



The Meaning Ascribed to the Aging Phenomena by Mayors in Israel

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Abstract

In Israel, as in many other countries, local government is the arena in which national policies are carried out and through which direct social services are provided to the older population. However, issues around local ageing policies have yet to be studied in terms of understanding the role of the heads of these local communities. This study describes and analyses how mayors and heads of local municipalities perceive the consequences of ageing and its effect on their communities, and how it influences the specific social policies they have adopted as part of their responsibility for addressing this phenomenon. A qualitative, phenomenological methodology was used. Sixteen mayors and heads of municipalities from across Israel were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. All interviews were transcribed and then thematically analysed. Three main themes were identified: the complicated tension with the central government; personal attitudes and beliefs towards ageing; and the policies and initiatives actually adopted by the mayors in the field of ageing. Overall, this study emphasises the significance of the subjective construction of local versus central government power relationships by mayors and heads of localities. It supports the “strong mayor” approach within the local political-gerontology literature, hence pointing to the potential importance of political activism by older persons at this governmental level.

Keywords Municipalism · Glocalism · Local government · Politics · Mayors

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Introduction

Similar to other Western countries, Israeli society is ageing (Dwolatzky et al. 2017), with dramatic implications for both the central and local governments. Local government, including all its branches, is the closest level of government to senior citizens and plays an important role in their rights and quality of life (Doron 2006; Donovan et al. 2009). In Israel, as in many other countries, local government is the executive arena in which national policies are conducted and through which direct social services are provided to the older population (Lagergren 2002; Lehning 2014).

The literature indicates that there is both academic and political awareness of the significance (or insignificance) of personal attitudes of mayors and heads of municipalities in shaping local social policies (Gerber and Hopkins 2011). However, issues around local ageing policies have yet to be studied in terms of understanding the role of the heads of local government versus central government, or in the context of gaining a better understanding of how ageism may shape local politics.

This study seeks to help fill in a small part of this gap by examining the meaning ascribed to ageing by mayors and heads of municipalities in Israel. In particular, it tries to better understand how they perceive the consequences of ageing and its effect on their communities, and how it influences the specific social policies they have adopted as part of their responsibility for addressing this phenomenon. All this is done within the unique Israeli context, which is based on a historically British-founded division of governmental powers between central and local authorities (Razin 2003).

Literature Review

Ageing and Municipalities: A Diverse Disciplinary Landscape

The relevance and importance of localities and municipalities to the field of ageing can be understood from at least three very different theoretical and disciplinary approaches. The first approach stems from the broad, non-age-related political theories of “municipalism” (Dogliani 2002) and more current theories of “glocalism” (Cecilia de Burgh-Woodman 2014). These approaches argue that generally the local and municipal levels of governance are (and should be) more important than national or global political levels of governance. This argument has received further support within more recent trends reflected both in the decline or retrenchment of the national/central welfare state and in the significant rise of the “mega-cities” (Cucca and Ranci 2016; Donald et al. 2014). Relatively little attention is paid within this theoretical perspective to how demographic ageing of municipalities and big cities affects these political theories and conceptual approaches.

A different approach to the relevance and importance of municipalities and cities to social ageing and the older population can be found within environmental gerontology and the age-friendly community initiatives (AFCIs; Greenfield et al. 2015; Wahl and Weisman 2003). Stemming from geography and environmental studies, environmental gerontology stresses the relevance of local and contextual factors such as space, topography, architecture, accessibility, and greenery to the health and quality of life of older persons (Kendig 2003). Having similar roots, the AFCIs have tried to develop

a paradigmatic shift moving away from the focus “when is old age” (i.e., the individual level) to rather “where is old age” (i.e., the local community level) (Stafford 2009). While both environmental gerontology and the AFCIs are umbrella terms, encompassing many different approaches, they share a similar understanding: a need to shift the emphasis in the field of ageing policies from a national, top-down, governmental approach to a local, community-based, participatory approach (Greenfield et al. 2015).

A good practice example of these trends can be found in the “age-friendly cities” movement, which reflects the introversion of these ideas by cities and local communities across the globe (WHO 2007; Plouffe and Kalache 2010). A growing body of empirical studies support the positive effects of local environmental policies in improving the lives of older persons (Sánchez-González and Rodríguez-Rodríguez 2016). This growing body of knowledge has focused in recent years on age-friendly community design in specific fields such as housing, transportation, supportive services and community engagement (Lehning 2014). However, it is hard to find within this literature specific references to or an empirical focus on the role that heads of municipalities play within the age-friendly cities movement.

Another disciplinary approach to the interaction between municipal governance and ageing derives from the broader “political-gerontology” perspective. The politics of ageing has received much attention since the late 1960s, especially since politicians and scientists have come to realize the growing potential political power of older persons (Binstock 1974; Cutler 1977). However, most studies have focused on the national political level and showed that the political behavior of older adults is not a simple matter of chronological age (Goerres 2007; Hudson and Gonyea 2012). While there is no broad-scale research on the politics of ageing, which focuses on municipal politics, at least one series of empirical studies regarding the use of local legislative powers by municipal governments has shown that there is very little awareness of, and, in some cases, even disregard for, the political power of local older residents (Dayton and Doron 2012; Doron and Dayton 2012).

Ageing, Municipalities and the Local “Nature” of Social Services for Older Adults

Moving beyond the paradigmatic importance of localities and communities to the older population, there is a very pragmatic importance to better understanding these social frameworks. Many scholarly writings in this field focus on the social services for the older population which are provided and conducted in practice at the local and municipal levels (Anttonen et al. 2003). Even when the legislative and policy frameworks are found within the national or federal levels, in many cases their actual implementation and execution is conducted by or under the supervision and control of local governments and municipalities (Reichert et al. 2014; Trydegård and Thorslund 2001).

However, the actual scope of these social services is often subject to considerable variation between different local authorities. These variations are manifested in the scope of services provided to senior citizens, the distribution of the budget pie among different population groups, and gaps in the quality of local services (Dayton and Doron 2012; Doron and Dayton 2012; Trydegård and Thorslund 2001). These differences are the result of specific national/federal policies that grant local governments

discretion to shape their own unique plans. However, these differences can also be found where no such discretion is given and can be explained in terms of the socio-economic strength of the municipality, the political power of the local community and other factors (Sadan 2002).

One possible way to explain the differences between municipalities and the actual services they provide to their older residents is differences in political beliefs of the heads of the cities, towns or municipalities. In other words, the policies of the heads of the municipalities, their ability to obtain resources, their level of creativity and initiative and their political and professional relationships can affect the ability and desire of the local authority, which they head to promote social services to its senior citizens. This potential explanation can be supported by non-age-related studies that examined the ability of mayors to change and shape local policies according to their political preferences (Schragger 2016).

However, this explanation may be wrong: some studies (mostly American) have shown that mayors have relatively limited power to shape or influence their local policies (findings which support what is also known as the “weak-mayor” hypothesis). According to these studies, the ability of city mayors to actually influence key aspects of local policies (e.g., city budgets, taxation, social services) is very limited and depends on specific national, legal and political contexts (Abney and Hutcheson Jr. 1981; Gerber and Hopkins 2011; Salanick and Pfeffer 1977). Hence, the actual weight and relevance of mayors and heads of local municipalities to the actual lives of their older residents is still disrupted, both theoretically and empirically.

The Israeli Context

Historically, the division of powers between the central and local governments in Israel was founded under the British government during its mandatory rule over Palestine, before Israel’s declaration of independence, in 1948. It was only natural within this historical context to shape the balance of power in a way that handed almost full control and power to the central (and mandatory) government—thus preventing the Palestinian and Jewish “natives” from having too much power. After the end of British rule and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, this division of power was maintained for many years as part of the ideology of the ruling labor party at the time, headed by Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion (Razin 2003).

However, since the 1970s and with the decline of the political power of the very centralist labor party, changes have been made to increase the political autonomy and power of local governments. For example, one significant change was to allow mayors and heads of municipalities to be elected personally and directly by residents (as opposed to electing a political party to the city’s council, which in turns elects the mayor). This has created a new and much more diverse reality. On the one hand, local municipalities are still controlled and supervised by the central Israeli government. On the other hand, a new generation of strong local and independent political leaders began to evolve, exercising more authority and autonomy in running their cities and municipalities (Ben-Elia 2010; Carmeli 2008).

Finally, two unique contextual aspects should be mentioned within the municipal Israeli story: first, Israel has experienced a unique political experience in the field of ageing. During the 2006 election, for the first time in Israel’s history, a Pensioners’

Party (*Gil*) received seven seats in the national parliament (out of 120 seats). The party became part of the governing coalition until the next election of 2009, when it failed to pass the electoral threshold. Although these developments occurred on the national political level, they triggered a wave of local pensioners' parties' attempts to be elected to local councils (Gil 2018). Second, about 20% of Israel's older adults are Holocaust survivors. This unique population poses significant challenges to the national social and medical services (Sadetzki et al. 2017). Once again, however, local Israeli municipalities and cities are also called upon to provide for special needs of this population.

In light of these changes in Israel, both theoretical and contextual considerations point to the relevance of personal attitudes and beliefs of mayors and heads of municipalities in shaping local ageing policies. Therefore, the aim of this study was to describe and analyse how mayors and heads of local municipalities perceive the consequences of ageing and its effects on their communities, and how it influences the specific social policies they have adopted as part of their responsibility for addressing this phenomenon.

Methods

This study used a qualitative descriptive content analysis methodology, focusing on subjective meanings as expressed in the real-life experiences of heads of cities, towns and municipalities. Given the absence of other studies in this field and the importance of the unique perspectives of those serving as heads of local authorities, qualitative research seemed appropriate as a starting point for our understanding of this field (Chaitin 2009; Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

Sampling

In order to generate new knowledge through descriptions of interviewees' rich and subjective experiences, this study employed a convenience sample based on a purposive sample (Mason 1996). The study sample included heads of local authorities in Israel. The following inclusion criteria were set: (1) being a personally elected mayor / head of municipality, (2) serving in the position at the time of interview, and (3) having served in the position for at least 2 years.

To achieve maximum variation and rich data, we made a sampling map of the variety of municipalities according to the following criteria (overall, there are 255 cities and local municipalities in Israel): size (large cities above 200,000 residents; medium cities above 100,000; small cities above 10,000; local municipalities below 10,000), geographic location (Israel is divided into five main geographic regions: north, central [non Tel-Aviv], Tel Aviv and vicinity, Jerusalem and vicinity, and south) and religion (Jewish, mixed, and non-Jewish). The goal was to include—based on the different criteria mentioned above—mayors from all the different kinds of municipalities to ensure maximum variability and diversity. In reality, and as described in the limitations section, there were major challenges in achieving our sampling goal. Eventually, recruitment ended once the research team concluded that theoretical saturation (i.e., the point at which sampling more data would not yield more information) was achieved. Overall, 16 heads of authorities were interviewed, including those from large

and small authorities, and from central and peripheral areas in northern, central, and southern Israel. The sample also included rural areas in the north and south of Israel, rich and poor authorities, a Druze authority, and a mixed (Jews and Arabs) city. A full description of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Interview Guide

The data collection was conducted using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews enabled learning and understanding of the participants' experiences; access to participants' diverse personal, contextual aspects; and an understanding of the subjective meanings (Englander 2012). All interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed by the researchers based on the key issues described in the literature review and in accordance with the research questions. The interview guide addressed five content areas: (1) personal account of the person's rise to the position of head of the authority (e.g., where they came from and what motivated them to run for office), (2) understanding of their experience of ageing and of being old on a personal level (e.g., how they understood these concepts and how they personally experienced their own ageing), (3) understanding of old age on a social level (e.g., how they understood the experience of ageing at the national level and how they experienced the way Israeli society dealt with the ageing trend), (4) the status of older persons at the specific local authority and the local policy in the field (e.g., the main ageing-related policies in the municipality) and (5) the division of responsibilities regarding older persons between the local authority and the central government.

Table 1 Informants and Municipality Characteristics ($N=16$)

Age range of Mayor	Gender	No. of Terms in office*	Legal type of Municipality	Size (of city)	Region	% of older residents age 65+
70+	Male	4	City	Large	Center	15%
60–69	Male	2	City	Large	Center	14%
50–59	Male	1	City	Large	Center	15%
60–69	Male	2	City	Large	Center	14%
60–69	Male	1	City	Medium	Center	18%
40–49	Male	2	City	Medium	Center	6%
60–69	Male	2	City	Medium	Center	12%
70+	Male	4	City	Small	South	9%
50–59	Male	3	City	Small	North	12%
40–49	Male	2	City	Small	North	10%
60–69	Male	1	City	Small	North	15%
60–60	Male	3	Local Municipality	–	Center	23%
60–69	Male	2	Local Municipality	–	North	7%
50–59	Female	1	Regional Municipality	–	South	10%
60–69	Male	3	Regional Municipality	–	South	7%
60–69	Male	2	Regional Municipality	–	North	4%

*At the local level, a term in office in Israel is five years

Procedure

All initial requests were made by means of telephone conversations with the mayors' heads-of-staff, during which the purpose of the research and the nature of participation were explained. After full informed consent was granted, a meeting was arranged according to time/place conditions that were convenient for each of the participants.

All individual interviews were held in the office of each of the heads of the municipalities. Most interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 h and were conducted by the principal researcher, a woman having no prior personal involvement in the administration of local authorities and/or the politics of local government. The male co-researcher in this study is an experienced qualitative researcher, with no bias or prior contact with mayors or other officials in local governments. All interviews were audio-recorded, accompanied by a written field notes, and then transcribed, with the omission of identifying personal details. The study received the ethical approval of the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Welfare and Health Sciences of the University of Haifa.

Analysis

Textual and thematic analysis was conducted in accordance with the "Creswell Stages" technique (Creswell 1998) for content analysis. This methodological approach is well established and accepted in phenomenology in general and is used in gerontological studies specifically (e.g., Ben-Harush et al. 2017; Doron et al. 2013). In the first stage, after transcription, a careful reading of the interviews was conducted with annotations (field notes) written alongside the referencing comments recorded during and after the interviews. Each interview was read a number of times and received full and holistic attention, yielding an understanding of the experiences of each interviewee. In the second stage, statements were identified and emphasised, and then combined into units of meaning that were codified according to their content. In the third stage, different units of meaning were combined into categories of meaning with meaningful titles. In the last stage, a descriptive, integrative text was created describing the meanings extracted from the experiences.

Throughout the interviews, as well as during the analysis, a process of self-reflection was conducted jointly by both researchers, in an attempt to neutralise prior biases and discuss personal reactions to the interviews and to the interactions with the participants. Finally, in trying to maintain validity and trustworthiness, both researchers read and analyzed all interviews separately and together, and a thick description approach was adopted in reporting the findings, providing ample authentic examples of the actual words of the participants, allowing the readers to evaluate the credibility of the analysis conducted by the researchers.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the interviews with the mayors. The first concerned the extent of the relationship between the local government and the central government. The second concerned the self-perception of mayors and the heads of municipalities

regarding the phenomenon of old age. The third addressed the formulation of policy related to the services for senior citizens provided by the local authority.

Theme 1: “I have serious powers” or “many things I cannot do”? The Contradictions of Looking up to the Central Government

The first theme raised by participants addressed the manner in which the local government was situated with respect to the Israeli central government within the context of social services for the ageing population. Participants expressed a wide range of experiences, ranging from a high degree of autonomy and power assumed by local governments to a sense of powerlessness and high dependence on the central government, while addressing issues of demographic ageing. The mayors who positioned themselves on the side of strength and autonomy often used military or musical metaphors, painting themselves as army commanders or orchestra conductors. For example, “H” described his abilities in the field of ageing policy in his city as follows:

Oh yes. .. The head of an authority is autonomous!. .. And today has more responsibility and authority than a government minister. .. We have autonomy. .. If I decide, it will be established! When I come with my vision, it materializes. No one stops me on the way. .. Everything according to the law, and we do everything. .. so my decisions. .. these are my guidelines. .. and it is carried out in practice on the ground.

In contrast, some mayors expressed frustration at their inability to be as autonomous as they wished in shaping independent social policies—in general, and in the field of ageing, specifically. For example, according to “P”:

On the one hand, I have very serious powers and in a big city. .. with almost [xxxx] thousand residents on a huge budget. That’s more than a Knesset member and even a minister. On the other hand, there are many things that I cannot do. .. For example, even buying something for 10 NIS [the equivalent of 2 US dollars] is under [central] regulation. .. or to decide that I am exempting them [senior citizens] from municipal taxes or from water payments. For that, we don’t have the authority or ability, as only the national legislation can achieve this.

Notably, whether or not the head of the authority perceived him- or herself as having a high degree of autonomy, all participants shared their criticism of the central government with regard to its policies and services concerning the older population. For example, “N” expressed general criticism as follows:

For the [Israeli] government, older persons are not an agenda item, even though there is a minister for senior affairs. It seems to me that they are only occupied with the subject of benefits—what to give them—not their real needs, not their integration into society.

Or as “Y” described it:

Our country is not prepared for the ageing of the population. At the national level there is no long-term solution. We provide short-term solutions. And unfortunately there is no multi-year plan.. .. There is no looking to the future. Sadly, the State is not prepared. . .

Theme 2: “Honor the elderly”: Personal Perceptions of Ageing Issues

The second topic explored was participants’ perceptions of old age and ageing. Many described their perceptions of and attitudes towards older persons in a historical and generational context: growing up in a country founded by young immigrants. Almost all emphasized the general change that has taken place in Israeli society in this area, and that they were part of it. For example, “T” emphasized how in the past Israeli society was not at all exposed to the phenomenon of ageing:

I am the product of a generation that did not know old age. .. I am from a generation that did not have grandparents.. .. I had no example of how to be a grandfather. I mean, I am a man who has reached the age of [XX] without living in direct contact with an older person.. .. I did not live with the pain of raising parents. And when I arrived in the city, for the first time in my life I was exposed to old age and all its aspects.

In addition to expressing the challenge of addressing ageing issues for the first time in Israel’s history, many participants emphasized the moral and ethical dimensions of the need to care for and support older adults. These values are mostly connected to Jewish values and traditions, as expressed by “R”:

There is the well-known duty in Judaism—“Honor the Elderly”—Good idea! When you see an older person, you have to give him more support. .. I talk about this duty! Forget about one coalition or another, one ministry or another, one political party or another. We are all commanded to respect the elderly.

The demographic changes within Israeli society, coupled with a sense of moral commitment, led many participants to express recognition of the need to provide a response and to find new solutions to this issue. “S” expressed this well:

The elderly have gained a significant place in our society. Old age is no longer living only for three or four years, but for twenty years, twenty-five years, that is, age sixty-five to eighty-five or ninety, which are already years that must be considered, by both the State and us, as local leaders. We have to consider what service is given to this age, because it is a significant age.

Finally, the recognition of the emergence of this new population group, coupled with a sense of moral commitment and the desire to provide answers, has led to recognition of the complexities and difficulties involved in shaping social policy in this area. As “S” stated:

I met with representatives of the older residents. I told them that I want our city to be a place where we want to grow old, not just a place that is a default place for the elderly. .. So that when you are old. .. you will not feel lonely, and so that you will feel active enough and have enough to do in this environment. But it is very, very difficult.

Theme 3: “We do not throw the elderly away from the center of the city”: Creativity and Innovation at the Local Level

The focus next shifted to the actual activities in which participants were involved by virtue of their roles. All participants were proud to share information about the many activities they performed in their municipalities with regard to ageing. They described a wide range of creative and often innovative systems involving a variety of services provided by local authorities to senior citizens. For example, “K” shared the following:

We provide a very high-quality infrastructure for older residents. Here there are all the activities that the older persons can choose to engage in, whether in art or in sports, bone strengthening exercises, lectures. .. computer classes. . .

The variety of services that the interviewees mentioned reflected their recognition of the importance of “ageing in place.” For example, according to “M”:

As long as the elderly can continue living at home, it is better. They can and they want to. We are building here. .. a structure. It comes from a view that we do not throw the elderly away from the center of the city. It’s a club that can work from morning to nighttime, next to our sports club, country club, that has swimming pools. I’m not building a nursing home for the elderly in some suburb outside the city.

Many participants mentioned the need to address a variety of situations, and to involve the citizens themselves in designing the services. For example, “V” described how this is done in his town:

Look, in the end we have to remember one thing, that in actuality there is not only one category in the subject of old age, or age for that matter. .. and for this purpose I established what is called the Pensioners’ Council. .. We are building a large pensioners’ center that will provide answers to all the organizations, including an area for lectures and all things, and inspirational activities with young people. .. So the idea is ultimately to enable everyone to operate in one place.

The issue of intergenerational services and the emphasis on creating activities that bring together young and older persons in the community was also raised by many participants. For example, “Y” described how.

[s]enior citizens accompany a class of children in rehabilitation. .. They accompany them until their army service and follow them afterwards. .. And another project connects the elderly with children who have difficulties in school, in high school. Such a child may be attached to a pensioner family, where the father of the family takes the child once or twice a week, gives him lunch and does homework with him.

Finally, several participants described how they specifically address the local needs of ageing Holocaust survivors in their cities within their intergenerational activities. For example:

[T]here is a special home that is a center for Holocaust survivors, like a pensioners' club, but only for Holocaust survivors, where there is a lot of activity. They have a place to come and tell their story, including the Testimony Theater. The Testimony Theater is something worth running in all schools. It is a joint performance by Holocaust survivors and young people.

Discussion and Conclusion

As illustrated by this study's findings, mayors and heads of municipalities in Israel describe a broad range of experiences regarding ageing issues. It is our view that these experiences can be arranged within two very different personal perspectives. On the one hand, some mayors and heads of municipalities expressed a high sense of autonomy, power, and perceptions of ageing as an opportunity for renewal and creation of new local initiatives. On the other hand, some reported experiencing limited autonomy derived from a sense of dependence on the central government and from negative perceptions of old age and ageing.

This complexity and tension between two very different and even contradictory subjective experiences were found in all three thematic domains. Some participants complained about the limited and "hypocritical" budgets transferred to them by the central government. Similarly, some stressed the normative subordination of the local governments in Israel to the central government, which greatly weakens the functioning of local government. In contrast, some participants emphasized the real power that heads of municipalities hold in Israel. Those participants voiced a sense of autonomy described in terms of leadership and command. They actually felt that heads of municipalities are able to position ageing issues high on their public agenda and to make a difference.

These very different subjective experiences are also evident from statements regarding the level of the design and provision of services for older populations by local authorities. Some heads of municipalities focused on and accepted simply providing services that are narrowly structured under national laws or dictated by external national ministries such as the Ministry of Welfare or the Office for Senior Citizens. Others, however, considered themselves free and encouraged to develop, on their own, innovative local activities, new and additional services, and a locally unique

infrastructure of activities aimed at older residents. These diverse themes are described in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the experiences of the mayors and heads of municipalities in this study can potentially be situated between notions of “weakness” and “strength.” These contradictory positions reflect the experiences of mayors with respect to the national/central government, as reflected in their personal perceptions on ageing, and with regard to the actual activities of their municipalities. Although this typology is schematic, whereas real-life experiences are always a mixture of the two extreme prototypes of weakness and strength, it provides a framework in which the participants locate themselves.

The significance of this study lies in its support of theories that stress not only the importance and relevance of local governments, policies and environments with regard to the rights of their older residents, for example as argued by Doron and Dayton (2012), but also the potential importance of the personal attitudes and positioning of the heads of the municipalities (e.g., as argued by Schragger 2005–2006). Integration of this study’s findings with non-Israeli writings also support their potential transferability to other countries. Moreover, the findings are also significant in light of the existing, mostly U.S.-based, non-qualitative empirical studies, which showed little real-life changes in local policies in non-age-related social contexts, for example gender (female mayors; e.g., Ferreira and Gyourko 2014) or race (African American mayors; e.g., Hopkins and McCabe 2012).

This study, however—which is situated in a different legal and political cultural—points to the relevance of the socio-legal environment in which mayors are operating. Moreover, it suggests that when heads of municipalities are “pro-elderly” and hold a strength-based personal self-perception, they may be able (within the boundaries of specific local and national contexts) to build a stronger local system of services for the older population.

From a policy perspective, this study may support recommendations on two different levels. On the local level, one can find support for those who would argue that

Table 2 Ageing, mayors and heads of municipalities: Outline of key themes

Activity level	Perception of a role characterized by “weakness”	Perception of a role characterized by “strength”
Upward: relating to central government	Focus on lack of resources, limited budgets and the local authority’s lack of power alongside normative subordination to central government	Focus on the power and strength of the local government against the central government, with the perception of the head of the authority as “the commander” with great leeway
Internal: relating to personal perception	Expression of ageist perceptions and negative stereotypes regarding the position of older persons in the local authority	Expression of an empowering vision and recognition of the importance and contribution of older persons to the local authority and emphasis on the strengths of old age
Downward: relating to the local government	Adoption of a manner of conduct that expresses subordination to the existing social services system for older persons, with no attempt to be innovative	Adoption of a manner of conduct that expresses creativity and innovation in the development of services for older persons in the local authority

greater power should be given to mayors and local councils. At least in this study, mayors who believed that they held the power in their hands used it to establish and promote new local services for older residents in their localities. This recommendation can also serve as an answer to the question posed by Greenfield et al. (2015, p. 194): what public policy supports are necessary for AFCIs to flourish in diverse communities throughout the United States? More powerful mayors and more powerful localities can be part of the answer.

However, and as the findings of this study show, localism or AFCIs cannot be the sole approach. On the national level, one can argue that as a policy, stronger and more universalistic and nationally provided supportive services for older residents should be established. This is needed not only to prevent different levels of services for older persons in different localities but also to prevent cases where a local mayor with negative personal attitudes towards ageing and older persons results in a lack of appropriate services for older residents.

Finally, the study findings may also support increased social and political activism at the local level. Communicating and transforming these research-based insights into public policy or local action is not simple, and fully addressing this issue is beyond the scope of this study. However, such activism can focus on the importance of exposing and discussing the age-related perceptions of local candidates for mayoral positions. It may also provide an important instrument for political empowerment, which can shape the future of social policies in the field of ageing at the local level. While these are all arguments that require empirical examination, this study opens the door to future investigation and action on the local political level and in the field of ageing.

Naturally, in qualitative research, one cannot make broad generalisations or causal argumentations, and the findings are well situated within a unique Israeli political-legal order. Nonetheless, the study's conceptual framework is situated in a much broader, universal one (i.e., gerontological environment and AFCIs), and the findings provide the grounds for a proposed typology which can be tested quantitatively in the future to determine whether such categorization does exist.

In conclusion, the findings of this research emphasize the personal and subjective aspects of “ageing” within the municipal political context in Israel. The tension presented in the literature review, between those who theorize cities and local municipalities as key players in the lives of older persons (e.g., Sánchez-González and Rodríguez-Rodríguez 2016) and those who stress the inherent political weakness and limitations of local government as such (e.g., Gerber and Hopkins 2011)—was well reflected in the meanings and experiences described by the study participants. However, the findings suggest that at least within the unique Israeli context, electing mayors and heads of municipalities who hold a role perception based on what was categorized as “strength” can potentially contribute to the development of stronger services for older persons on the local level.

Limitations and Research Challenges

It is not easy to directly approach mayors and heads of municipalities in Israel. Usually, the only way to approach them is through their personal assistants or their secretaries, who many times view themselves as gate-keepers and screen those who seem politically unimportant or unwanted (and academic researchers fall into this category).

Moreover, in those cases where the gate-keepers opened the initial door, many mayors and other heads of municipalities declined the invitation to participate (overall, 33 mayors were approached). This was justified by various excuses (e.g., lack of time or lack of interest). It seemed that in most cases the mayors (or their personal assistants) either saw no political benefit from participating or feared the potential exposure to academic research. In many cases it took significant effort and time to “break down” the initial reluctance to cooperate. In some cases, targeted participants agreed to participate only if the person in charge of ageing affairs in the municipality could be present or even participate in the interview (a condition that was rejected, and which thus excluded some participants).

Therefore, the voices captured in this study were only of those mayors who felt more “comfortable” talking about issues of ageing in general, and about ageing in their specific municipality. As a consequence, very relevant voices and experiences of those who are probably more critical or perhaps less empathetic were unheard and left out of this study. A different limitation of this study was its gender bias. Except one, all study participants were male. This reflects the fact that at the time of the study there were only six female mayors/heads of municipalities in Israel (out of 251 cities and local municipalities). Nevertheless, the findings described should be read with the above limitations in mind.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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