discretion they exercise are both directly and indirectly affected by clients' intersectionality and by the policy context this creates.

Design and data collection

The case of adolescent mothers and the social workers who work with them serves us as a case study through which we seek to explore the above questions. Adolescent mothers in the personal welfare services are situated in the intersection of at least three marginal locations, which include gender, age and status. The social workers who work with them are SLB who are responsible for implementing the personal welfare policies and services. Hence, this makes it a suitable case to study the interface of clients' intersectionality and SLB in the social work field.

The 'Case study' method, as it allows for in-depth research, is particularly suitable when seeking to understand actors perceptions and behaviors in various processes, including policy-making and implementation (Devine, 1999) it is also seen as a central method for building hypotheses and promoting theoretical development (Levi ,2008).

The research reported here combined policy analysis with qualitative and dyadic interviews. In the policy part we analyzed formal policy rules, procedures and resources that appear in the social work regulation protocol and that guide social workers in general and with adolescent mothers in particular.

The qualitative and dyadic part explored the experiences of adolescent mothers and that of the social workers who work with them and their children. The dyadic method allowed us to shed light on the perspectives of both the provider and the consumer and to gain a deeper understanding of their encounter.

The study included 14 interviews, seven pairs of teenage mothers and social workers that worked with them. The teen mothers that were interviewed included girls and young women who gave birth in adolescence (13-19) outside of marriage. They were all recognized as "girls in distress" and were all treated in the social services department

before their pregnancy. The social workers that were interviewed were all family case managers in the social services department that worked also with teenage mothers and their children.

The sample was a 'purposive sample' (Arskey & Knight, 1999). Thus, interviewees were recruited through the professional networks of the researcher - social workers in the social services departments. And the young mothers were recruited through their social workers. All interviewees expressed their consent to participate in the study and signed a consent form. Privacy, confidentiality and anonymity was strictly ensured.

Research data was collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which enabled participants to provide rich and comprehensive information about the phenomenon under investigation and express their subjective point of view (Shkedi, 2003; Bevan, 2014). The interview guide included semi constructed open questions (see annex?) to foster dialogue and to provide a flexible and safe space for expressing subjective meanings to behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and worldviews in relation to the self and in relation to others (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1996). Data analysis drew on the qualitative constructivist paradigm and the principles of grounded theory.

Findings

The present article is part of a broader study that dealt with the care experience of adolescent mothers and their social workers in departments of social services in Israel. The findings are based on the policy analysis of the guidelines as they appear in the Social Workers Regulations and on the qualitative analysis of the interviews of the young mothers and the social workers.

Three main themes were selected for this article: 1) **“the provision and consumption of welfare services in a context of resource deficiency and inadequate policy guidelines”** which addresses the gap between the needs of young mothers and the existing policies; 2) **“Client weakness in welfare consumption relations/interactions”**, which addresses the expressions of clients weakness in the consumer- provider encounter; and 3) **“Granny Practices”** – which addresses the coping mechanisms and discretion exercised by the social workers in response to what they perceive as unfair and inadequate policies and guidelines.

Theme 1: The provision and consumption of welfare services in a context of resource deficiency and inadequate policy guidelines

Similar to our hypothesis, a key issue derived from both the analysis of social worker regulations and the analysis of the interviews, relates to the gap between formal policy and the real needs of the young mother.

Pregnancy and childbirth in adolescence presents many challenges. First and foremost, to the girls themselves and at the same time to the social workers who work with them and their children. The sharp transition from girls who are in the stage of searching for and forming their identity to motherhood creates a challenging and unique encounter that particularly challenges the therapeutic arena. The encounter becomes even more challenging when social workers are forced to work under vague policies and without clear guidelines regarding working with this population.

The analysis of Social Workers Regulations, reveals that while they include guidelines aimed to specific groups such as "girls in distress" and "individual and family", they do not

include any reference to the "adolescent mothers' group". According to the Israeli Ministry of Welfare's formal policy, when a girl becomes pregnant she is transferred from the "girl's service section" to the "family service section" and the focus of care and attention moves from the adolescent mother to her unborn child (Levin, 2007; Guy and Dalmadigo, 2019). The Girls' service sections includes particular age adjusted interventions such as reaching out interventions and maintaining regular contact, which do not apply to the 'Family service section'. Furthermore, and due to the demand for closer professional accompaniment, the staffing standards in the girls service section are higher than that of the Family service department and reflected in fewer girls per social worker. Consequently, transitioning the care of adolescent mothers from the "girl's service section" to the "family service section" implies that while the girls' objective needs increase, the level and adequacy of the welfare services provided to them actually declines. The work with adolescent mothers in the 'Family service section' is carried out without guidelines, tools or adequate resources that are tailored to the age characteristics of the girls and to the needs that distinguish them as mothers.

The provision and consumption of welfare services in a context of resource deficiency and inadequate policy guidelines has been repeatedly reflected in the interviews. The social workers who work with these adolescent mothers report that they see the transition of adolescent mothers from the "girl service section" to the "family service section" as erroneous and inappropriate (see quotes below). They also stress that the intervention tools available to them in the family services are unsuited to the unique characteristics and needs of these young mothers and their children.

'I do not understand this policy... a girl is a girl, but then if she gives birth she is no longer a girl? She is treated by a family social worker... Instead of being treated by a girls' social worker, which is what she needs... This policy is not adapted... On the contrary (social worker)

Treatment plans are not tailored, these are girls and hence one has to run after them¹. What do you expect from a 15-year-old girl?... eventually I do this (i.e. work and run after her) but only because there is no other choice. Yet, I am family worker and this is not the appropriate worker to carry this out. I do not have the time for it, I do not have the guidance for it, I am not a parental guide ... and I cannot fulfill these needs... other professional' specializations are needed ... (social worker)

As a social worker points out, not only that the treatment plans are not tailored to the age characteristics of teen moms, but the service resources in terms of time, tools and professional supervision, are severely lacking. The repeated use of phrases like **"I need"...** **" but "and " I do not have"** reflects a sense of scarcity this social worker experiences in her work with adolescent moms.

The inadequacy of treating adolescent mothers according to guidelines that are targeted at mature parents is expressed in the following quote, where the social worker stresses, that adolescent mothers are first of all girls and hence the service expectations from them to behave as mothers is not realistic.

Now let's look at her as a mother, but there's something very unnatural about it, that ... we're seeing a girl ... that she's in charge of the boy and then I'm supposed to ... This is a girl!!! Until yesterday she still went to school ... I think there is something from my acquaintance ... that I saw that a girl who becomes a mother is not first a mother and then a girl, she is first a girl and

¹ Indeed the girls service section, social work interventions draw on age characteristics technics such as reaching out ('running after them'), which do not apply in the family service section

then a mother. And there is something that is expressed in everything ... in her priorities, in her conduct, in her connection with the world, in connection with us... (social worker)

The following quotes reflects, the frustration social workers experience when facing this gap between needs, risks and answers. While risk and needs of adolescent mothers are perceived as particular high, they recognize policy provisions and resources as deficient and incompatible.

Load, load, load and more load. It is wrong, because if I could, I would designate a full time social work appointment who would take care of adolescent mothers. Like I ... I ... can say that a lot of my time I devote to these young mothers, yet it is on the expense of other families and by far, by a huge margin ... but also the level of risk of these adolescent mothers' children is higher, the need to be there is higher,...it burdens me and gives me no place neither for other families nor to effectively take care for these adolescent mothers. This should really require a designated nomination specific to it (i.e. specific for taking care of adolescent mothers). (Social worker)

It's terribly frustrating. You cannot give up ... you must try what you have. So, you try ... Parental guidance, family health stations, an intensive relationship, home visits, whatever I have to offer. I do not have the tools so I will not do anything? I get along with what there is... (Social work)

The interviews with adolescent mothers resonate the inadequacy of the policy to their age characteristics and their needs. As pointed out by the social workers, adolescent mothers report that the social services stop seeing them as "girls" and ignore their age related needs. Here are two examples:

Already during pregnancy, it was like this suddenly they no longer ask me if I am okay, if I go or not to school ... as they did before ... now they only ask about him (i.e the child) and if I did the right thing (young mother)

Ever since my girl was born ... she's been looked at all the time. They constantly want to see that I am a good mother ... but I am also a human being ... and it is difficult for me sometimes ... it would always help me in the hostel (i.e before pregnancy when cared by the girls service section) that they would talk to me ... (young mother)

From both quotes one can feel the disappointment of the girls from the sharp transition of the focus from them to their child. In fact, by becoming mothers, they are no longer the target audience of existing policies.

Theme 2: Client's weakness in welfare consumption relations/interactions

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This theme addresses the ways in which **client's weakness** is reflected and manifested in social work-clients relations and in the ways this affects the exercise of discretion.

By focusing on teen-moms in the personal services, the study addresses a group that by definition is located in the intersection of three marginal social categories: **age**, **gender**, and **class**. The teen moms that participated in the study reported however on belonging to additional marginal categories like **migration and ethnic minorities**. Three of the seven girls interviewed come from immigrant families from the former Soviet Union, and describe difficulties of absorption, manifestations of racism, and difficulty in assimilating into Israeli society. The other three were Muslim Arabs, who in addition to belonging to a

national minority group with traditional characteristics, had also to face the tension between traditional and western culture (Goldstein-Meshulam, 2017).

Consistent with the intersectional perspective, these girls describe experiences of oppressive and extreme life situations including poverty circumstances, growing in dysfunctional families and with a non-present parenting model. Five out of the seven adolescent mothers that were interviewed were taken out of their families as children to out-of-home settings and all reported feelings of lack of belonging and rejection experiences.

You know ... we had a hard time ... I had nothing ... (young mother)

I suffered from my mother and my father and did not receive love ... and as if I wanted a lot of things in my life and I thought that mother and father could bring me but did not bring me ... (young mother)

To understand the effect of the marginalization of young mothers on the interaction with social workers and the welfare system, one must first understand what meanings these young participants attach to pregnancy and childbirth in adolescence.

All the girls that were interviewed reported that though the pregnancy was unplanned, none of them considered terminating it. Moreover, most of them described the pregnancy as an opportunity for a fresh start and a kind of correction.

Before she arrived (her daughter), I had nothing to fight for. When she arrived, I said to myself - I have something to live for. Let's say so, I always dreamed of having a family and someone to love me. I never thought I would bring a girl, but okay ... she's part of me and I'm part of her. (Young mother)

Unlike the young mothers, the social workers described pregnancy and childbirth in adolescence in a language of 'failure' and as a replication of distress and poverty patterns.

Very suitable (the phenomenon of pregnancy and childbirth in adolescence) for a population of girls who are at risk and also belong to populations that are.... It's something a bit judgmental but I see it as some sort of intergenerational reproduction of patterns. It seems to me mostly a product of something so sad... in the sense of... it's hard to say because it's very judgmental, but it does not seem to me to be a product of choice, it does not seem to me a product of hope or knowledge or power, they do not have them, but a product of much ... an attempt to escape from some reality of life or something else, or an attempt of no choice, or an attempt of not knowing what is good or how to defend oneself, or not even knowing the facts of life somewhere ...(social worker)

From the above quote one can also learn about the way these girls are perceived in the eyes of social workers, as weak girls who lack knowledge and power, whose "choices" are not real and, whose desires are not connected to reality. This perception also resonates in the next quote:

...the girl is a girl at risk, and we would like the girl not to be pregnant ... because for us this means that again we have a population (i.e. the children of these teen moms) that is not treated properly, that is promiscuous and that is neglected (social worker)

While the social workers expressed a deep commitment to the wellbeing of the teen-moms they worked with, we find that the structural weakness of these girls emanating from being located at the intersection of young age, low social class and motherhood had various effects on social work-client's relations and interaction.

Throughout the interviews, both the social workers and the teen moms describe complex and tense relations where monitoring, control and supervision are inherent to social

workers interventions and discretionary practices. While the relations draw also on genuine care and concern of the social workers towards the teen moms, the girl's social inferiority is prominent and expressed either in 'monitoring/supervisory' interventions or on what can be termed paternal care giving interventions. The following quotes reflect this:

I ... so what am I? ... Who am I here? I am in charge, I am a supervising figure, but I am also a friend and companion... can I let her dare, be strong and make decisions? Or should I prevent her from making decisions because it could hurt the child. (Social worker)

In the end I represent the welfare service and it is a very conflicting relationship... I do not know if they (i.e. the girls) can be authentic with me... if they can really say what is on their heart ... like what can I give my son? what can I do for him?, what would I like? Sometimes I feel there is so much pretense, so that I would believe she is capable... I can understand that ... because I, I have a very, very supervisory role (social worker).

This disadvantaged position of being constantly under examination, was repeatedly expressed by the adolescent mothers.

Even when I was pregnant it was like this. As if I'm constantly on test. Their eyes are on me ... everything I wanted to do I would think several times ... not to say I'm wrong ... (young mother)

I just want them to support me, help me ... be ready ... not threaten me all the time... They kept telling me if you did not do this or that we would take the girl from you, if you did not do this and that we would take the girl out from you. Does this make sense to you? To be constantly in a test ... this thing ... just knocked me down (young mother)

It is thus not surprising that adolescent mothers avoid asking for help. Issues like exercising rights or asking for financial assistance were not raised at all by the girls even when asked, and when in one interview the young mother said she was receiving food

supplies, she hurried to correct that she did not ask for it and that this was the social worker's idea:

I get food ... but I did not ask. My social worker registered me. And she comes to my house ... and we talk, and she sees the girl with me ... um ... and my girl also goes to the daycare ... I always take care of her. (Young mother)

One can notice that in the second part of the quote, the same defense pattern is repeated when she says **“My girl also goes to the daycare ... I always take care of her”**.

Being afraid of demanding material assistance, and often also not being aware of the rights they are entitled to, adolescent mothers expectations from their social workers tend to focus on supportive and inclusive relationship with their social worker.

That she's a bit like a friend ... that I can tell her everything ... that she's good to me and that she's listening. That she will see that I do good things for my children and help me promote myself. (Young mother)

Theme 3: “Granny’s practice”

The gap between needs and actual institutional responses creates the need for street-level bureaucracy massive discretion. Theme 1 has shown that social workers view the resources and policy guidelines regarding teen moms as deficient, unfair and inadequate. This theme refers to the discretion patterns and coping mechanisms they developed in response to that.

“Granny’s practices.” was an in vivo term given by several social workers to describe alternative interventions they developed in order to compensate on policy deficiencies and attain to the teen moms' needs. As the following quotes reflect these practices were

based on employing their 'emotional capital' and drawing on connection building and on their time.

Granny's Practices! For me ... like it's mine ... if she wants to take it is hers ... they need warmth, companionship, caring ... a function of something she did not have. She's not just a mother ... I'll try to fill the void for her ... like I would with my daughter ... (social worker)

I function more like ...I cook... I do everything... sometimes I feel that I am their grandmother... a lot of patience... I need to take them by the hand... provide legitimacy, explain... They have no one to turn to... even in the smallest things... they need to be heard (social worker)

The main thing was my connection with her on a daily basis... I would come to her home at least once a week, the situation there was very difficult, a situation of neglect dirt and lack of hygiene... During home visits I would shower the baby together with the mother (social worker)

I knew that in that sense it was something that was needed. To woo more, to strengthen more, to remind, to escort, to take by hand...It's like she's a little ... sometimes a little like my own girl ... (social worker)

Another coping mechanism reported by the social workers was the adoption of intervention practices prevalent in the 'girls' service section'. Though such practices, as giving their phone number and allowing contact after working hours were not included in their policy guidelines as family case managers, they used their discretion to apply them nevertheless.

Look, not everyone (i.e every social worker) will agree to give her cell phone, but I do not believe it is possible otherwise. Communication with them (with the adolescent mothers) is different. It is through 'WhatsApp', often in the evening. Not everyone is ready for this, but only in this way we can earn her trust. It does not work with them to meet in the office, eight to three (working hours).It just doesn't work (Social worker)

A third coping mechanism, was using their discretion to bend rules in order to enable the girls' access to services that formally they were not entitled to: An example of this can be seen in the following quote:

We enlisted the child in subsidized nursing home. You will not believe but formally she was not entitled to it. I mean it is clear to me why the child should be in a nursing home, but according to the criteria she did not really meet it. So we wrote a heartbreaking report and invented a reason.... (Social worker)

While these discretion patterns are indeed laudable and praiseworthy, the workers themselves acknowledge, that the energy and time they devote to this teen mothers come at the expense of other families under their responsibility.

You take a little from here and a little from there. It's the whole thing. It depends on who can wait longer, who can be more tolerant, and what is less dangerous ... (Social work)

Furthermore, the discretion applied by social workers remained at the level of 'connection' and relation with their clients, and did not translate into policy practices, such as demanding budgets, providing training and developing compatible provisions that are essential for meeting the needs of these teen moms.

Discussion

The question that underlie this study is how clients' intersectionality' background influences the policy context and the direct encounter in which street level bureaucracy is carried out. The study addressed this question through the case of adolescent mothers in the Welfare Services in Israel. It analyzed the formal policy guidelines and through semi structured interviews reflected both the views of the girls and that of the social workers.

Political theories of the welfare state (Korpi 1980 ; Stephan 1979; Korpi and Palme 1998) have long recognized that programs targeted at the most disadvantaged populations tend to lack resources and be innately short on budgets and staffs. The political explanation attributes this to differences in political power and hence the weaker ability of constituencies with disadvantaged backgrounds to demand social policies and programs that answer their interests and needs. We find that this pattern that has been documented in comparative studies, in regard to more residual welfare states is also relevant to personal social services, which generally serve clients from underprivileged social categories. Different from the logic of need where support increases according to the level of necessity and in accordance with political theories expectations, we find that the formal policy resources allocated to girls in distresses life situations actually decreases when they become teen moms and their material and emotional needs increase.

While political weakness is surely an important part of this problem, our findings suggest that policy inadequacy may also derive from the limitations of formal policy guidelines in addressing complexity. While regulations are apt to address common cases, they are often unsuited to answer complex cases where multiple problems are intertwined. Consequently, clients with intersectional marginalization backgrounds, like adolescent mothers, who often require complex and 'tailored' responses, tend to face formal policies that are unable to address their needs. In our case, both social workers and the adolescent mothers, described services that were unsuited to address the age characteristics of the girls and the needs that distinguished them as mothers.

Clients disadvantaged background and specifically the intersection of age, motherhood and low social status, were also reflected in the social workers-clients' encounter. As both workers and clients express, these power gaps are built into the care relationship. Social workers are expected to apply their professional discretion to monitor and supervise and yet at the same time to provide care and assistance. Adolescent mothers, express the stress they experience from being constantly under examination and suspected as inadequate parents. Fearing their child would be taken from them, they avoid asking help and develop defensive patterns that further hinder their ability to receive the services and the benefits they urgently need.

We find that social workers apply professional discretion to 'compensate' for existing policies, which they perceive as deficient, unfair and inadequate. They developed 'Granny practices' which refer to interventions that draw on their own 'emotional capital' and employed their 'connection assets' and their time to address the needs of these teen moms. While the social workers interviewed were all family case managers that worked in the family services, they applied practices (upon their own discretion) that were customary to the 'girls' service section', such as giving their private phone number, conducting home visits, and enabling contact after working hours.

While these discretion patterns are indeed laudable and praiseworthy, we find that they are also inherently limited. As the workers themselves acknowledge, the energy and time they devote to this teen mothers come at the expense of other families under their responsibility. Furthermore, and though connection is crucial, it cannot replace training, budgeting and other provisions that are essential for meeting the needs of these teen moms and their children.

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