

Alone in the campaign: Distrust in regulators and the coping of front-line workers

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Abstract

Trust is the “glue” connecting state and society and particularly relevant to how front-line workers, who are the face of public administration vis-à-vis citizens, implement policy. Therefore, it is important to examine how front-line workers’ absence of trust in regulators influences the ways they cope with their clients. Our study investigates this question empirically through interviews and focus groups with 80 Israeli social service providers. Our results show that front-line workers’ distrust in regulators is a product of four factors: perceived lack of protection, clash of values, politicization in implementation processes, and regulators’ “disconnection” from the field. It leads them to adopt two coping strategies: acts of self-protection and deviation from formal policy. A further derivative is their turnover intention.

Keywords: coping, distrust, front-line workers, policy implementation, regulators.

1. Introduction

An extensive body of literature underscores the importance of regulation in the proper functioning of society and emphasizes its expected growth (Koop & Lodge 2017; Levi-Faur & Jordana 2005; Levi-Faur 2011a; Maggetti 2012). It is an essential element of the implementation of social policy in the welfare state (Levi-Faur 2014). Regulatory performance is directly affected by interactions between different regulatory players (Etienne 2013). It is influenced by interorganizational relationships (Levi-Faur 2011b) and by horizontal inter-office interactions (Hirata 2020), between inspectors and inspectees (Pautz 2009; de Boer & Eshuis 2018) and between public, non-governmental, and private players (Benish *et al.* 2018).

Front-line workers are often the mirror that reflects state regulations to citizens. Their extensive discretion enables front-line workers to give a subjective interpretation to regulations and procedures and adapt them to citizen needs (Lipsky 2010). Their relationships with different regulatory players (Sager *et al.* 2020), such as politicians (May & Winter 2009), non-governmental, and private organizations (Cohen *et al.* 2016) and government agency representatives (Brodkin 2012; Gassner & Gofen 2018), make them dominant actors in regulatory process execution. Their role becomes crucial when the regulations they need to implement are vague (Davidovitz *et al.* 2021), affording them the power to reshape policies according to what they believe is right (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000; Gofen 2014; Tummers *et al.* 2015). Their trust in regulators may therefore play a crucial role in how state regulations are translated at the front-line.

Trust occupies a central place in public administration literature. Major studies have identified the trust between public servants and citizens as derived from a broader context of trust between institutions and society (Rothstein 2000; Uslaner 2002). This is important considering that in some countries in recent decades trust between institutions and citizens has declined sharply (see e.g. Van de Walle *et al.* 2008). This has been explained in terms of social relations and capital within social systems (Putnam 1993; Fukuyama 1995; Uslaner 2002) and is specifically relevant to Israel (in 2020) where public trust in government is low (Mizrahi *et al.* 2020).

However, the role played by front-line workers’ trust in regulators and its impact on their coping mechanisms is a black box. This is surprising because when front-line workers distrust regulators, they may believe that the

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latter's future actions are unlikely to be beneficial to them (Robinson 1996). Front-line workers may act contrary to regulatory goals and adopt an opportunistic approach (Mayer *et al.* 1995). It is reasonable to assume that there may be a "rollover" onto their relationships with clients. As interface between state and citizen (Thomann 2015), often citizens' sole connection with state functioning, front-line workers may give clients a negative representation of regulatory systems, leading to distrust in institutions. This may also impact public trust in front-line workers themselves. According to Six (2018), trust in public professionals is role-based, institutional-based trust, and therefore the institutions on which it rests are important. Since there is a reciprocal link between the trust of public employees in citizens and that of citizens in public employees (Yang 2005), there may be far-reaching implications for the relationship between state and society.

Our goal in this study is to examine how front-line workers' trust in regulators is reflected in their coping methods with clients. We suggest that since trust plays a core role in any relationship between two parties (Kramer 1999) and has diverse consequences for behavior (Lewicki *et al.* 1998), understanding this link will help us better comprehend policy delivery process. While other studies have examined trust in public professionals (Six 2018), ours focuses on front-line workers' trust in regulators as rule makers and its impact on how services are provided.

We empirically examine our question by studying two types of Israeli social service providers, teachers and social workers, using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus groups. Teachers and social workers are classic examples of front-line workers who have day-to-day relations with citizens (Lipsky 2010), affording a unique ability to influence critical life decisions (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000).

While previous literature has examined elements that influence the discretion of front-line workers, our study investigates the factors that play a role in their distrust of regulators and its effects on their coping strategies when delivering services. We contribute to the literature by offering a conceptual framework for understanding these phenomena.

2. Literature review

2.1. Trust – Definitions, importance, constructs, and implications

Definitions of trust are varied. According to Uslaner (2002), the literature creates confusion between diverse concepts of trust. It is associated with situations involving personal conflict, outcome uncertainty, and problem solving (Nyhan 2000). One of the common definitions suggests that trust is the willingness of one individual to be vulnerable to the actions of another, or to a group or institution that has the capacity to harm or betray the trustor (Levi & Stoker 2000; Mayer *et al.* 1995). Rousseau *et al.* (1998, p. 395) defined trust as "a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another." According to Kramer (1999), trust's importance and inherent problems stem from the reciprocal vulnerabilities and uncertainties inherent in hierarchical relationships. Trust involves risk derived from the uncertainty of one party with respect to the motives, intentions and future actions of another party on which it depends (Lewicki & Bunker 1996).

In recent decades, scholars have conceptualized trust and distrust as two distinct concepts (Lewicki *et al.* 1998; McKnight & Chervany 2001; Van de Walle & Six 2014; Searle *et al.* 2018). Distrust is defined as a negative expectation toward another's intentions or behaviors (Van de Walle & Six 2014). Oomsels and Bouckaert (2014, p. 558) defined distrust as "the intentional and behavioral rejection of vulnerability by a trustor on the basis of negative expectations about a trustee." Many trust researchers tend to perceive trust as positive and desirable, contrasting with distrust that is dysfunctional (Six & Verhoest 2017). According to McKnight and Chervany (2001), they are separate constructs that may exist simultaneously. Hardin (2004) did not see distrust and trust as separate structures but highlighted that low level of trust differs from active distrust. Both trust and distrust involve movements toward certainty, with trust pertaining to expectations of things that are hoped for and distrust to those that are feared (Lewicki *et al.* 1998).

Trust is frequently addressed in public administration literature, due to the general decline of public trust in government during recent decades (Van de Walle & Six 2014). Many studies see it as a "glue" that connects state to society (Van de Walle & Bouckaert 2003; Vigoda-Gadot 2006; Wang & Wart 2007). Some scholars have highlighted trust's importance by associating it with the size and scope of welfare states (see Hooghe &

Stolle 2003; Bjørnskov & Svendsen 2013). According to Bjørnskov and Svendsen (2013), higher levels of social trust contribute to a reduction in free-rider problems and make bureaucracies more effective.

The literature distinguishes between interpersonal and institution-based trust (Rousseau *et al.* 1998; Six & Verhoest 2017). The former is based on the interactions of individuals (Rotter 1980) and the latter on environmental structures or situations (McKnight & Chervany 2001) at the organizational or system level independent of specific individuals (Six & Verhoest 2017). One form of institution-based trust is role-based trust, a depersonalized structure derived from the knowledge of a particular role a person plays in the organization and not from specific knowledge related to that person's capabilities, dispositions, motives, and intentions (Kramer 1999).

Trust is recognized as an important factor in determining organizational success and stability and the well-being of employees (Kramer 1999; McKnight & Chervany 2001; Albrecht & Travaglionone 2003; Schoorman *et al.* 2007). Scholars see trust as a determinant of individual organizational performance (Dirks & Ferrin 2001). Employees' organizational trust is seen as a factor in increasing their positive attitudes, collaboration, commitment, and citizenship behavior, as well as reducing turnover intention (Kramer 1999; Zeinabadi & Salehi 2011; Cho & Song 2017). In contrast, distrust is associated with suspicion (Deutsch 1960), uncertainty, and effort to avoid harm (Lewicki *et al.* 1998; Kramer 1999; Davidovitz & Cohen 2020). Violated trust is linked to vulnerability and revenge (Bies *et al.* 1996).

2.2. Regulation, trust, and front-line workers

The regulatory literature discusses the importance of trust in regulatory relations (see Braithwaite & Makkai, 1994; Six 2013; Six & Verhoest 2017). Six and Verhoest (2017) mapped the various relations within regulatory regimes and reviewed empirical studies dealing with the role of trust in these relations. The literature has focused on the link between regulator–regulatee trust and compliance (Van de Walle & Six 2014). Scholars like Murphy (2004) found that when taxpayers believe the tax authority is mistreating them, their trust declines, leading them to resist the regulatory authority. In addition, Murphy *et al.* (2014) found that procedural justice had a significant impact on public trust in the police, predicting both the willingness to obey and to cooperate. Six (2013) showed how regulator trust and control complement each other in their impact on regulatory compliance.

The regulatory literature also explores the role of trust in the work of front-line workers. Front-line workers are an integral part of state regulation (de Winter & Hertogh 2020), due to their broad discretion and their relationships with citizens (Golan-Nadir 2021). Most scholarship on front-line workers and regulation focuses on inspectors (Winter & May 2015) whose primary mission is to enforce compliance with regulations (de Boer *et al.* 2018; de Winter & Hertogh 2020). Inspectors are considered classic examples of front-line workers because they have considerable discretion when enforcing regulations (Lipsky 2010; de Boer 2019). Discussion has typically focused on the regulatory style and enforcement spectrum inspectors demonstrate (Pautz & Wamsley 2012). According to Kagan (1994), to achieve normative regulatory outcomes, cooperation is necessary. Trust can help achieve this cooperation (Macy & Skvoretz 1998; Pautz & Rinfret 2016) and is necessary to ensure regulatory compliance (Scholz 1998).

A few studies have dealt with trust in the context of front-line workers and regulators. Pautz (2009) found that most interactions between environmental inspectors and regulatory officials were characterized by trust between the parties. Pautz and Rinfret (2016) found that trust in regulatory interactions leads to cooperative behavior, information sharing, and respect. Rorie *et al.* (2015) found that trust plays an important role for both regulated community and regulators in determining whether a sanction will be applied. However, the literature has not yet examined how front-line workers' trust in regulators influences their coping strategies when delivering client services.

Because of the importance of trust in shaping behavior (Ireni Saban 2011), we argue that it should be the focus of study when attempting to understand how front-line workers use their discretion in coping with clients. Following Tummers *et al.* (2015, p. 1,101–1,102), we define coping as “behavioral efforts front-line workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis.” In Tummers *et al.*'s (2015) systematic review, front-line workers' coping strategies are classified according to the direction in which they move in dealing with clients. They may give

clients priority, moving toward them to meet their requirements, bending and breaking rules and procedures, as well as supply them informal resources (Lavee 2021). Alternatively, they may move away from clients, rationing services, or dealing routinely with them. In extreme cases, they may move against clients, dealing with them aggressively.

As previous literature shows, front-line workers implementation processes are significantly affected by their personal values (Keiser 2010), and their judgment of policies as meaningful (Tummers & Bekkers 2014). When feeling alienated from policies (Tummers *et al.* 2009), they may deviate from mandatory guidelines (Gofen 2014), bend rules (Cohen 2018,) and try to reshape policy (Frisch-Aviram *et al.* 2018; Lavee *et al.* 2018). This underscores that a basis of trust by front-line workers in regulators is necessary for normative policy implementation. Such trust may cause front-line workers to feel satisfied (Bouckaert & Van de Walle 2003), influence their pro-social motivation (Zhu & Akhtar 2014), and act with confidence in the regulatory system.

In contrast, if they distrust regulators, they may consider that the regulations conflict with their professional values and experience organizational role conflict (Tummers *et al.* 2012). They may adopt a unified front with clients against regulators (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000), deviate from or distort policy guidelines, and take the “steering wheel in their hands.” They may signal that state institutions are untrustworthy, tarnish the image of public service, and contribute to citizen distrust in state representatives. Where state-society dynamics are characterized by lack of trust and basic suspicion (Raaphorst 2018; Raaphorst & Van de Walle 2018), their behavior may create a stumbling block for the relationship between parties with far-reaching implications for policy outcomes.

2.3. The context – Israeli teachers and social workers

Israeli social workers and teachers are classic front-line workers operating in a multicultural context. Israeli society has numerous divisions: Jews and Arabs; religious and secular; political left and right; native-born Israelis and immigrants (mostly from Ethiopia and the former USSR); Ashkenazi Jews (from Europe and North America) and Mizrahi Jews (from the Middle East and North Africa); rich and poor (Eisenstadt 2019). These schisms are all reflected in the educational system (Oplatka 2017). Israel has military conscription, and most Jews serve in the army. As Israeli society has developed, military threats have come to serve as an organizing foundational principle playing a significant role in social and governmental institutions (Ben-Eliezer 1998). A result is ambiguity regarding the boundaries between military and civilian missions, evident in the field of education (Tamdor-Shimony 2010).

Since Israel’s establishment, there has been politicization and centralized control of public administration (Galnoor *et al.* 1998; Cohen 2016). As in other developed welfare states, Israeli social service providers have been significantly affected by New Public Management reforms. These are designed to implement private-like strategies to streamline competitiveness in public service, increase transparency, and improve responsiveness to citizens’ demands (Benish 2014). Social workers in Israel are professionals who provide welfare services under the auspices of local authorities while regulated by local and central government (Weiss-Gal *et al.* 2020). Some work in third sector or private organizations that provide welfare services under quasi-market arrangements (Cohen *et al.* 2016). These social workers are divided between case workers and community workers whose task is to further the development of geographical or functional communities and improve the quality of services. Social workers in Israel are employed in fields such as health, nursing, child welfare, and rehabilitation (Weiss-Gal *et al.* 2020).

The Israeli state education system is divided into sectors: secular-Jewish, religious-Jewish, and Arab (separate government-administered with teaching in Arabic) (Harel Ben Shahaar & Berger 2018). The system is centralized, and financing, organization, administration, and structure (especially at the elementary level) are designed and supervised by the Ministry of Education (Gaziel 2007). However, in the 1970s, with the institution of direct election of mayors, a process of decentralization of educational services began. Local authorities were motivated to strengthen their control over schools and influence the education system, both administratively and pedagogically (Yair 2005). Local leaders (such as mayors) have an interest in increasing their authority over the local education system as the quality of services plays a significant role in their prospects of re-election (Yair 2005). Many local

authorities are initiating unique curricula, taking responsibility for teacher training and monitoring student achievement (Yair 2005).

The Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Services are the main regulators in their fields. A major function of the Ministry of Education is to serve “as a regulator on all educational institutions ...” (Ministry of Education 2019, p. 1). A major function of the Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Services’ personnel is “to monitor the implementation of its guidelines by service providers and enforce its requirements on them when they deviate from them” (Ministry of Labor, Welfare and Social Services 2018, p. 1).

2.4. Research design

This study is part of an extensive research project examining the role that trust plays in the implementation processes of front-line workers (approval number 056/19 of the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Haifa). Our goal was to examine the factors that explain the trust / distrust of front-line workers in regulators and how it is reflected in their coping strategies when delivering services to clients. A qualitative design was used to explore these issues. The analysis drew on in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups with two classic types of Israeli front-line workers, teachers and social workers. As in other countries, the front-line workers in our study have extensive discretion in the implementation process. The study sample was scattered with relative representation given to different sectors in Israeli society.

Given the ambiguity of the term, we defined trust for our interviewees as the willingness to make oneself vulnerable to another individual, group, or institution with the capacity to harm or betray one (Levi & Stoker 2000; Mayer *et al.* 1995). Defining the term to participants and confirming their understanding of the variables measured helped ensure the validity of the study.

Given the difficulty of establishing clear research hypotheses and to avoid missing relevant insights pertaining to the specific context of our study, data analysis was based on grounded theory (Birks & Mills 2015) with the goals of: (i) conceptualizing the factors that play a role in front-line workers’ trust in regulators and (ii) distinguishing the effects of front-line workers’ trust in regulators on how they deliver services.

Being aware of the value of reflexivity associated with qualitative research and the implications that the researcher’s position may have on its validity and reliability (Silverman 2016), we made every effort to be objective and maintain a reasonable social distance. Because the interviews and focus groups were conducted with the researchers’ direct interaction with the study’s participants, several tools were used to increase objectivity and trustworthiness, prevent bias, and ensure the validity of the study. To facilitate transferability (Guba 1981) and ensure a thorough understanding of the research definition and context, detailed field notes were taken during and after each interview. Another safeguard employed was the recording of a methodological diary detailing any relevant reference to the researchers’ presence, degree of involvement with the participants, and possible bias on the part of the researchers or participants. The peer-to-peer research technique was used. A research assistant was enlisted to review the research data critically to help identify potential biases.

2.5. In-depth interviews procedure

We conducted 58 interviews with Israeli front-line workers (26 teachers and 32 social workers) between July 2019 and March 2020. All interviewees were public administration employees engaged in day-to-day face-to-face interactions with clients to whom they delivered policy. Most of these workers operated under the political environment of the local government. This allowed us to examine the implications of the environmental-organizational dynamics on their feelings toward regulators and their behavior toward clients. We selected our participants through convenience sampling. First, we turned to five teachers and five social workers with whom we were personally acquainted. Each referred us to colleagues from different organizations. Overall, one in five of those approached refused to participate in the study. The social workers came from various specializations (the mentally handicapped, toddlers at risk, toddlers with autism, youth at risk, the elderly, young people lacking family support, victims of domestic violence, and special needs children). Teachers who participated worked in different types of schools (elementary, middle, and high school) and taught various subjects (geography, history, physical education, art, biology, mathematics, language, and literature). Our interviewees included Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, workers from both urban centers and peripheral communities. Initial contact was by

phone. We presented the study as examining their relationships with clients and managers, their feelings about the public policies they were required to implement, and how these affected day-to-day behavior with clients.

All interviews were conducted face to face, recorded, and transcribed. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. The interviews focused on the interviewees' feelings toward and experiences with clients and managers and their attitudes toward the regulations they were required to implement and the regulators under whom they operated. Our goal was to understand what affected their trust in their regulators and how it was reflected in their coping mechanisms with clients. We referred to regulators as decision makers heading regulatory organizations, specifically senior bureaucrats and politicians in local and central government who operate outside the organizations within which front-line workers perform their tasks.

We asked our interviewees to describe whether they had trust in their regulators (Ministry of Education / Ministry of Welfare, Education and Welfare departments of local authorities), the nature and influence of this trust / distrust, and whether and how it affected their dealing with clients and policy implementation.

The following questions guided us in the interview: Do you have trust in the regulations you are required to implement? What makes you trust these regulations? How does this affect your work routine? Can you explain why? Do you trust your regulators? What factors influence your trust in them? Does this trust or distrust affect your work with clients? How is this reflected in your work routine? Can you explain why? Does it lead you to adopt certain coping mechanisms in your daily contact with clients? Can you explain why? Can you give examples?

2.6. Focus groups procedure

We conducted two focus groups, each lasting an hour (one with 10 teachers and one with 12 social workers). The purpose was to complete the data collected during the interviews. All participants were public administration employees who interacted face to face and implemented public policy with clients on a daily basis. As with the interviews, through our professional contacts, we found a social worker from a municipal welfare bureau in an urban center and a high school teacher from an urban center who assisted us in building a representative sample for each focus group. As in the interviews, we tried to learn about the participants' feelings of trust toward their regulators and how that trust was reflected in their behavior toward clients. This method of data collection gained us information from a group perspective in which the dynamics between participants led to open sharing of honest feelings concerning issues.

2.7. Analytical procedure

As per grounded theory (Charmaz 2000), we explored the data without resting on prior expectations while using ATLAS.ti 8.0 software. Two encoders participated in the coding and analysis process. To ensure intercoder reliability and that nothing had been missed, we passed transcripts to another researcher.

The first step was open coding, by which a comparison was made between different statements from the data to decide which of them belonged together (Strauss & Corbin 1997). For example, a statement such as: *"I have no trust in the Ministry of Education since it doesn't support school principals and teachers"*, was labeled as *factors for distrust in regulators*. A statement such as:

I just pointed with my feet. I sent a message to Welfare [Ministry] that I was leaving. Although I know there is a shortage of manpower and that it can affect my friends as well, I have come to the realization that there is no choice and I must take care of myself right now.

was labeled as *coping strategies that front-line workers adopt for dealing with distrust in regulators*.

The second step, "axial coding" (Strauss & Corbin 1997), was used to place the open codes around specific axes, while grouping separate codes according to conceptual categories that expressed commonalities among codes. Finally, we classified major factors for distrust of front-line workers in regulators, patterns of coping related to this distrust, and an additional derivative that we identified under these conditions – turnover intention.

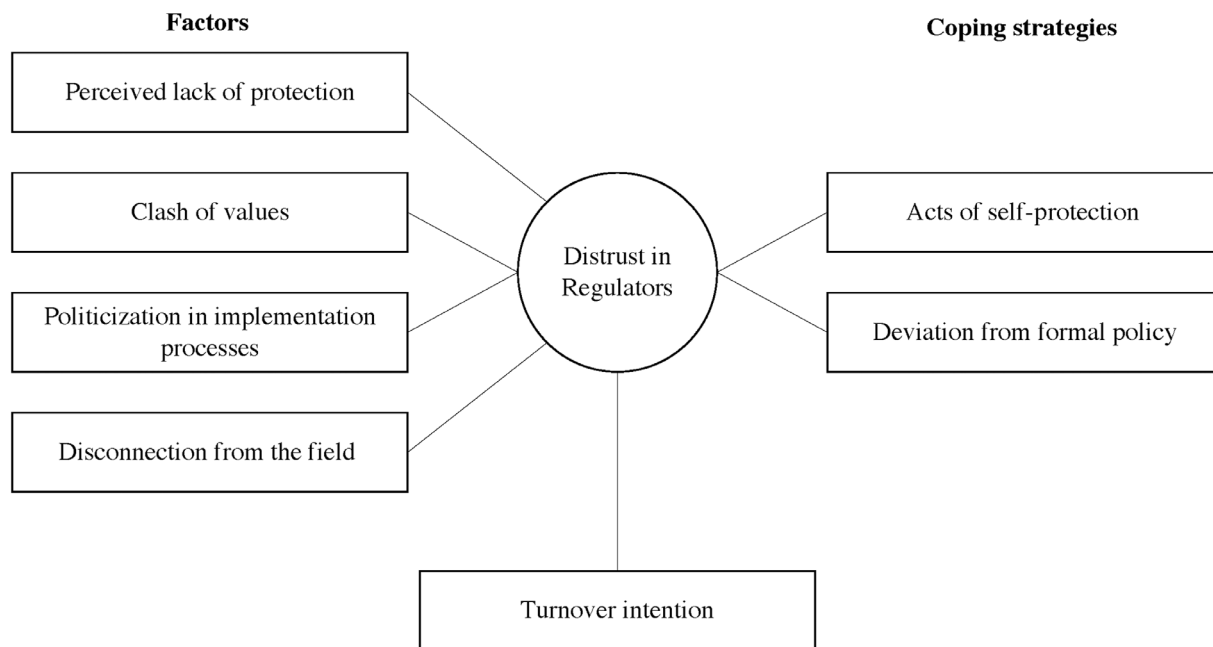


Figure 1 The factors that lead front-line workers to distrust their regulators, their turnover intention, and the coping strategies they adopt.

2.8. Findings

Our findings revealed that front-line workers felt considerable distrust in their regulators. This distrust was the result of four factors: perceived lack of protection, clash of values, politicization in implementation processes, and regulators’ “disconnection” from the field. Having identified the factors, we tried to understand the effects on their work routines, which proved to be acts of self-protection and deviation from formal policy. There is an implicit connection between each factor and the willingness of front-line workers to make themselves vulnerable although it may seem that only the first factor – “perceived lack of protection,” speaks directly to our definition of trust. When regulators are motivated by political considerations, front-line workers may fear their control will be undermined and they will be unable to protect their clients’ welfare. In the case of “clash of values,” front-line workers may fear that regulators will be offended by their actions and retaliate. Finally, when regulators are disconnected from the field and unfamiliar with needs, front-line workers may think that if they make a decision, they believe legitimate, regulators may reverse it and punish them. The result in all three situations is a reluctance of front-line workers to make themselves vulnerable.

Our interviews revealed that when front-line workers spoke of regulators, they found it difficult to distinguish between different regulatory functionaries (politicians and bureaucrats on local and national levels). When asked about their trust in “regulators,” they used the term to refer to senior bureaucrats in the ministries of Education and Welfare, high-level bureaucrats in their municipality, the Ministers of Education and Welfare, and the Mayor (Fig. 1).

2.8.1. Perceived lack of protection

The first element highlighted by front-line workers as a source of their distrust was the perception that regulators were unconcerned with protecting them. The security they were denied was both physical and verbal (shielding them from violent attacks) and professional (not backing up their decisions thereby undermining their status with clients and self-respect in their jobs). They felt that regulators looked after their own interests while ignoring the dangers to which front-line workers were exposed, and assuming no responsibility for their safety. One social worker focus group participant explained:

I have no trust in the Ministry of Welfare [the regulator]. I am very critical of their commitment to our security. There is so much violence towards social workers. The Ministry has made no statement on the matter.

Their treatment of such cases is a joke. I myself was a victim of a violent incident.... I had to cope with it myself.

Another teacher explained why she distrusted the Ministry of Education: “*There is a lot of verbal violence against principals and teachers and the Ministry of Education [the regulator] doesn’t give enough back-up to school principals, supervisors, and teachers.*” Another teacher declared: “[The Ministry of Education] *doesn’t think about the teachers at all. What am I fighting for? I think about everyone else, but nobody protects me. At the end, only teachers pay the price, and nobody appreciates them.*”

Our participants also described their sense of vulnerability as due to the regulators prioritizing clients’ needs over theirs; should a conflict with clients arise, the regulators would not support them. One teacher asserted:

I have no trust in the Ministry of Education since they don’t support school principals and teachers. The first and foremost emphasis is on parental requests. The Ministry is being pressured by parents who contact supervisors and complain about teachers, and it is almost always just bullshit.

This distrust was reflected in their attitude toward policy guidelines, which the front-line workers identified as the agenda of regulators. Another teacher stated:

I feel vulnerable. Parents always have an advantage over me.... A teacher can be fired from the school immediately. The policy guidelines [regulations] give [too much] scope and power to parents and they can cause a good teacher to be removed.

Another teacher stated:

I have no trust in regulators in the Ministry of Education ... conduct and policy don’t favor teachers. Teachers always get complaints, they [regulators] do not give the [required] backing and do not give tools to deal with problems.

They described how, often, when clients approached regulators directly, they received a different response from that given by front-line workers. Lack of support was a major source of distrust. According to a focus group social worker: “*How can I trust those in the Ministry of Welfare [regulators]? The issue of back-up from them is super-significant. When our client addresses a request to them, they give him a different answer than ours.*”

2.8.2. Clash of values

The second element our participants described as leading to distrust in regulators was the perception that regulators embodied values not shared by the front-line workers. They felt conflicted by their commitment to implement policies whose designers they distrusted. One teacher explained: “*I have no trust in the policy makers [senior bureaucrats in the Ministry of Education]. The things that the Ministry of Education ‘rolls’ on us are delusional. They go against my values.*” Another teacher declared:

I don’t tend to trust the Ministry of Education [regulators]. If they put more focus on universal and democratic values, such as ‘accepting the other’, rather than just using slogans, if they required students to meet with people of all kinds, in or outside Israeli society, then I would feel that I was operating in a system which I could trust.

Distrust in the values of regulators undermined front-line workers’ trust in their regulations. They felt exposed and vulnerable when required to implement policies that conflicted with their worldview. One social worker stated: “*I have no trust in the policy at all. I don’t feel that it represents the spirit of the things I believe in.*”

Distrust was also expressed when front-line workers perceived that a minister’s agenda did not match their own. One teacher (who is gay) described the Minister of Education [the regulator] who has in the past spoken publicly against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community: “*How can I have trust when a person [the Minister of Education / the regulator] comes out against me clearly? Whom do I represent? It just makes me act against the institution I represent.*” The same teacher added: “*How can I tell my students to perform meaningful [army] service? Serve your state and pay taxes but if you want to adopt children [with your same-sex partner], you must fly to the other side of the world and pay half a million shekels.*”

Another teacher raised a similar issue regarding the value gulf between her and the Ministry of Education that required her to implement policies counter to her beliefs:

I have no trust in policymakers [Ministry of Education]. There are a lot of things I don't believe in and this strongly influences me as an educator. For example - in the seventh-grade class, every homeroom teacher must teach Jewish heritage lessons. The Minister of Education demanded that we teach all religious traditions. As an atheist, I must teach about religious heritage - I had no wish to teach this.

Another teacher stated:

My trust is limited. The Ministry of Education requires educators in grades 9–12 to brainwash students and encourage them to enlist in combat service. And if, God forbid, something will happen to the student in the army – is it on my conscience? I would not agree to that. I constantly feel the militarism, nationalism and religionism in the schools, and it bothers me.

2.8.3. Politicization in implementation processes

The third element undermining front-line workers' trust in regulators was their perception that the latter's actions were based on political considerations, behavior the front-line workers called corrupt, even if not motivated by personal gain. Although they saw themselves as employees representing the regulators, they felt a schism between their own motivation – to serve the public interest, and the motivation of the regulators – political advancement.

One focus group social worker stated: “We are subject to pressure and criticism from politicians above. The political interest is not professional, so we need to mediate between the policy and the needs of the clients.” Another social worker remarked:

I could have had trust if the policy [regulations] had been non-political. That they were not made because of what is written in the newspapers, not just ‘to cover ass,’ but because someone really sees [what is needed] in the future and not because the Minister [of Welfare] wants to attribute achievements to himself.

Another social worker declared:

I have no trust at all in the system [regulators / Ministry of Welfare / municipal Welfare Department]. It exacerbates the problems [we deal with]. Some people with links to the municipality get certain things that others [clients] do not. There may be a situation where applicants making a request, receive a negative answer and someone else who applies directly to the municipality receives a positive answer. It really reflects the unfairness of our system... With regard to policy - where do the instructions come from? The director of the department is subordinate to the Mayor, she is subordinate to various vested interests in the municipality, and she is instructed from above to ‘solve the problem’, ‘to give material assistance.’ Even if there are no resources, if they wish, they will find a way to satisfy the client. We are behaving unfairly. Our applicants won't know that the decision came from the municipality; When you see such corruption, there can be no trust in the system.

A teacher described:

This is what affects my distrust of the Ministry of Education and its Minister. When political considerations unrelated to educational considerations mix in. Hence the problem and therefore also the distrust.

Our front-line workers described how politicization processes percolated from the top down and were reflected in the considerations motivating the managers immediately above them. They described how school principals / administrators of welfare offices adapted internal policy to political goals, causing front-line workers to feel that they represented a “rotten” organization, diminishing their trust in the entire regulatory system. One teacher explained:

The principals' appointments are political. A tender, not a tender, it's political. The Mayor is the one who selects the principals. That's exactly the point. The Mayor says to the principal – I put you in this position because I wanted you and then the principal must meet the Mayor's expectations. The principal is measured by the students' grade point averages, so it rolls over to us.

A social worker described:

In many cases I don't have trust in the policy makers [regulators in the Ministry of Welfare, municipality]. Some of the policy makers indeed desire the welfare of our clients but many of them care about their budget and other considerations. Our manager works for her political interest, for power, and political survival. All she does is make her reputation look good on the outside. They [the managers] will do their utmost to make things look perfect. City council members come here, cut the ribbon, and they do not know that a few months later the programs close.

2.8.4. Disconnection from the field

The fourth element diminishing the trust of front-line workers in regulators was their perception of them as “disconnected” from the field. They described regulators as “sitting in the ivory tower,” unaware of existing needs, formulating unrealistic and unachievable policies. One focus group social worker described: “*Our profession is in bankruptcy. There is a huge gap between us and the Ministry of Welfare. They are very weak, not attentive to our needs, just dropping projects on us.*” A teacher explained:

I have no trust in the Ministry of Education [the regulator] and I don't think it's a meaningful organization. Unfortunately, those who sit in the 'ivory tower' don't have any idea of what is really going on in our work. The rules and procedures they set are not implementable. Unfortunately, the decision-makers don't have a clue about what is going on.

One social worker stated:

I have a partial trust. I really agree with the procedures and bureaucracy. I agree for the most part with the ethical rules. I just don't agree with the methods. With these burdens. I don't agree that there is no limit on the tasks that an employee can carry out. I've been shouting all year that I can't handle this.

These feelings of distrust intensified during the COVID-19 crisis when front-line workers reacted to the conspicuous disconnection of regulators from street-level needs. One teacher complained:

I don't trust the Minister of Education. Neither trust nor have faith. It is a fact that during the Corona [COVID-19] period the Ministry of Education did not [succeed] in making any decision. All information that teachers receive comes from the media. There is no orderly policy. The whole area works on its own and each manager does what he wants. We are told [by regulators] to teach remotely [online] but they don't think about the implications for teachers and students.

Interviewees indicated that regulatory officials were “blind” to the challenges confronting front-line workers. One teacher said:

I have no trust at all in the Ministry of Education. Everyone [there] works [with the goal] that his name will be remembered. Not long ago there was a discussion on Facebook's history teachers' group regarding the reform implementation. Many teachers wrote – 'how do you expect us to do that? we don't have enough hours to do [implement] it?' Then, the history supervisor at the Ministry of Education wrote: 'the goal is not to make it easier for teachers, but to give students a more meaningful learning experience.' This answer immediately made me distrust her. Besides the students, we are half of her responsibility, so what is my place here? If I'm not important, what am I doing here?

Another teacher remarked:

I have trust in the [education] system because I think most of the people who work in this profession are in the system by choice. I have met quality teachers with a sense of mission and a desire to change and help. To the system heads - the Minister of Education, his deputies, inspectors and the director general of the Ministry of Education ... I feel less appreciation, especially professionally ... because they see us - the teachers as small screws in the system, who come to 'fill holes,' [although we are required] to perform superhuman work requiring tremendous attention, down to the smallest details, and attend to each student. In my colleagues, other teachers – I have trust, but in the heads of the system – I have no trust.

Distrust also resulted when policy was detached from clients' needs, that regulators lacked the knowledge or ability to identify. As one social worker pointed out:

I have no trust in the Ministry of Welfare or the state. I absolutely think that we are not a social state. There is no organized social policy. Many youth sponsorship frameworks have now closed and therefore our youth [clients] go to other frameworks that do not always suit their therapeutic needs; the government doesn't allocate a sufficient budget to fulfill our [clients'] needs.

Another explained: *"I will have trust only if the Ministry of Welfare comes out in the field a bit, that they don't receive all their information through the University, but they come in person and hear things for themselves."*

2.9. Front-line workers' coping strategies for dealing with distrust in regulators

Front-line workers' distrust led them to adopt two main coping strategies. The first was self-defense. They over-documented their work, behaved cautiously with clients, and requested a protective backing from various players in their environment. The second was to defy official policy and bend or break regulations and rules.

2.9.1. Acting in self-protection

Front-line workers' distrust in regulators led them to defend themselves from potential blame through over-documentation. According to one social worker:

Social workers are very careful. There is a great fear of being hurt. There is a catchphrase that a team leader shared with us – "the documentation is our priority." Without documentation, later they [the regulators] may send a letter [of complaint] and act against us. Thus, to be prepared, we become enslaved to documentation.

A focus group social worker stated: *"With some clients we know they may be recording us, so they can have grounds to complain against us later. You know, we have to document everything so that later we will not be accused [by regulators] of saying something that we never said."*

A teacher described: *"If I think there is someone [a client] who may behave in a problematic way, I bring in another person – a counselor, a class coordinator or a principal, so that things are witnessed properly, so that they do not distort the situation and report [further to the Ministry of Education]."*

Front-line workers described acting cautiously due to fear they will not be supported by regulators. They weighed their words carefully. One teacher stated: *"In... classes related to political issues I am very careful not to be interpreted as saying things incorrectly or I will be the next teacher to be fired."*

Participants highlighted their sense of vulnerability and apprehension when at work because regulators did not give them adequate protection from physical harm. To improve their personal security, they enlisted colleagues or managers to be with them when they interacted with threatening clients. According to focus group social workers:

There are care planning committees with clients who may cause more problems. We ask the guard to sit close by or one of the male social workers to be alert and ready. We order community policing in some cases [in advance]; we ask a colleague to call in the middle of the visit [at a client's home].

Another social worker explained: *"There have been situations where we transferred visits to another [activity] center where there was a guard. After previous dealings with certain clients, we had a bad feeling [about interacting with them] so I asked other social workers to be available [physically] for back-up."*

2.9.2. Deviation from formal policy

Distrust of regulators by front-line workers led them to deviate from existing policies in ways that conformed to their own worldview or personal values. One teacher described:

I get to talk to the students about the lack of trust in the Ministry of Education regarding religious studies [a teaching requirement]. Sometimes after a religious activity [in which students participate], or if I oversee students in the activities of a religious organization or something similar, I question the organizers and intervene [in the activity]. Unfortunately, most teachers are silent and let the activity pass [without saying anything].

Our participants explained how when their values are offended, they may bend or break rules to avoid implementing the mandated policy. While Tummers *et al.* (2015) observed that front-line workers adopted coping strategies of bending or breaking rules to meet clients' requirements, in our case, participants acted because of their personal values and distrust of the policy itself. A teacher mentioned that she ignored regulator-issued policies with which she had a philosophical disagreement:

There was a directive ...that [girl] students who wear too short shorts should receive a warning. I thought to myself, would the world really come to an end? I said nothing [to the students]. When it was Memorial Day for Gandhi [Israeli army general and former right-wing politician] I didn't agree that the students should stand [a minute of a silence] in memory of this rapist and racist.

When the front-line workers distrusted their regulators, they distorted and hid information, overriding policy guidelines to give what they felt was the appropriate response to clients. Their justification was that they foresaw that regulators would be unhelpful in resolving issues. They used creativity to mend flaws they identified in existing policy, defying regulations (Tummers *et al.* 2015), and functioning as citizen agents (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000). A social worker described how she operated:

I often act out of a desire to hide things. If there is a mother [of a toddler at risk] who started to work, and we cannot give assistance to working moms, I don't write she [the mother] is working, pretending I don't know about it. If the mother was working for the past year, I'm not checking, asking, documenting it, to allow her to get arrangements [for daycare]. I rely on the negligence of the Ministry of Welfare not to check because I think these children should be in daycare.

2.9.3. Implications for turnover intention

Another finding was that distrust in regulators led front-line workers to feel discouraged and increased their turnover intention. They felt "alone in the campaign," helpless, with "exit" as their only realistic option. A social worker described:

I just pointed with my feet. I sent a message to Welfare [the Ministry] that I was leaving. Although I know there is a shortage of manpower and that it can affect my friends as well, I have come to the realization that there is no choice and I must take care of myself right now.

A teacher asserted:

If I had more trust in the policy I would have stayed in the system. Many teachers leave at a much earlier stage [than I]. You ask yourself – what am I fighting for? I arrive with self-respect and then realize that I am nothing [to the regulators].

Actions of regulators increased front-line workers' frustration with the entire regulatory system, leading many to want to quit their jobs. A snowball effect with profound social implications occurred when employees followed in the wake of colleagues who left the profession. One social worker declared:

There is a big wave of workers leaving the welfare [service]. I don't think it's a matter of time and resources but how we are perceived as employees, how the Mayor perceives us, how the department director perceives us. If you don't have minimum conditions, it is simply not possible to give [clients] treatment.

2.10. Are there any differences between teachers and social workers?

In our findings, both teachers and social workers expressed distrust toward regulators and pointed to the same four factors as its basis. The "clash of values" factor was stronger among teachers, presumably because as pedagogues, they are responsible for shaping their students' values and critical thinking (Thornberg 2013). Both groups described similar ways of coping with their distrust. Overall, we had difficulty finding significant differences between them.

3. Discussion

Our study's central goal was to examine how the trust of front-line workers in regulators is reflected in their coping mechanisms with clients. The suggested theoretical framework underscores the importance of trust in this dynamic.

The literature places great emphasis on the importance of regulation in the proper functioning of a state (see Levi-Faur & Jordana 2005; Levi-Faur 2011a; Koop & Lodge 2017). Scholars highlight the role of trust in the relationships between regulatory players and its link to compliance (Braithwaite & Makkai, 1994; Murphy 2004; Murphy *et al.* 2014; Six 2013; Six & Verhoest 2017; Six 2018). Most discussions regarding the importance of front-line workers' trust in a regulatory context have focused on inspectors (Pautz 2009; Pautz & Wamsley 2012; Rorie *et al.* 2015; Pautz & Rinfret 2016). Trust has also been identified as impacting endeavors of front-line workers providing social services (Davidovitz & Cohen 2020; Destler 2017). The literature has examined various factors influencing how front-line workers cope. Emphasis has been placed on organizational factors (Cohen 2018), personal preferences (Keiser 2010), client characteristics (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003), and the policy's nature (Gofen 2014). However, the literature has not examined how front-line workers' trust in regulators influences their coping mechanisms.

Our study makes two theoretical contributions to the literature connecting regulation and implementation. First, our study identifies the factors that lead front-line workers to distrust their regulators: perceived lack of protection, clash of values, politicization in implementation processes, and regulators' "disconnection" from the field. Second, it illustrates how distrust in regulators leads front-line workers to adopt two coping strategies, acts of self-protection and deviation from formal policy, and impacts their turnover intention. Empirically, the study focuses on two classic types of front-line workers – teachers and social workers. Interestingly, the literature on front-line implementers of social policy makes little direct mention of trust / distrust in rule makers, dealing with it only implicitly, focusing on direct managers and employing organizations (Lipsky 2010; Gofen 2014; Davidovitz & Cohen 2020). Our study fills this gap by offering a conceptual framework for understanding how social services providers' distrust in regulators affects their implementation of policy.

Consistent with previous studies highlighting the relationship between trust and the willingness to put oneself at risk (see e.g., Mayer *et al.* 1995), each of the distrust-linked factors we found is directly or indirectly related to the willingness of front-line workers to accept vulnerability. In line with previous literature pointing to the coping methods of "bending" and "breaking" rules that front-line workers adopt to reduce conflicts and burdens (see e.g. Tummers *et al.* 2015), our study's findings reveal that distrust in regulators leads front-line workers to deviate from existing policies through adopting similar coping strategies. Furthermore, our findings demonstrate how front-line workers' distrust in regulators manifests itself with regard to both institutional trust (directed toward the Ministry of Education / Welfare / municipal Welfare Department / municipal Education Department) and role-based trust (directed toward the Minister of Education / Welfare).

Organization literature has emphasized the importance of employee trust in management of private companies not providing public services (Mayer *et al.* 1995; Kramer 1999; Zhu & Akhtar 2014). Social service front-line providers, however, operate in a political environment where their supervisors are government actors (elected or appointed) with social values at stake and public benefit the overriding goal. In this setting, the distrust of front-line workers in regulators may have a roll-over effect signaling to citizens that government institutions are untrustworthy.

Our study demonstrates that front-line workers' trust is not only critical to the optimal implementation of public policy when directed at internal organizational players (direct managers, colleagues, or clients) as previous studies suggest (Davidovitz & Cohen 2020; Destler 2017; Six 2018), but also when directed at out-of-organization regulators. Our findings demonstrating that politicization leads to distrust are consistent with prior findings that civil servants who perceive their agency is politicized are more likely to leave and less likely to engage in behaviors building policy expertise (Richardson 2019). The findings are also in line with studies on the link between trust and public service motivation (Lee *et al.* 2020) and highlight that distrust in regulators may lead front-line workers to turnover intention. Our research emphasizes the need for managers to recognize that turnover intention not only depends on individual or intra-organizational factors as prior studies showed (Grissom &

Keiser 2011; Shim *et al.* 2017) but also is influenced by regulators that operate outside the organizations in which employees work.

3.1. Limitations, future research directions, and practical contributions

Our study has several limitations. First almost all our participants expressed distrust in their regulators, narrowing our findings. Second, because our participants referred to various players (such as politicians, mayors, and government ministries) as regulators, it became difficult to distinguish between them in the analysis process. Third, our study's insights are relevant to the Israeli context, which is characterized by low trust in state institutions (Mizrahi *et al.* 2020) and politicization. These insights may not apply where there is a higher level of institutional trust or social capital and less politicization in the social services environment. Fourth, since our research set-up is based on empirical qualitative data, it is difficult to establish more than a tentative causal relationship between research variables. Future studies are needed to examine our research question through an experimental set-up that eliminates alternative explanations and allows a causal link to be drawn between the distrust of front-line workers and their resultant ways of coping. Fifth, our findings are relevant for a particular time, context, and place. Our study deals with regulators who are decision makers in ministries providing social services; our research is limited to teachers and social workers. Future studies are needed on other types of regulators (Ministries of Health, Public Security or Environmental Protection) and front-line workers (nurses, police officers or environmental inspectors).

Future studies might examine how front-line workers' distrust in regulators may affect other variables, including public service motivation and burnout and whether there is a threshold where distrust leads to front-line worker turnover. Further research might also examine how front-line workers' distrust in regulators influences their clients' attitudes on the functioning of institutions.

Our study makes practical contributions. It shows the need for reforms that will make front-line workers feel protected, such as a hotline to report dangerous situations, and impressing on clients the consequences of violent behavior. It highlights regulators' need to understand that the trust of front-line workers is critical to employee retention. It indicates the need for decision makers to promote direct communication between front-line workers and regulatory players. Frequent joint meetings may help regulators achieve a better understanding of the front-line worker environment, increase transparency between the parties, and establish a relationship of mutual trust.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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