

The Effects of Knowledge about Poverty, Exposure to Poverty and Trust on Policymakers' Perceptions about Poverty

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Abstract

This article explores two questions: (1) Does knowledge about poverty and exposure to poverty affect the perceptions of policymakers about how to deal with the problem? (2) Does policymakers' trust in members of society affect their perceptions regarding ways of dealing with poverty? Based on interviewees with 103 policymakers in Israel, the findings reveal that knowledge about poverty and trust in the members of society have an effect on policy perceptions. The result may have a theoretical contribution to the policy theory at the individual level and practical implications for policy entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Policymakers; Perceptions; Trust; Knowledge; Poverty

Introduction

Public policy theory lacks a complete understanding about the factors that shape policy perceptions at the individual level (Sabatier 2007). Studies of policymakers and elite groups have identified different variables that affect their perceptions, including sector and institutional affiliation, political, ideological and value orientations, casual perceptions and socio-demographic characteristics (Putnam 1976; Verba *et al.* 1987; Lahat 2011). While the literature has acknowledged that perceptions are an important element in the policy process (Sabatier 2007), the empirical evidence indicating what additional factors influence these perceptions is lacking.

This article contributes to this line of work by exploring three factors that may affect policymakers' perceptions about poverty: knowledge about poverty, exposure to manifestations of poverty and general trust in the public. This is a second article based on a study among policymakers in Israel. The

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first article explored the effect of political identification and value orientation as well as perceptions about the causes of poverty on their approaches to dealing with poverty (Lahat 2011). The current article investigates a different set of independent variables to explain the same dependent variable – perceptions about ways of dealing with poverty.

Studies have investigated the problem of poverty from numerous perspectives. Some have mapped the causes of the phenomenon (Miller 1996; Powell *et al.* 2001), others have dealt with its measurement (Townsend 1979; Piachaud 1987; Nolan and Whelan 2010) and still others have examined perceptions about poverty among various populations (Feagin 1972; Smith and Stone 1989; Zucker and Weiner 1993; Lepianka *et al.* 2009). This article focuses on the third group and explores perceptions about how to deal with poverty based on interviews with 103 policymakers in Israel, investigating two questions: (1) Does knowledge about poverty and exposure to poverty affect the perceptions of policymakers about how to deal with the problem? (2) Does policymakers' trust in members of society affect their perceptions regarding ways of dealing with poverty?

Israel is an interesting case study due to its high rates of poverty and unique welfare regime (Koreh 2017). About 20 per cent of the Israeli population lives below the poverty line (National Insurance Institute of Israel 2014), defined as one half of the median disposable income per person (Ben-David and Bleikh 2013: 7). Between 1992 and 2011, the rate of poverty increased from 16 per cent to 19.9 per cent (Ben-David and Bleikh 2013: 13–14). Israel ranks high among Western countries, along with the USA, in having a high rate of poverty. Its welfare system, cash benefits and tax instruments have been less effective in reducing the poverty rate than in other Western countries (Ben-David and Bleikh 2013). Furthermore, in the last three decades Israel has moved from a social-democratic welfare regime to a more neo-liberal one whose characteristics resemble those of southern Europe (Doron 2003). Gal (2010) includes Israel in the family of Mediterranean welfare states such as Spain and Turkey. These countries seem to have 'overall limited success in alleviating poverty and overcoming social and economic gaps' (Gal 2010: 296).

The findings of this study reveal that knowledge about the subject of poverty and trust in the members of society affect policy preferences. Surprisingly, knowing people who live in poverty and exposure to manifestations of poverty do not affect policymakers' perceptions about how to deal with the problem. These findings contribute to the need to strengthen the theoretical perspective of policy theory at the individual level (Sabatier 2007: 328).

Literature Review

Policymakers and policy theory

Recent theories have focused on the mezzo and macro level of policy theory. Examples include modes of governance (Rhodes 2012), network governance (Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Wu and Knoke 2013), global public policy and policy learning (Dolowitz 2004; Stone 2008), and the advocacy coalition

framework (Sabatier 1998, 2007; Weible *et al.* 2011). Although most theories advance our understanding about the diversity of actors, they generally do not engage directly with the individual. As Sabatier (2007) observed, ‘One of the fundamental tasks confronting several frameworks of the policy process ... is to develop a much more explicit and coherent model (or models) of the individual’ (Sabatier 2007: 328).

Nevertheless, most theories incorporate some reflections about the individual and refer to his or her beliefs, preferences, interests, cognitive ability and level of rationality. For example, public choice theory relies on the basic assumption that people are rational and seek to maximize their utility (Downs 1964; Whitford 2013). In this context, Elinor Ostrom (2011) refers to individual actors in her institutional analysis and development framework by identifying their resources, information and information-processing capabilities along with their interests as explanations for their actions in the policy process. Other examples are Sabatier and Weible (2007), who argue in the advocacy coalition framework for more complex assumptions about individual behaviour. They discuss the normative beliefs and altruistic behaviour of the individual and refer to the “logic of appropriateness” alongside the logic of consequences’ (Sabatier and Weible 2007: 194). Kingdon (2011 [1984]) differentiates between visible participants such as members of Congress and the media, and hidden participants such as academics and bureaucrats. He also elaborates on the motivation of policy entrepreneurs – who promote policy alternatives. Their motivations range from the desire to promote their self-interests, their values and ideology, to the enjoyment of the policy game (Kingdon 2011 [1984]: 204). Another example is Jones and Baumgartner’s (2012) punctuated equilibrium theory based on the premises of bounded rationality. However, in contrast to the advocacy collation framework, it focuses on the limited cognitive ability and allocation of attention of the individual actor (Jones and Baumgartner 2012: 3).

Although the various theories embrace different points of view about the individual, less attention is paid to other kind of factors. Factors that are not entirely personal characteristics such as: perceptions, cognitive ability, self-interest or socio-demographic factors and not entirely exogenous characteristics such as institutional context, public mood, and political context. In the current article, I explore the effect of policymakers’ knowledge about the subject being discussed, their trust in members of society and exposure to the relevant target population, and investigate their effect on policy perceptions. This study considers these factors in the context of poverty. To date, researchers have not investigated the role of these factors in influencing policymakers’ perceptions about ways to deal with poverty. Hopefully, exploring these variables will help to narrow the gap that Sabatier (2007: 328) identified with regard to the need to better understand the individual level in policy processes.

Ways of Dealing with Poverty

While most of the literature deals with perceptions about the causes of poverty (behavioural versus structural¹), a number of studies have dealt with ways of

dealing with poverty. Pereira and Van Ryzin (1998), who studied such perceptions among New Yorkers, pointed out that individuals who regard poverty as the consequence of the social and economic structure of society are less likely to favour time limits on support for the poor. Similarly, Littrell and Diwan (1998) found that survey respondents who did not agree with the perception that poverty is the consequence of the social and economic structure of society were less likely to support government intervention on behalf of the poor.

In the Israeli context, community activists Monnickendam-Givon and Blit-Cohen (2012) established a relationship between perceptions about the causes of poverty and approaches to dealing with it. Furthermore, activists who felt that the poor were to blame for their situation tended to favour selective financial support and did not agree with increasing tax rates to support them.

With regard to policymakers, some researchers have studied their attitudes towards the welfare state, government intervention and privatization, but fewer have investigated their perceptions about poverty (Verba *et al.* 1987; George 1998; Gulbrandsen 2005). Beck, Whitley and Wolk (1999) examined support among legislators for two alternatives to welfare programmes in the USA – aid to families with dependent children (AFDC) and temporary assistance to needy families (TANF) – that reflect a change from entitlements to contracts with time limitations and a move from a federal to a state responsibility (Beck *et al.* 1999: 88). The researchers found a connection between the legislators' support for the structural explanation for poverty and support for the AFDC programme, but not for support for the behavioural explanation for poverty and the TANF (Beck *et al.* 1999: 98). Another such study is the work of a group of researchers who interviewed elite members of society regarding poverty in the Third World (Reis and Moore 2005). In Israel, Doron (2002) interviewed 17 policymakers who had various ideas about ameliorating poverty, among them: education, raising the minimum wage and cash benefits (Doron 2002).

In this study, I focused on two categories of ways of dealing with poverty, representing two viewpoints of government intervention (Howlett and Ramesh 2003). One category is a free-market oriented approach calling for limited government engagement, which some researchers term neo-liberal policies (see Béland 2007, cited in Lobao *et al.* 2014: 3). The second approach, which I called the empowerment² of populations living in poverty, requires the state's involvement in strengthening the political power of the poor, transferring resources to those living in poverty (Sen 1997) and bolstering the needy.

Knowledge about Poverty and Exposure to Manifestations of it

The importance of knowledge in the policy process is well documented in the literature (Sabatier 1998; Ostrom 2011; Freeman and Sturdy 2014). While researchers have been preoccupied with the transformation of knowledge into policy (Weiss 1979; Buuren 2009), I am interested in the knowledge that policymakers bring to the policymaking process. Thus, I use Freeman and Sturdy's (2014: 8–9) term 'embodied knowledge', defined as 'knowledge held by human actors and employed and expressed by them as they go about their

activities in the world. It includes that sort of knowledge most often regarded as embodied, namely, so-called tacit knowledge’.

According to Atkinson *et al.* (1990), people behave like informal researchers who build intuitive theories that interpret human behaviour. As individuals, we observe the behaviour of others, gather information and process it, and attempt to formulate causal explanations in order to understand various events (covariation) (Kelley 1973; Atkinson *et al.* 1990). Putnam (1976: 87–8) points out that leaders usually have more knowledge about public and social issues than the general public. Thus, the elite’s perceptions are more coherent and stable.

It is quite challenging to differentiate between the effect of formal knowledge such as statistics and formal publications and the embedded or tacit knowledge resulting from one’s own experience on the learning process (Spender 1996). For example, there is growing awareness about the need to include impoverished people as part of the employees serving the poor population (De Corte *et al.* 2017).

In this regard, several studies have explored the effect of different kinds of knowledge about poverty and exposure to manifestations of it on the perceptions of various people. Studies of perceptions about poverty among students – before and after their participation in programmes and courses on the topic – show that the more their exposure to poor populations and the more knowledge students have about the subject, the more they tend to support the structural explanations of poverty rather than placing responsibility for their impoverishment on individuals (DeLashmutt and Rankin 2005). Furthermore, other studies that explored perceptions regarding poverty found that exposure to formal knowledge (through learning and formal talks) affects support for structural explanations of poverty (Wilson 1996; Reutter *et al.* 2005). Based on these studies, I posit:

Hypothesis 1:

- a. Respondents who have more knowledge about the issue of poverty will be more inclined to support policy alternatives involving government support to deal with the issue.
- b. Such respondents will be less inclined to support free-market oriented alternatives that limit the role of the government in coping with poverty.

Another interesting question is whether exposure to people living in poverty affects perceptions about poverty. Exposure to poverty reflects the embodied version of the knowledge that arises out of the experience of poverty. Jarrell *et al.* (2014) explored perceptions among nursing students participating in a course that included a service-learning-treatment experience. After the experience, the researchers found that the students’ perceptions about the poor changed both positively and negatively. They embraced more superficial and judgmental perceptions of the poor, along with a desire to help them (Jarrell *et al.* 2014: 302).

In his study of perceptions regarding three types of people living in poverty in the USA – welfare dependents, the homeless, and migrant labourers – Wilson (1996) used the variable of exposure to poverty. He found that

panhandling and informal discussions with family and friends about the different kinds of poverty groups supported individualistic explanations for poverty. On the other hand, exposure that included friendship with the poor and formal presentations on the radio or television about the three populations promoted structural explanations for poverty (Wilson 1996: 422). In this context it is important to note that researchers established a correlation between structural explanations for poverty and support for policies calling for government intervention to deal with the issue (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Littrell and Diwan 1998; Lahat 2011)

Reutter *et al.* (2005) explored variables such as personal experience with social assistance or welfare, acquaintance with low-income family members or friends, through work or through volunteer activities, and learning about poverty via the media or formally through courses and lectures. They concluded that the exposure variables played a small role in the explanations about the effect of poverty. Acquaintance with low-income family and friends did not affect perceptions. Personal experience with welfare contributed only to the belief that low-income people are less involved in community life. Extensive exposure to information about poverty from the media prompted people to believe there is a connection between poverty and health. Lastly, formal information about poverty improved the understanding about the difficulties of living in poverty (Reutter *et al.* 2005: 527).

Despite the small number of studies and their conflicting results, based on indications of a connection between exposure to poverty and perceptions about it (Wilson 1996; Jarrell *et al.* 2014), as well as the established connection in the literature between believing in the structural causes of poverty and support for state policies to cope with it (Kluegel and Smith 1986; Littrell and Diwan 1998; Lahat 2011), I maintain that:

Hypothesis 2:

- a. Interviewees who have been more exposed to people living in poverty are more likely to support state support for this population.
- b. Such interviewees will also be less inclined to support free-market oriented policy alternatives to ameliorate poverty.

Trust in the Public and Poor Populations

Trust is an important ingredient in the welfare state (Rothstein 2001; Crepez 2008; Bjørnskov and Svendsen 2013) and influences how we perceive those living in poverty. The discourse of poverty includes narratives of the poor as those who 'exploit the system' and describe them as the 'others' – those who cannot be trusted. Furthermore, the view of the poor as 'the other' corresponds with modes of inclusion and exclusion, and affects policy directions (Lister 2004). Welfare institutions and policies for the alleviation of poverty rely on trust. For example, programmes that allocate resources to those in need trust them not to exploit the system. At the same time, they trust the public to keep funding those programmes by paying taxes. Therefore, trust benefits individuals and groups, ensuring that one's contribution will be rewarded at some

time in the future with an equal return, or at least will not be exploited by other members of the group. Trust resolves the 'free-rider' problem that plagues the providing of public goods, because there is no suspicion that others will exploit one's contribution by refusing to contribute themselves (Knack and Keefer 1997; Luo 2005).

There is a growing interest in trust in the context of public organizations (Berg 2005; Van de Walle *et al.* 2008; Bouckaert 2012; Vigoda-Gadot and Mizrahi 2014; McCall and Rummery 2017), but less in the trust that policymakers have in society (Van de Walle and Lahat 2016). Based on the literature above, I suggest:

Hypothesis 3:

- a. Interviewees displaying more trust in the members of society are more likely to support policies involving state intervention to help alleviate poverty.
- b. These interviewees will be less inclined to support policy alternatives characterized by limited state involvement in dealing with poverty.

Method

Sample

To conduct this study, I interviewed 103 representatives from seven sectors in Israel: elected public office holders (18), senior officials in the civil service (24), members and representatives of the business sector (14), academics and researchers in think tanks (15), chairs of voluntary organizations (17), media representatives (11), and representatives of labour unions (4). The research is based on purposive sampling involving the sampling of the elite population or leaders. Individuals or groups are selected on the basis of information known about them, and in accordance with the questions and purpose of the research (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998: 76; Mikecz 2012). The sectors were chosen based on their appearance in the literature as being key areas that influence the formation of public policy or policy discourse (Verba *et al.* 1987; Etzioni-Halevy 1997; Forma 1999; Clarke and Sison 2003; Maman 2004). Within these groups, interviewees were chosen on the basis of their roles and their influence on social and economic issues as well the social-economic discourse in Israel. It should be noted that they were not chosen specifically due to their involvement in issues related to poverty, but due to a broader view of poverty as a multi-dimensional problem. Therefore, the interviewees represent people with influence who are involved, at different levels, in social-economic issues in general.

In addition, I used snowball sampling, a method that allows those in the group to recommend others for inclusion in the study (Beyth-Marom 1986; Mikecz 2012). I asked the interviewees to name three people who they thought influenced the formation of public policy in Israel. Of the names submitted, 75 out of 103 interviewees,³ about 73 per cent, were suggested by the other interviewees as being influential. Among the interviewees, 46.4

per cent stated that they had a strong influence on policy design in their field, 37.1 per cent had a medium degree of influence and 16.5 per cent had little influence.

Regarding the socio-demographic characteristics, most of the interviewees were males aged 40–60, with high levels of academic education and income. The great majority of the respondents were Jewish; half of them were secular. Half of the interviewees supported the left side of the political map, and about 60 per cent had European or American origins. These characteristics are consistent with the characteristics of the elite groups in Israel (Etzioni-Halevy 1997).

Statistically significant differences emerged between the various sectors with regard to age, number of years of schooling, education of the respondent's parents, income, and place of residence. The media representatives were the youngest, and the academics and think-tank researchers were the most highly educated. Interviewees from the business sector had the highest incomes.

Research Instrument

The interviewees answered questions in a structured questionnaire with open-ended and closed-ended questions dealing with various issues: perceptions about the causes of poverty and the ways of dealing with poverty, perceptions about the influence of various actors in the sphere of policy, and questions relating to the socio-demographic characteristics of the interviewees. To strengthen the validity and reliability of the research instrument, I conducted a pre-test among heads of Israeli municipalities. In addition, I showed the questionnaire to two interviewees (a former member of the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, and a senior official in the civil service) and included their comments in its final formulation.

Research Procedure

The interviews took place between December 2002 and October 2004 at locations chosen by the interviewees. The interviews lasted between half an hour and three hours, with most taking about an hour. The interviewees were promised anonymity and that their answers would be used only for research purposes.

Research Variables

Dependent variable

As table I shows, the dependent variable, ways of dealing with poverty, is divided into two categories based on a factor analysis: free-market oriented policy alternatives and statements emphasizing helping those living in poverty by giving them a more central role in decisions about them, strengthening their political power and increasing the resources directed to them. Although the second category includes various solutions, they all involve increasing the kinds of resources to benefit the poor: more political power, more financial resources or more power in policy decisions.

Table 1

Subcategories used in the multiple regression analysis and variance analysis

<i>Ways of dealing with poverty: free-market oriented approach</i>	Simple average of: (1) promotion of deregulation and privatization to create growth, which will improve the state of the poor (2) encouragement of integration in work through limitations on the period of receiving allowances and on the size of allowances (3) limiting the welfare benefit system	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$
<i>Ways of dealing with poverty: empowerment of the population living in poverty approach</i>	Simple average of: (1) participation of the poor in decision-making related to them (2) encouragement of organizing among the poor as a basis for creating political power (3) increasing government transfers to programmes aiding poor populations	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$
Independent variables <i>Exposure to poverty</i>	In the last few months, have you encountered true manifestations of poverty? If so, expand on the nature of the encounters	1 – yes 0 – no Adapted from Wilson (1996)
<i>Acquaintance with poverty</i>	Are you acquainted with people who are supported by the welfare system (recipients of guaranteed income)? If yes, are they family, friends, or acquaintances?	1 – family 2 – friends 3 – acquaintances
<i>Knowledge about issues related to poverty</i>	Based on the sum of four questions: (1) Do you know the poverty rate (number of people living in poverty) in Israel? (2) Do you know if this rate is lower or higher than the corresponding poverty rate in other Western developed countries? (3) Do you know how the poverty rate is measured in Israel? (4) Do you know (approximately) the income level defined as the poverty	1 – know 0 – don't know A maximum error of 20% from the true data was treated as 'know'

(Continued)

Table 1

(Continued)

	line for a four-member family, or per person, in Israel?	
<i>Trust in members of society</i>	Simple average of two questions: (1) How often do you think that people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance and how often would they try to be fair? (2) Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?	Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.69$ ISSP 1998

Moreover, it should be noted that most Western countries utilize different mixes of policy tools to alleviate poverty. Thus, they do not embrace a simplistic or dichotomous view of how to deal with the problem. Some welfare regimes favour more neo-liberal policies that rely less on state involvement, some offer a mix of private and public services (Been *et al.* 2016; Considine *et al.* 2017), while others, for example, social-democratic regimes, provide more direct support to the poor (Esping-Andersen 1990; Brady *et al.* 2010; Gal 2010). I use these two categories because they reflect distinct views regarding the way to deal with poverty and help identify policymakers' perceptions.

Independent variables

The four independent variables include: (1) exposure to poverty; (2) acquaintance with people living in poverty; (3) knowledge about the issues related to poverty; and (4) trust in the members of society. Table 1 provides details about the operationalization of the variables. The socio-demographic variables include gender, income (subjective perception on a scale of 1–5), age, education (continuous variable), and ethnic origin (based on the father's origin, defined as two dummy variables).

Results

Regarding the policymakers' knowledge about poverty, 61.2 per cent of the interviewees knew the poverty rate in Israel. Almost 80 per cent knew that this rate was higher than that of other advanced Western countries. However, only 30 per cent of them knew how poverty is measured, and 35 per cent were aware of the income level that defines the poverty line (see Appendix figure A1).

The media interviewees displayed the most knowledge about the topics being studied, whereas interviewees from the business sector had relatively little knowledge about these topics.

Furthermore, 75.8 per cent of the interviewees claimed they had been exposed to manifestations of poverty and to people living in poverty in the

previous few months. They described meeting people who asked for help or as part of their role, for example, visiting the tents of people without housing, and hearing stories in the media. However, most of them described personal encounters.

One half of the interviewees maintained that they knew people who were supported by the welfare system (see Appendix figure A2). Of those indicating that they knew people on welfare, more than 70 per cent stated that they were acquaintances, not relatives or friends. Representative of the labour unions, interviewees from the volunteer organizations, elected officials and senior civil servants were more likely to be exposed to manifestations of poverty and to know people living in poverty. Academics and those from the business sector were the least likely to know people living in poverty.

About 80 per cent of the interviewees expressed trust in the members of society (see table 2). There were no significant differences between the sectors in their level of trust.

The Effects of the Variables on Policy Perceptions

I used an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis to explore the effect of the different variables on the ways of dealing with poverty. The regression coefficients shown in table 3 indicate that interviewees who were relatively knowledgeable about poverty were less likely to favour free market-oriented policies (Model 2), supporting Hypothesis 1(b). Moreover, those who had a high level of trust in the members of society were also less supportive of such an approach, confirming Hypothesis 3(b). Furthermore, interviewees with higher incomes tended to support free market-oriented policy alternatives more than lower-income respondents. Of the three explanatory variables that significantly affected the dependent variable, the variable 'trust in the members of society' had the strongest effect on lack of support for free market-oriented policy alternatives. The other variables – exposure to poverty, acquaintance with people living in poverty, and ethnic origin of the interviewee – had no significant effect on support for such policy alternatives.

Table 2

Trust among the interviewees (percentages)

Perception of trust*			
Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted, or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?	N	One should be careful ¹	One can trust others ²
	99	22.2	77.8
How often do you think that people will try to take advantage of you if they got the chance and how often would they try to be fair?	N	Try to take advantage ¹	Try to be fair ²
	94	11.7	88.3

Notes: 1. Includes those who selected statements 1 and 2. 2. Includes those who selected statements 3 and 4.

*Based on ISSP 1998.

Table 3

Metric (B) and standardized (β) regression coefficients for predicting interviewees' positions regarding ways of dealing with poverty

Explanatory variables	Model 1: free-market oriented policy alternative	Model 2: free-market oriented policy alternative	Model 3: empowerment of populations living in poverty	Model 4: empowerment of populations living in poverty
Exposure to poverty ¹	B β	-0.171 (0.253) -0.072	-	0.353 (0.238) 0.155
Acquaintance with poverty	B	-0.274 (0.208)	-	0.192 (0.196)
Knowledge of poverty ²	β	-0.135	-	0.098
	B	-0.216* (0.087)	-	0.190* (0.082)
Trust	β	-0.254	-	0.231
	B	-0.476* (0.172)	-	0.426* (0.162)
Income	β	-0.284	-	0.263
	B	0.300 (0.115)	-0.399** (0.094)	-0.260* (0.109)
Asian-African Origin ³	β	0.373	-0.384	-0.241
	B	-0.321 (0.311)	0.145 (0.265)	-0.014 (0.291)
European-American Origin ³	β	-0.116	0.060	-0.006
	B	-0.485 (0.245)	-0.339 (0.209)	-0.536* (0.233)
Constant	β	-0.221	-0.178	-0.273
R ²		1.667** (0.454)	4.944** (0.387)	2.525** (0.704)
		0.174	0.201	0.341

Notes: ¹The variables age, gender, and years of schooling were included in previous procedures (calculations). Given that they did not contribute to the explanation of the dependent variable, I excluded them from the models. ²The comparison group included those who were not exposed to manifestations of poverty. ³The comparison group included those who did not know individuals living in poverty. ⁴The comparison group included Israeli-born interviewees. *P < 0.05. **P < 0.001.

The full model (Model 2) explained more than 30 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable, more than Model 1 that included the socio-demographic variables and explained about 17 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable. Models 3 and 4 assessed whether the various variables explained support for policy alternatives empowering those living in poverty by strengthening their influence, involving them in decision-making processes, and increasing the amount of resources allocated to aid them. Interviewees who were relatively knowledgeable about poverty-related topics were more inclined to support such policy alternatives, confirming Hypothesis 1(a). Furthermore, interviewees who had a higher level of trust in the members of society also favoured this approach, supporting Hypothesis 3(a). Among the socio-demographic variables, interviewees with relatively low incomes expressed more support for such an approach. Furthermore, interviewees whose origins were in Europe or America were less supportive of them than Israeli-born interviewees.

The variables 'exposure to poverty', 'acquaintance with populations living in poverty', and ethnic origins in Asia or Africa did not affect the inclination to support such policy alternatives. Of the four variables that did impact the dependent variable, coming from a European or American background had the strongest effect on lack of support for such policy alternatives. Next in order of strength of the effect on the dependent variable was trust in the members of society.

As in the case of support for free market-oriented policy alternatives, the full model (Model 4) provided a significant increase in explanatory power, from 20 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable in Model 3 to about 34 per cent.

The findings did not support Hypotheses 2(a) and 2(b), which connected exposure to, and acquaintance with, poor populations to perceptions about how to cope with poverty.

Summary and Conclusions

The findings confirmed that knowledge about poverty-related issues did tend to affect policy perceptions about how to deal with the problem. Relatively knowledgeable interviewees were more inclined to support measures designed to strengthen those living in poverty by engaging them in decision-making processes, increasing their political power and increasing the resources that the state allocates to help them. They expressed less favourable attitudes towards relying on the free market to reduce poverty. These findings align with studies among students and other populations (Wilson 1996; DeLashmutt and Rankin 2005; Reutter *et al.* 2005) establishing the connection between knowledge about poverty and support for the structural explanations of it. A similar connection seems to exist in the minds of policymakers as well. Furthermore, the empirical results reinforce the effect of knowledge on the individual policymakers' perceptions (Sabatier 1998, 2007; Ostrom 2011) and the importance of different kinds of knowledge such as 'embodied knowledge' (Freeman and Sturdy 2014).

On the other hand, acquaintance with, and exposure to, those living in poverty did not affect the perceptions about how to ameliorate it. These findings

diverge from studies that describe connections between exposure to those living in poverty and perceptions about how to help them (Wilson 1996; Jarrell *et al.* 2014), but are consistent with that of Reutter *et al.* (2005). One explanation for the difference may lie in the level of the connection. Although most of the interviewees in this study had high levels of exposure to manifestations of poverty due to their roles and duties, most of the impoverished people they encountered were not close friends or family. Perhaps the more impersonal nature of their interaction muted its impact on their perceptions. Alternately, due to their high level of exposure to manifestations of poverty, they might have become more inured to the experiences, which ultimately had less of an effect on their perceptions.

In addition, trust had a significant effect on perceptions about how to deal with poverty. Interviewees who tended to trust the members of society were more inclined to support ways of dealing with poverty that involved helping and engaging with the poor and did not support free-market alternatives. These findings correspond with the literature that connects trust and the welfare state (Crepaz 2008; Bjørnskov and Svendsen 2013). They also confirm the assumption that people who trust other people will support the idea that the state ought to help the poor. Such people are less worried about being exploited by the 'the others' in society and favour policies designed to include rather than exclude the poor (Lister 2004).

While the socio-demographic variables were not my focus, the finding that higher income interviewees favoured free market solutions accords with the motivation of self-interest of at least some of the high income interviewees. As for the results based on ethnic origin, in Israel there is a distinct social divide between those of Asian-African origin and those of European-American origin, with the former being more prominent in the lower echelons of society (Shalev 2007). One possible explanation for the effect of ethnic origin is class identification. Note, however, that the 'origin' variable did not affect support for free-market oriented policy alternatives. Given the various findings in the literature concerning the relationship between the socio-demographic characteristics of the elite and their perceptions (see Lahat 2011), we should exercise caution in interpreting these results.

It is important to note the limitations of this research. I studied the perceptions of policymakers in Israel, one country, at one point in time, using purposive sampling with a relatively small sample of 103 interviewees, which certainly limits its external validity. Although the choice of policymakers necessarily presents a difficulty in sampling, it also creates the research interest in this topic. Despite the inability to generalize to other populations, more than 70 per cent of the interviewees were named by other people as influential, and more than 80 per cent of the interviewees maintained that they had a medium or strong degree of influence on policy design in their field of occupation, a claim that strengthens the trustworthiness of the study (Mikecz 2012). The social desirability effect might have also played a role in the study. Therefore, one must take these limitations into account when considering the interpretations suggested above. Furthermore, although the data was gathered at the beginning of 2000, it consists of a unique collection of information that I believe makes an important contribution to the literature.

Several theoretical and practical implications emerge from this study. A key contribution to theory in this area is establishing that personal characteristics such as the level of trust of the policymakers in the society and the information they have on the subject play a role in their perceptions about how to deal with poverty. Including these less investigated variables can broaden our view of policy processes at the individual level and help to create a more holistic model that illustrates their influence on the choices of policymakers.

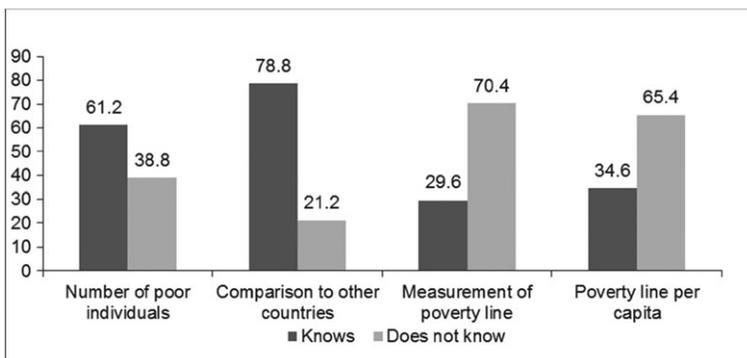
On a practical level, policy entrepreneurs and policy brokers (Sabatier 1998; Kingdon 2011 [1984]; Meydani 2015) who want to promote the state's involvement in reducing poverty rates can take steps in line with my results. For example, increasing the level of knowledge about poverty among policymakers in the public sector, civil society or other arenas, and developing ways of increasing trust in the other members of society will help policy entrepreneurs or policy brokers achieve this goal. Although increasing knowledge may seem more feasible than activities to increase trust, we may be able to devise methods to accomplish the latter goal.

Future research could continue to study the effects of knowledge and trust in the members of society as variables that determine positions regarding how to deal with poverty. Given that they may influence the world views and policy preferences of policymakers, they might provide a new path for understanding the policy process in general and approaches to coping with the problem of poverty in particular.

Appendix

Figure A1

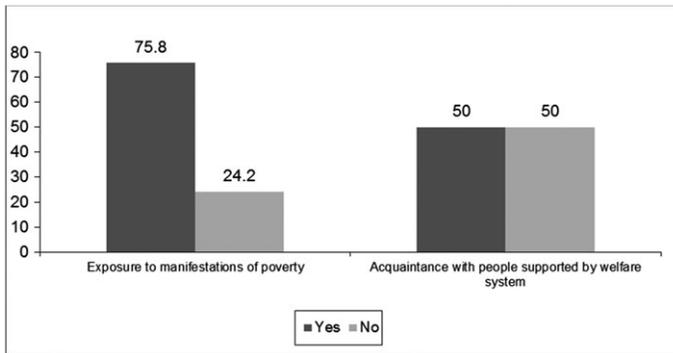
Knowledge of interviewees about topics related to the subject of poverty (percentages)



Notes: 1. The interviewees could state the number of people living in poverty or the rate of people living in poverty. 2. The category 'knows' includes a maximum error of 20% from the formal data.

Figure A2

Exposure of interviewees to manifestations of poverty and acquaintance with people living in poverty (percentages)



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Notes

1. Some provide fatalistic explanations. See, for example, Kluegel and Smith 1986.
2. The use of the term 'empowerment' in this article does not centre on the top-down or community perspective (Lister 2004: 173–4). Rather, the focus is on changes in power relations.
3. In 17 of the questionnaires, no answer was given to this question.

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