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# In the face of sociopolitical and cultural challenges: Educational leaders' strategic thinking skills

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## Abstract

This article discusses the implications of sociopolitical and cultural challenges and complexity on educational leaders' use of strategic thinking skills in divided societies, using the case of Israel, a deeply divided society with a hegemonic Jewish ethno-national state and Bedouins – a subculture of the minority Arabs. In the suggested model, we propose that, due to sociopolitical and cultural challenges, Bedouin school principals use 'systems thinking' skills as a holistic approach to coping with their complex environment. Jewish principals use the additional strategic skills of reflection and reframing. We provide the results of a preliminary empirical study, with 103 Bedouin and 67 Jewish principals, supporting our propositions. This article and its propositions open avenues for research into principals' perceptions in deeply divided contexts and contribute to cognitive characteristics of leadership by explaining the implications of specific contexts for strategic thinking.

**Keywords:** strategic thinking skills, divided society, marginalized group, political and cultural challenges, educational leader

## Introduction

The role of school leaders is particularly complex in today's 'era of accountability', which involves high standards for student achievement alongside frequently changing educational systems and a complex external environment (Ganon-Shilon and Schechter, 2017). To accommodate these complex internal and external environments, school principals must satisfy nearly overwhelming requirements for expertise across a wide range of leadership capacities that were previously not within their purview (Da'as, 2017). In particular, the ability to think strategically is essential for successful leadership in school management (Kim, 2011) and leader effectiveness (Muriithi et al., 2018).

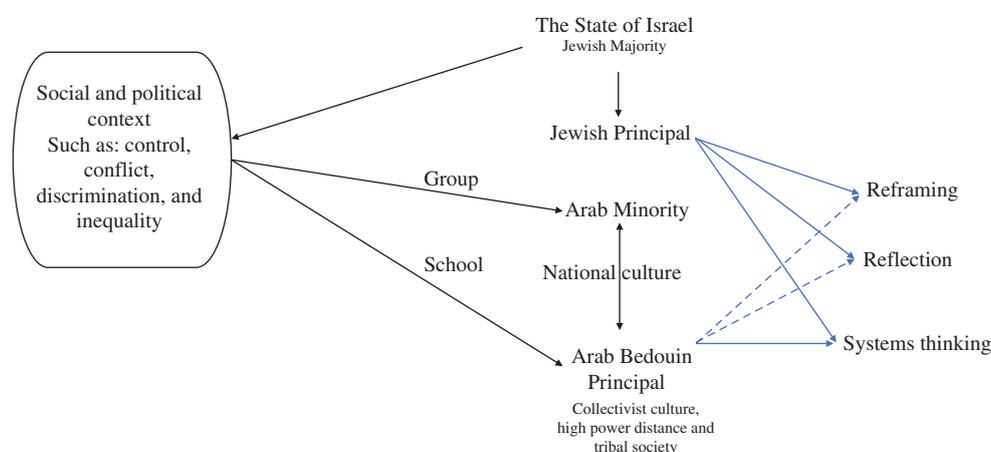
Casey and Goldman (2010) suggest that strategic thinking is a dynamic, interactive and iterative process that integrates thinking and action. It is one of the managerial abilities that guide managers during the development of organizational capabilities, processes (for example, organizational learning) and performance (Alatailat et al., 2019; Moon, 2013; Srivastava and D'Souza, 2019), and it has long been recognized as a focal point for an organization's success (Dhir et al., 2018). Leaders need the ability to think and act strategically to deal effectively with rapid and continuous change (Goldman, 2012; Pisapia, 2009).

Researchers have argued that individual and organizational factors may affect leaders' strategic thinking, such as their attitudes towards risk (Moon, 2013),

organizational context or the characteristics of the strategic thinker (Bonn, 2005). Others emphasize that strategic thinking is an individual activity influenced by the context within which it occurs and the challenges in one's environment (Goldman et al., 2017), such as the specific cultural and political context (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). Thus, the current article will add to this research by presenting a preliminary small study on this issue and discussing how the complexity of sociopolitical context and cultural values can shape and challenge the strategic thinking skills (STS) of school principals. We consider three components of STS: systems thinking, reflection and reframing (Pisapia et al., 2005). Research suggests that a higher level of STS will provide the complex strategic processing capability demanded by such environments (Pisapia et al., 2005).

Educational leaders face challenges in their environment related to their national culture and other sociopolitical processes (Arar, 2015; Arar and Ibrahim, 2016; Arar et al., 2016; Truong and Hallinger, 2017). It has therefore been argued that leadership is a phenomenon that should be investigated and interpreted in the context of a specific culture (House et al., 2004; House et al., 2001; Zibenberg, 2018). A management's decision-making process and ways of thinking can be examined through the internal 'cultural model' of a given group, which represents the 'blend of normative beliefs and moral prescriptions' (Markus, 2004: 78), as well as through external cross-cultural comparisons with other groups (Resick et al., 2006). However, the challenges posed by cultural and sociopolitical contexts have been less considered in the literature in relation to leaders' STS (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). Thus, in this article, we extend the discussion and take into consideration the sociopolitical and cultural challenges affecting leaders' use of STS. In addressing our arguments, we use the case of the Arab Bedouins in Israel as a subculture of the Arab minority, compared to the Jewish majority. We discuss how political issues (such as processes of inequality and discrimination) and cultural challenges affect the Arab Bedouin group, and, in turn, affect the Bedouin school principals' STS (Figure 1), and in comparison to the STS of principals from the Jewish majority. We further present a preliminary small study to examine our propositions.

As a minority subculture, the Bedouins have two positions in Israeli society: relative to the national minority group and relative to the majority group. The Bedouin population is geographically distant from the Arab minority, the majority live in southern Israel (except for a small number of Bedouins in the north), and they have



**Figure 1: Implications of sociopolitics and culture for strategic thinking skills: the case of Israel (dashed lines indicate less STS use than solid lines) (Source: Authors, 2021)**

specific characteristics that are related to their social structure and their connection with the community, as will be discussed later. Therefore, taking into account the Bedouins' marginal position and the sociopolitical processes (Figure 1) that affect them, it is important to address the Bedouin perspective, reflecting Bedouin school leaders' thinking, as also reflected by their roles as agents of both the state and their community. A discussion of some of the issues facing Bedouin education in Israel is also important, as research on Bedouins has been less documented.

Moreover, a discussion of STS in different contexts will add to the educational leadership literature, as it has been argued that more research is needed on leadership in educational organizations across more diverse national settings (Truong and Hallinger, 2017). Furthermore, this article adds to the developing strategic leadership literature and may serve to identify potential effective leadership in dynamic environments, as well as future research areas.

## **Literature review**

Culture is 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another' (Hofstede, 1991: 5). Hofstede (2001) noted that as organizations and management styles are bounded by culture, different national cultures might aspire to different organizational structures. Although some leadership traits and practices seem to be universally endorsed, these traits also seem to be enacted differently across cultures (House et al., 2004). According to House et al. (2001), beyond differentiating cultures, cultural attributes and practices can also predict leader attributes and behaviours. Cultural values have been found to affect leadership ideals (Dorfman et al., 2012), leadership styles (Sabri, 2012), organizational leadership goals and strategies (Kouzes and Posner, 1987) and leaders' skills (Da'as, 2017).

In this regard, this article can also provide further insights into the use of strategic thinking in non-European (for example, traditional) cultures, where a non-European orientation is coupled with a unique style that is unrelated to modern life. This is reflected in these groups' values and norms in thought and lifestyle, sometimes deviating from the Eurocentric lifestyle – 'referring to the civilization found in Western European countries and their derivative settler societies in North America and elsewhere' (Eyal et al., 2020: 2) – in not recognizing, for example, gender equality, where women's roles lie more in the private sphere, that is, at home and raising children; these groups also tend to be more religious. Regarding the Israeli context, Smootha (2005: 77) argues that Israel can be considered a semi-Western country in terms of 'self-image, broad integration of science and technology, democratic tradition, individualistic orientation, and modern values', rather than a fully Eurocentric one. However, Israel's orientation, and in particular that of its hegemonic Jewish group, towards the Eurocentric model, which focuses on Western civilization or on a biased view that favours Western over non-Western cultures, contrasts with the orientation of its Bedouin minority (Hobson, 2012). In other words, the focus of Israel's hegemonic culture conflicts with the non-Western Bedouin culture. Hence, a comparison of STS may reveal traditional–modern convergences and divergences in cultural, organizational and educational contexts.

Recently, the argument has been raised that leadership is affected by sociopolitical settings (Arar, 2015; Arar et al., 2016; Truong and Hallinger, 2017), and that sociopolitical processes should be taken into consideration when examining effective educational leaders (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). This is especially true in

divided societies where educational leaders face other challenges related to their status in their specific country (Truong and Hallinger, 2017).

Arar (2015) indicates that Israeli educational policy perpetuates ethnic and social gaps. Accordingly, the principals in that study reported on different personal trajectories that shaped their perceptions of social justice, and they described their strategies in promoting social justice. Although the principals in Jewish schools suggested strategies to help their low-achieving students, they did not mention improving the status of the Arab educational system, which exists on the margins of the Jewish one (Arar, 2015).

In this regard, educational leaders in a divided society characterized by multiple cultures have to cope with issues of social inequality, such as in resources per student, relative to students belonging to the majority (Arar, 2015). For example, Truong and Hallinger (2017) note that in Vietnam effective school leadership integrates elements associated with strong autocratic and moral leadership. More specifically, Truong and Hallinger (2017) argue that cultural, political and institutional legitimization seems to lead to the use of an autocratic and directive leadership style. Da'as and Zibenberg (2021) describe the challenges of educational leadership in minority groups, where culture, sociopolitical conflicts and control are the basic processes affecting teachers' perceptions of effective leaders in a divided society. Teachers perceived the principal as being less dedicated and intelligent, compared to the majority group's perception of their principal.

We begin with a literature review, giving the framework of STS. We then establish our propositions by demonstrating the case of Israel, along with explanations of the sociopolitical and cultural implications for principals' STS. We also present a preliminary empirical study comparing Bedouin and Jewish school principals' STS.

### **The strategic thinking skills framework**

School principals' ability to deal with change and environmental challenges lies in how they think and plan strategically, and how they help their members prepare for continuous professional development and school improvement (Al-Zboon and Hasan, 2012). Strategic thinking can provide a better view of a facility's needs and environment (Kraus et al., 2006), and can help define the organization's overall mission while focusing on its objectives. Pisapia (2009) notes that one reason that leaders in chaotic and complex environments fail is that they tend to rely on linear thinking, which does not work in situations characterized by ambiguity and complexity.

Strategic thinking is an important leadership skill; however, its core elements are not well-defined (Muriithi et al., 2018; Pang and Pisapia, 2012). Previous research provides somewhat varying definitions of strategic thinking, depending on the focus. Bonn (2005: 337) defines strategic thinking as 'a way of solving strategic problems that combines a rational and convergent approach with creative and divergent thought process'. This definition emphasizes the elements or characteristics of the strategic thinking process. Abraham (2005: 5) defines strategic thinking as 'the process of finding alternative ways of competing and providing customer value'. This definition focuses on not only the objectives, but also the functions of strategic thinking. Muriithi et al. (2018) suggest that strategic thinking is leaders' ability to comprehend the issues facing them in their leadership tasks in relation to their current and future organizational performance.

This article is based on the leadership thinking skills framework developed by Pisapia et al. (2005), which describes the way in which leaders make sense of their environment. The assumption is that if leaders possess these skills, they will be better

able to: (1) recognize interdependencies, interrelationships and patterns; and (2) make consequential decisions using powers both of analysis and intuition (Pang and Pisapia, 2012: 345). Pisapia et al. (2005) identify systems thinking, reflection and reframing as important concepts that scholars associate with STS. These concepts have been further associated with strategic thinking in general (Cohen et al., 2000), and we therefore adopt this framework. Pisapia et al. (2005) hypothesize that effective leaders use these skills – systems thinking, reflection and reframing – differently from less effective ones, especially in complex situations, thus relating these skills to leader effectiveness.

More specifically, systems thinking refers to 'a leader's ability to see systems holistically by understanding the properties, forces, patterns and interrelationships that shape the behaviour of the system, thereby providing options for action'; reflection is 'the ability to weave logical and rational thinking through the use of perceptions, experience and information, to make judgements on what has happened, and to create intuitive principles that will guide future actions'; and reframing refers to 'a leader's ability to switch their attention across multiple perspectives, frames, mental models, and paradigms to generate new insights and options for action' (Pisapia et al., 2005; taken from Pang and Pisapia, 2012: 346).

A study by Pang and Pisapia (2012) suggests a link between school leaders' STS and the development of well-performing schools. In a previous study, Pisapia et al. (2005) defined the three STS with apparent links to leader success: reframing, reflection and systems thinking. Pang and Pisapia (2012) found that for Hong Kong school leaders systems thinking was the strongest predictor of leader effectiveness. Furthermore, in Malaysia STS had a statistically significant positive relationship with schoolteacher leadership motivation (Mohamad, 2020). Pang and Pisapia's (2012) framework has also been used in the business sector: a statistically significant correlation was found between total STS, their dimensions and organizational performance in Jordanian insurance companies (Almarshad, 2019). Shaked and Schechter (2016) found that Israeli principals' systems thinking contributes to three areas of instructional leadership: (1) improving school curriculum; (2) developing a professional learning community; and (3) interpreting performance data. As pointed out by Fullan (2014), principals' ability to think systemically depends on their strategic thinking capacity. The latter calls for competent planning, anticipation and an understanding of the interdependency of actions in a social system, implying focused resource coordination.

## **The case of the Arab Bedouins in Israel**

Bedouin society in Israel is a secondary group (that is, a subculture) within the Arab minority, the latter considered to be an ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural minority (Smooha, 2004, 2010). The Bedouins are Muslims, and their subgroup's cultural, historical, social and political uniqueness distinguishes it from other secondary groups (Abu-Saad, 2006).

Today, the Bedouins in Israel are divided into two major groups: Bedouins in the south of Israel, that is, the Negev (272,578 people in 2020; Ben Gurion University of the Negev, n.d.), including semi-nomads and inhabitants in towns and unrecognized villages; and Bedouins in the north of Israel, who mostly live in 21 villages and towns (about 100,000 people in 2018; [www.moin.gov.il](http://www.moin.gov.il)). In addition to these two groups, there are smaller concentrations of Bedouins in other locations around the country (about 15,000 in all). The Bedouins constitute about 3.5 per cent of the population of Israel.

Bedouin society is described as patriarchal, with a traditional collectivist culture and high power distance (Abu-Rabia-Queder and Oplatka, 2008). It is a tribal society,

with tribes divided into a number of family clans; each clan branches into parent houses, where the father stands at the head of the family and is subordinate to the sheikh, who is the tribal head. The clan is an independent unit, both socially and economically. Traditionally, Bedouin individuals act out of loyalty to their family, clan and tribe, showing great commitment. From childhood, they are educated to favour the group interest over the individual (Mizel, 2005).

Schools are built according to the clan or tribal settings, and each school is named after the clan or tribe to which its students belong (Mizel, 2009; Rinawi, 2003). Thus, it is acknowledged that the school belongs to a certain tribe, clan or family, on whose land it is usually built.

## **Bedouins within the Israeli educational system**

Israeli society is deeply divided along ethno-national lines, with a separation between the Jewish majority and the Arab (Palestinian) minority, and with subgroups within each population (Sabbagh, 2017). Typically, this deep divide – in essence, a social boundary that divides society into two or more parts and creates tension between them – describes a society in which the ethnic divisions are sharp enough to threaten the very existence or nature of the state (O'Flynn, 2010). In divided societies, tension between citizens and the state is high, arising when the minority feels discriminated against or alienated (Smootha, 2010). The ethno-national division between Jews and Arabs has led to almost a century of conflict (in part as a result of the establishment of Israel in 1948). The relationship between Arabs and Jews is consistently overshadowed by disagreements about the narrative and solution to the violent conflict between Jews and Palestinians (Smootha, 2004). The Arab citizens (in Israel) sympathize with the Palestinians (in the West Bank and Gaza) in their struggle against the Jewish state, separating them from the Jews. On the one hand, they are enraged by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank; on the other hand, as part of Israeli society, they are subject to Palestinian violence (Schaedel and Azaiza, 2006).

The conflict also has implications for the educational system (Abu-Saad, 2019). Al-Haj (2012) argues that Arab education is an instrument used by the majority group to mould their culture, and a means of preserving the accepted values and standards.

All schools in Israel belong to the Israeli educational system that regulates their administrative and curricular aspects (Arar, 2012). However, education in Israel is segregated, such that Jewish schools are managed by Jewish principals who teach in the Hebrew language, while Arab schools are managed by Arab principals, and the teaching is in Arabic. The Arab and Jewish educational systems are not equal, nor are their resources; the Arab schools suffer from budgetary discrimination and a lack of learning programmes or content. There is further discrimination with respect to allocations per student, and there is a huge gap in educational inputs – for example, in special programmes for low-achieving students, school libraries and free consulting services (Arar, 2015).

The Israeli centralized educational system dictates curricula and learning materials, and controls Arabs through Israeli educational aims, because the general and specific curricular goals that have been developed for Arab education tend to blur, rather than enhance, the formation of an Arab identity (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). This is true for all Arab schools, but the impact of this situation is even greater for the Bedouin schools. The overall aims of the educational system, as well as the specific curricular goals, require Arab students to learn the Hebrew language and learn about Jewish values and culture (in total, more hours are spent on this than on

Arabic language, literature and history) (Abu-Saad, 2015, 2019; Agbaria et al., 2015). To a large extent, the tendency is to ignore or to provide only minimal exposure to Arab language, history and culture (Haddad-Haj-Yahia and Rudinsky, 2018).

The educational framework for the Arab Bedouin population in Israel operates within the centralized Israeli Ministry of Education. This homogenization of the system creates considerable difficulties for Bedouin school principals, as it ignores the distinct communal and social characteristics of their society. Insufficient funding for Bedouin schools has resulted in the worst school overcrowding situation of all groups in Israel (Abu-Saad, 2015) and a lack of necessary physical and human resources. With regard to the former, facilities and equipment are inadequate and, in some cases, altogether lacking, especially in schools in the unrecognized villages. Schools do not have enough laboratories, libraries, sports facilities or teaching materials (Abu-Saad, 2015). Moreover, the specific social features of this marginalized sub-minority group generate further obstacles. All of this results in low levels of academic achievement and limited access to, and participation in, tertiary education (Abu-Saad, 2015).

Furthermore, the high school dropout rate of Bedouin students is one of the most serious problems facing the Israeli educational system. According to data from the Knesset Information and Research Center published on 15 November 2020 (Weissblei and Weininger, 2020), the dropout rate of Bedouins in the Negev is very high compared to other population groups in Israeli society. Data compiled by the Brookdale Institute in a report summarizing the five-year plan for 2011–16 show that in the 2015/16 school year the cumulative dropout rate of 17-year-old Bedouins in the Negev was 23.5 per cent, compared to 10 per cent and 7.4 per cent respectively for the Arab population and the general population of the same age in Israel (Weissblei and Weininger, 2020).

## **Use of strategic thinking skills in Bedouin schools: Sociopolitical and cultural challenges for Bedouin principals**

Previous research has argued that strategic thinking should also be examined and explained in specific contexts (for example, Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). In Hong Kong schools, for example, use of STS was found to depend on role assignments, school type and environmental complexity. It is argued that when the situational complexity increases (for example, position, school type or number of staff), school leaders use different STS (Pisapia et al., 2006) to maintain the fit between the external environment and internal organizational processes, thereby building organizational resilience. In this article, we argue that the specific sociopolitical context, including control and conflict, and Bedouin national culture, affect the Arab Bedouin minority as an ethnic subcultural group, and have a further effect in schools (see Figure 1). Specifically, it affects their principals' perceptions, and their use of STS. In this regard, our first proposition is that Bedouin principals will use systems thinking more than the other STS.

For Bedouin principals, who are coping with sociopolitical complexities in a divided state where the majority controls the minority with double marginalization and inequalities, holistic systems thinking skills will be used as a strategy to go with the flow and meet the needs of both their community and the Israeli educational system. We assume that they will favour the STS of systems thinking based, first, on the growing demand in Bedouin society for the realization of Bedouin students' right to education, social change and social integration (Abu-Saad, 2010), and for improvements in education, teaching and learning in their schools and society (Abu-Saad, 2006, 2010).

This is especially true because their students' achievements are low relative to other groups in Israel (Abu-Saad, 2015). Therefore, with the limitations and obstacles they face, they rely more on a systems view of their school.

Second, systems thinking has been pinpointed in several studies as a means of facilitating specific processes, or as a tool for improving school functioning in a particular field (Shaked and Schechter, 2013). As noted by Shaked and Schechter (2013: 771), systems thinking 'may enable school principals to develop highly performing schools that can cope successfully with current challenges, which are more complex than ever before in today's era of accountability and high expectations'. Principals need to recognize the relationships and interdependencies of the various components in their schools (Nadav et al., 2020); they need to see the whole picture.

Third, Bedouin principals represent their traditional collectivistic community while working in the modern Israeli educational system, the latter dictated by the Israeli Ministry of Education (majority Jewish). The dominant Hebraic culture is characterized as a modern, individualistic and low-power-distance culture (Smootha, 2010). The collectivist culture, with uncertainty avoidance and high power distance, may affect the way of thinking (Da'as, 2017), innovation (Syed and Malik, 2014) and innovative thinking (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). Thus, the latter culture may use systems thinking more than reflection and reframing, which require a different way of thinking.

Further, it was found that school principals' interpersonal skills (that is, social skills) are more dominant than strategic skills in collectivist as opposed to individualistic cultures (Da'as, 2017), as collectivist cultures emphasize social interactions. Strategic skills enable analysing and understanding different perspectives within the organizational system, such as: planning, scanning the environment, problem solving and visioning (Mumford et al., 2007). Scanning the environment is related to leaders' attention to information in the environment (Abebe, 2012), and attention is an aspect of reframing skills.

Crossland and Hambrick (2010) found that chief executive officers in more collectivistic firms have less discretion (that is, latitude of action), because societal members – and, thus, the members of the firm – expect decisions to be made through consultation. This is in contrast to individualistic societies, which, for the most part, 'permit individual initiative and tolerate unilateral decision-making' (Crossland and Hambrick, 2010: 801). We assume that the complexity of Bedouin society and its clan structure, and the Bedouin principals' loyalty to this society, will limit the latitude of their actions, as well as their possibilities for reframing and reflection. Therefore, they adopt a holistic approach that promotes the overall school system and its achievements, thereby avoiding criticism from the system and their community, meeting its requirements, reducing the large gaps in education, confronting these coercive conditions and breaching the community's marginal position.

In particular, it has been argued that the more complex the environment, the more often school leaders need to practise reframing skills (Pisapia et al., 2006). However, their cultural characteristics and sociopolitical environment limit the opportunity to do so. For example, Abu-Rabia-Queder (2006) shows that Bedouin girls leave school because of the clash between the Israeli (Western) institution's views of modernity and the traditional values of the Bedouin minority. The tension between traditional society and the modern Israeli educational system also limits principals' ability to use more horizontal thinking. In this case, for example, school principals' actions are limited by the decisions made by their community or by students' parents; they cannot see or reflect on other perspectives. Furthermore, as indicated by Pisapia et al. (2005), reframing skills emphasize activities related to using a perspective (a frame) that

provides information to understand the situation in its entirety, and to consider and offer new ideas. Where there is little discretion (that is, limited latitude of action) or when there are limitations in the environment, principals' use of different perspectives is restricted, as is their reflection ability. The latter emphasizes the weaving of logical and rational thinking through the use of perceptions, experience and information to make judgements as to what has happened, and then to create intuitive principles to guide future actions (Pisapia et al., 2005). We therefore assume that:

**Proposition 1** – Bedouin principals' STS will focus more on systems thinking than on reframing or reflection.

## **Bedouin and Jewish principals' use of strategic thinking skills**

We suggest that Jewish principals, like their Bedouin counterparts, will use systems thinking skills in facing their environmental challenges; however, there will be differences between them in the reframing and reflection dimensions (see Figure 1). We suggest that these differences can also stem from the sociopolitical, community and cultural contexts of, for example, inequality of resources (as a result of majority control) or appointments, and this may also affect their strategic thinking. First, according to Da'as (2017), inequality and unequal distribution of resources between majority and minority groups affect school principals' latitude of action (discretion) in their work; they limit their ways of thinking (related to reframing and reflection skills), and their choice of strategic skills and problem-solving methods. Furthermore, it is argued that Jewish teachers' perceptions of effective principals focus more on dedication and intelligence than do Arab teachers' perceptions of their effective principals (Zibenberg and Da'as, 2020).

Second, all principals in Israeli public schools are state appointed; however, in the Bedouin communities, the tribal sheikh or clan head also has a say in the appointment of principals, because the schools are clan-based (Mizel, 2009). The school principal has high status in Arab society. In the Bedouin society in the south, the status of this job is particularly high, with its multiple roles: educational and sociocultural. Socially, it is complementary to traditional leadership, and the position is of special importance when the principal is a native Bedouin, who knows not to undermine tribal status. This appointment may therefore result in having unqualified or inexperienced principals filling the position. Thus, we assume that Jewish principals will exhibit more STS than Bedouin principals, because they have the opportunity to think about more perspectives, and have more resources available to improve their schools (see Figure 1).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that the majority of Jews serve in the Israeli army (for at least two or three years) after finishing high school. This life stage provides Jews with experience and opportunities for skill acquisition, which will open up different horizons and perspectives of thinking. This is in contrast to Arabs, who do not go through this stage, and specifically Bedouins in the Negev, who are less involved in the army because it is not compulsory for them (note that some Arab subcultures in Israel do serve in the army, such as the Druze and parts of the Bedouin group in the north). We therefore suggest that the differences between the Jewish and Bedouin school principals is in the reframing and reflection dimensions, that is:

**Proposition 2** – There is a difference between Jewish and Bedouin principals in the reframing and reflection dimensions of their STS.

## Preliminary empirical study

We conducted a preliminary empirical study emanating from the proposed model based on the STS framework. This article is based on three facts.

First, it is a study of an ethnic subculture that is part of the minority Arab ethnic-national group, where both authors, as Israeli Arabs from the minority (who are not of Bedouin descent), share the same general sociopolitical issues. The general political influences on Israel's Arab society are also relevant to the Bedouins because, as an Arab subculture, they are also part of these political processes. Furthermore, the study is related to Arab culture in general, and Bedouin culture in particular, stemming from the authors' cultural positioning as minority Arabs who share the same national cultural characteristics (for example, collectivism and high power distance).

Second, the research relies on data and knowledge accumulated from previous experience in research focusing on ethnic minorities in a divided society, such as examining implicit leadership theory in a divided society (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021), research into Arab Bedouin educational leaders' ethical considerations and Bedouin society stakeholders' views on appointing female principals (Eyal et al., 2020, Da'as and 'Ali, 2018); and data related to the Islamic profile of the Israeli Arab minority, education in Arab society and the structure of Arab society (for example, 'Ali, 2019). The study also relies on insights published by native Bedouin researchers investigating Bedouin society and education (for example, Abu-Saad, 2015).

Third, it relies on data stemming from analyses of text content, gained by reading reports and documents (for example, state-sponsored publications of the Israeli Knesset), social media posts, newspaper articles, and journalists' reports (for example, Ynet), and understanding the meaning of their contents for research participants and their context. Examples include alienation in education through non-transferral of budgets to children in unrecognized villages – 18,000 Bedouin children are not studying (Yanko, 2020); very few young Bedouins are joining the high-tech workforce (Koreal, 2017); and the Knesset report on increasing education and educational instruction over the next few years in Bedouin society (Weissblei, 2017).

### Participants

Participants in this study were 103 principals from 103 Arab Bedouin schools in the Negev (28 were secondary schools, 29 were middle schools and 46 were elementary schools). In addition, 67 Jewish principals from 67 Jewish schools from all over Israel participated in this study (50 were elementary schools, 12 were middle schools and 5 were secondary schools). Both Bedouin and Jewish schools were public schools.

### Procedure

Bedouin schools ( $n = 83$ ) and Jewish schools ( $n = 57$ ) were randomly selected from a list compiled by the Ministry of Education. Data from these schools were collected by research-staff assistants, who were chosen based on their experience in research; Bedouin assistants were assigned to the Bedouin schools, and Jewish assistants to the Jewish schools. The authors provided the assistants with all of the research instructions.

Principals completed an electronic questionnaire on strategic thinking and demographic variables. The assistants did not go to the actual schools, but rather sent the questionnaire link by email to the principals after contacting them by telephone, explaining the purpose of the research and sending them the approval. The link was sent after they agreed to participate. The research assistants succeeded in enrolling

83 Bedouin principals and 57 Jewish principals. In general, the Bedouin principals' response rate for participation in the research was extremely high relative to that of the Jewish principals.

In addition to these samples (83 Bedouin and 57 Jewish), we included Bedouin ( $n = 20$ ) and Jewish ( $n = 10$ ) principals who were participants in advanced training courses at two colleges. We used convenience sampling for both Bedouin and Jewish principals. Principals were given the link by the research assistants who were physically present at both colleges, prior to the start of the participants' training courses. One of the authors was previously employed at one of the colleges from which Bedouin principals were sampled (the authors' engagement with these populations stems largely from their teaching experience). That author was still employed at the college during the time of the study, but was not their lecturer, so the potentially adverse effects of professor–student dependency were not encountered. The study was conducted after obtaining Institutional Review Board approval from the relevant academic institutions; for the other school principals (83 Bedouin and 57 Jewish), approval was obtained from the Chief Scientist of the Ministry of Education. All of the participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential.

## Measures

STSs were measured using the strategic thinking questionnaire developed by Pang and Pisapia (2012) (23 items). Pang and Pisapia (2012) used this questionnaire to identify STS that distinguish effective school leaders. This is considered as a valid and reliable instrument to study a leader's ability to recognize patterns and interdependencies, and to make consequential decisions – that is, STS (Pang and Pisapia, 2012). The strategic thinking questionnaire collects data on participants' use of three thinking skills – *reflection* (6 items; Cronbach's alpha for this study = .80), *reframing* (7 items; Cronbach's alpha for this study = .84), and *systems thinking* (10 items; Cronbach's alpha for this study = .76). The questionnaire asks respondents to rate how often they use the particular skill when confronted with problems, dilemmas and/or opportunities on a Likert-type scale, where 1 = rarely or almost never, 2 = once in a while, 3 = sometimes, 4 = often, and 5 = frequently or almost always (Pang and Pisapia, 2012: 349). The survey was translated into Arabic and Hebrew (for Jewish principals), and back into English in order to verify the validity of the items (Brislin, 1980).

## Results

Bedouin principals' used systems thinking more than the two other STS (for systems thinking: mean = 4.00, SD = .40; for reflection: mean = 3.84, SD = .53; for reframing: mean = 3.33, SD = .69), consistent with Proposition 1. Results of dependent sample t-test showed significant differences between the three skills. The mean difference between systems thinking and reframing was .67 with  $T(99) = 12.29$  ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed); between the former and reflection it was .16 with  $T(99) = 3.65$  ( $p < .01$ , two-tailed); and between reframing and reflection it was  $-.51$  with  $T(100) = -9.60$  ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed). Additional analysis of the Jewish principals showed that the mean difference between systems thinking and reframing was .24 with  $T(62) = 1.77$  ( $p = .08$ ); between systems thinking and reflection it was .10 with  $T(62) = 2.41$  ( $p < .05$ ; two-tailed); and between reframing and reflection it was  $-.14$  with  $T(63) = -.47$  ( $p = .63$ ).

Regarding Proposition 2, results of independent sample t-test are presented in Table 1. There was a significant difference between Bedouin and Jewish principals in the reframing dimension ( $T(120) = -4.15$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed; Cohen's  $d$  for effect

**Table 1: Independent sample t-test results of the strategic thinking skills of Bedouin versus Jewish principals (Source: Authors, 2021)**

	<b>Bedouin principals Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Jewish principals Mean (SD)</b>	<b>t-test</b>
Systems thinking	4.00 (.40)	4.05 (.42)	T(194) = -.68
Reframing	3.33 (.69)	3.81 (.81)	T(120) = -4.15*
Reflection	3.84 (.53)	3.95 (.42)	T(194) = -1.01

Notes: n = 103 Bedouin principals; n = 67 Jewish principals; \* $p < .001$ , two-tailed results.

size = .64), with the Jewish principals showing more of this dimension than the Bedouin principals (mean = 3.81, SD = .81 versus mean = 3.33, SD = .69, respectively). However, there were no significant differences between the two groups in systems thinking or reflection. Thus, Proposition 2 was partially supported. It is important to note that the Jewish principals' average for the reflection dimension was greater than that for the Bedouin principals.

## Discussion

This article contributes to the literature on educational leadership and provides an exploratory ethno-cultural basis for studying school principals' STS as a cognitive attribute, by attempting to tie principals' perceptions of STS and the leadership cognition framework to cultural and sociopolitical aspects. This will provide a better understanding of the extent to which national culture and sociopolitical processes influence the nature of organizational settings and principals' perceptions. Moreover, as a powerful interpretive structure, STS provide a framework for effective leadership.

The main issue in this article is related to the sociopolitical and cultural challenges affecting principals' STS in a divided society. As argued previously, leadership is a phenomenon that should be investigated and interpreted in the context of the specific sociopolitical and cultural processes of a state (Brooks, 2015; Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021; Dimmock and Walker, 2005). We use the case of Israel, and consider the subculture minority group of Bedouins to extend this argument. The consideration of a subculture within a state minority is innovative because, to our knowledge, the effects of these challenges for subcultures have been less documented (Abu-Saad, 2015).

We suggest that Arab Bedouin principals use systems thinking more than other STS, and that they and Jewish principals use systems thinking at the same level, as a way of managing their schools and educational strategies, and as a strategy that contributes to their instructional leadership style. However, Jewish principals were also characterized as using the reframing skill more than Bedouin principals (there was a significant difference between the two groups in reframing skill). The dimension of reframing is more related to leaders' attention, which determines the information that one can possess (Dane, 2013), and their attention across multiple perspectives, in order to generate new insights and options for action (Pang and Pisapia, 2012). Leaders' attention contents are an important resource for their organization, and the amount of information a leader possesses may affect the operational logic of an innovation (Zheng et al., 2016). However, because resources are limited due to inequality between the two groups, the way in which the Bedouin principals scan the environment and receive available information, and then use it, is also limited (Da'as, 2017). Specifically, this is related to the political processes of control and conflict that affect state policy,

resulting in unequal distribution between the two groups and control of the system; these factors also limit Bedouin principals' opportunities for more perspectives, and limit their possible thinking choices and strategic skills, as well their ability to solve problems in different ways. Therefore, as already noted, Bedouin school principals respond to these inequalities and unequal distribution (in the sociopolitical context) by adopting a more holistic approach. This also results from their marginalization as a subculture of the Arab group in the Israeli context. They want their students to succeed in the world in which they live (Abu-Saad, 2006), and they seek to improve education, teaching and learning in their society (Abu-Saad, 2006). They have therefore adopted this profile of skills, and benefit from systems thinking to face today's educational leadership complexities.

We argue that the second explanation for the systems thinking outcome lies in the Bedouin principals' traditional societal structure of collectivism and family clans, which has implications for their perceptions (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021), and which limits their way of thinking in terms of using different perspectives and showing more initiative, both of which are related to reflection and reframing skills.

## **Limitations and future research**

One of the limitations of this empirical study was the small number of Jewish principal participants; they did not represent all of the school levels, and this may have affected the significance of other dimensions, such as reflection. However, the results of this preliminary study did indicate the need for future study to extend this research to include a larger number of Jewish principals, and to compare educational practices, perceptions and conditions in various cultures, organizations and sociopolitical contexts.

Second, we were not able to explore gender differences because of the small number of female principals among the Bedouin population, a result of the continuing influence of the patriarchal society. Further study will examine differences between the genders; specifically, data from the Bedouins of northern Israel can be obtained, where there is a larger sample of women in leadership positions.

Third, the current research used only the STS framework developed by Pang and Pisapia (2012). Future research should examine strategic thinking in other frameworks, such as that emphasizing creativity (Moon, 2013), defined as systems thinking, vision-driven thinking, creative thinking and market-oriented thinking. This is because it has been argued that creativity is more prominent in individualistic rather than collectivist cultures (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021).

Furthermore, the current research did not examine the specific tasks or situations that might affect the use of the specific skills of strategic thinking. Therefore, future research might consider the effect of situation on the use of STS dimensions, and how these dimensions, and their specific levels, change according to specific tasks. In addition, the interactions between two skills in promoting a specific task could be examined, or whether a specific task requires the skills of systems thinking with different levels of other skills, such as reframing or reflection. Future research could also consider other variables that might affect these STS, and other contextual variables that might affect the levels of systems thinking, reframing and reflection.

This article discusses the cultural characteristics, societal structure and sociopolitical challenges that are common to Bedouin society as a whole (Figure 1). However, we know that in the unrecognized villages there are additional sociopolitical challenges that might also affect school principals. Future research could consider the

diversity in Bedouin society based on its communities, such as cities versus unrecognized villages. Furthermore, it is important to note that modernization may also be a source of diversity. Researchers have argued that the spread of urbanization into rural areas has led to greater clashes between traditional cultures and modernization (Shmueli and Khamaisi, 2011). Meir (2019) argues that in the Bedouin community modernization has undergone a process of diffusion. In some areas (such as Rahat, the largest Bedouin city in Israel), social change (due to the modernization process) has worked better than in small or unrecognized localities.

In addition, school principals in the Arab educational system cope daily with a number of contradictions that influence the functioning and formation of a school culture that could otherwise improve teaching–learning performance, such as exclusion of Arab educators from the determination of educational policy and learning programmes for their schools (Da'as and Zibenberg, 2021). Previous research has also found differences between Arab and Jewish school principals in their perceptions (Da'as, 2017). This article illustrates a subculture within Arab society. Future research could compare Arab society and other subcultures to gain more insight into the differences in social structure and other political issues, such as marginal status, which might affect principals' STS. Furthermore, qualitative research is needed to gain more information about how principals explain these ways of thinking, using other objective measures, such as observation.

This article contributes to the literature focusing on examining ethnic groups in divided societies by discussing and examining another layer (Bedouin subculture) of this divided system. This may also contribute to research on justice (Arar et al., 2019). Therefore, future research could examine how these state processes affect another layer of society, such as refugees. Future studies should compare STS perspectives with other marginalized ethnic groups in other national contexts to allow for a broader generalization and non-hegemonic inter-interpretation of the findings.

Finally, systems thinking is considered to be one dimension of STS. As mentioned by Pang and Pisapia (2012), when the levels of the three dimensions (reflection, reframing and systems thinking) are high, STS are more prevalent; they enable educational leaders to better face the complexities in their environment, to deal with challenges and to build a vision and direction for the school. Further, the use of different perspectives and skills enables them to build effective relations with stakeholders (that is, teachers, supervisors and parents), to be more innovative, creative and effective (Da'as and 'Ali, 2018), to connect their schools to major themes associated with success (Pisapia, 2009), and future organizational performance (Muriithi et al., 2018). Thus, beyond its theoretical contribution, and despite its shortcomings, the findings of the study highlight the need to update training programmes and professional development for Bedouin school principals, to promote their awareness of other strategic thinking frames, and to provide them with strategies to improve their ability to navigate the sociopolitical and cultural tensions that they may encounter while managing their schools (such as external societal intervention). This may help them to achieve improvements for both their students and their schools.

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## Declaration and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interests with this work.

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