

1 Working at the Street Level

Street-level bureaucrats are important players who strongly influence policy outcomes, mainly through their role as implementers of public policy. This section focuses on the importance of street-level bureaucrats in democratic societies, highlighting their considerable discretion and autonomy in policy implementation. I also present how they base their decisions on normative choices defined in terms of relationships with their citizen-clients, their organizations and their environments.

1.1 Who are Street-Level Bureaucrats?

Street-level bureaucrats are frontline workers who interact daily with citizens. Though usually face to face, these interactions also occur via email, letters and phone calls. Providing citizens with public goods and services, street-level bureaucrats exercise considerable discretion in matching the terms and requirements of policies to the demands and needs of clients. Hence, they directly and indirectly impact the lives and fates of many people. As frontline workers, they see the deficiencies and distortions that the bureaucratic system has created and work under enormous pressure and multiple constraints. Given the complexity of their jobs, their discretion cannot be satisfactorily replaced by rules, instructions and guidelines. They are considered pivotal players in public policy-making and de facto policymakers in that they informally construct or reconstruct their organizations' policies. While the usual examples are social workers, teachers, police, environmental inspectors, and doctors and nurses in government hospitals, many other bureaucrats who share these characteristics, such as judges and tax officials, should also be considered street-level bureaucrats.

Academic interest in street-level bureaucrats represents a shift in the way scholars focus on policy outcomes. This shift is mainly the result of Michael Lipsky's (2010[1980]) influential book, *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. Lipsky's goal was to move farther away from traditional top-down approaches in the public administration literature that emphasized the formal structure of the organizational hierarchy and to highlight the day-to-day characteristics and conditions of policy implementation (Lipsky, 2010:xii). By focusing on low-level bureaucrats, underscoring how policy implementation is at least as important as policy design, Lipsky led the way for others (Hupe, 2019). His efforts have generated "the implementation axiom": researchers will not know much about what implementation means unless they focus explicitly on the street level (Hupe, 2019).

Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats are "public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (2010:3). Working in conditions of ambiguity, they are motivated chiefly by a desire to establish control over their clients while maintaining their discretion as professionals. Street-level bureaucrats cannot fully meet the quantity or substance of client demands. In fact, Lipsky argues that much of their behavior with clients stems from difficulty measuring their performance in ways that can be connected to pay and other rewards. Thus, Lipsky portrays street-level bureaucrats as playing coping games to gain rewards or avoid sanctions in often underfunded and tension-ridden organizational environments.

1.2 The Importance of Discretion in Street-Level Bureaucrats' Work

A crucial characteristic of street-level bureaucrats' work is their substantial discretion in policy execution. Unlike other civil servants, they not only enjoy a certain degree of autonomy vis-à-vis organizational authority, but also have considerable discretion in determining "the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies" (Lipsky, 2010:13). Bureaucratic discretion is typically viewed as a range of choices within a set of parameters that circumscribes the behavior of the individual service provider (Lipsky, 2010; Prottas, 1979; Scott, 1997). Street-level bureaucrats use their discretion to make decisions that ultimately define policies and regulations, and do so using various reference systems (Thomann et al., 2018). Their discretion is necessary to cope with uncertainties and work pressures (Lipsky, 2010). Therefore, some have argued that public policy is not imposed top-down by senior managers, but rather implemented and executed bottom-up by street-level bureaucrats (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002).

In their reality of limited resources, contradictory demands and unclear policies, street-level bureaucrats use their discretion to address clients' needs (Brodkin, 2011; Evans, 2016; Gofen, 2013; Hill & Hupe, 2014; Lavee, 2020; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Thomann & Sager, 2017; Tummers & Beckers, 2014). Therefore, their decisions often create "individual dilemmas" (Lipsky, 2010) that ultimately arise from the "situations of conflicting and irreconcilable accountabilities" to which they are exposed (Lieberherr & Thomann, 2019:230). In this context, discretion has been defined as a fundamental feature of social service provision (Brodkin, 2007, 2011, 2012). Usually, it is understood as a matter of freedom or choice that a worker

can exercise in a specific context, or simply as “the freedom in exercising one’s work role” (Evans, 2016:11).

According to Lipsky (2010:142–156), like other people who try to minimize or tolerate stress or conflict (Lazarus, 1966; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), street-level bureaucrats also use various coping strategies. Thus, given a chronic lack of resources, they tend to cope with job stress by modifying their conceptions of work. As all street-level bureaucrats share the same working conditions, they use similar and universal coping strategies, such as rationing services, setting priorities among cases, modifying goals and dominating clients. For example, to avoid heavy caseloads, street-level workers may try to reduce client demands for services by limiting the information they provide about available programs, make themselves unavailable to clients, ask people to wait and refer difficult clients to other authorities. Another available strategy is creaming, whereby street-level bureaucrats handpick easy cases and send time-consuming ones to others. By choosing a limited number of clients, programs and solutions with which to demonstrate success, they avoid heavy caseloads. This ability to use such coping strategies led Lipsky to conclude that street-level bureaucrats are actually policymakers. They create policy through the multitude of decisions they make in interacting with citizen-clients. In other words, policies are actually formulated by those who implement them, and are affected by the routines and shortcuts they create to deal with their jobs.

1.3 Street-Level Bureaucrats’ Relations with Citizens, Their Organizations and the Environment

Street-level bureaucrats base their decisions on normative choices defined in terms of their relationships with clients, their organizations and the environment. These choices, in turn, impact policy outcomes and the general social welfare (Cohen, 2018).

Most people who interact with public servants want to believe that these bureaucrats care about public welfare, but this is not always the case. Whyte’s (1943) classic research on street-corner societies revealed that local police officers do not always invest time and energy in law enforcement. Often, they may actually permit its violation. The factors motivating them are incentives, often contradictory ones, from their senior officers, politicians who move in and out of office, bureaucrats in higher positions and sometimes even lawbreakers themselves (Kosar, 2011).

Street-level practices and motivations cannot be detached from the context in which they operate. Traditionally, public administration was government run through specialized bureaucracies operating in the typical Weberian-style

departmental model that separated politics from operations. However, in many Western societies, this model ultimately proved disappointing (Barzelay, 2001). Attempts to remedy the situation led to “bureaupathologies” (Caiden, 1991) that, along with challenging economic times, soon led to the rise of New Public Management (NPM). The NPM wave of administrative reforms has had a major impact on the public sectors – and specifically street-level bureaucrats – of many countries. What initially began in English-speaking countries and then spread to other Western countries (Hill & Hupe, 2014:93) soon dominated administrative systems all over the world.

The impetus for change came from several directions, both within and outside public administration systems, leading to a more ideologically oriented neoliberal economic policy. These change factors included deficits and economic crises, in the wake of competition arising from globalization, that put pressure on national governments and economies; rapidly developing information technologies that opened up new possibilities, redefined management and restructured work processes; a lack of trust between executive politicians and administrative leaders; and citizens’ dissatisfaction with public service performance (de Vries, 2010; Self, 2000). Thus, the main target of most reforms focused on improving efficiency, contracting out, privatizing service delivery and adopting private-sector management methods (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011).

Indeed, the environment of street-level bureaucrats has undergone far-reaching changes in recent decades (Brodkin, 2007, 2011). New modes of governance have emerged that have had a lasting effect on how policies are implemented (Sager et al., 2014). Under the influence of NPM and “entrepreneurial government” (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992), their environment has shifted from specialized bureaucracies operating in the typical Weberian style to a new world characterized by the adoption of private-sector management methods, such as performance measurements and choice-based services (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Policy implementation nowadays often does not lie in the hands of governments but increasingly has become the joint task of public and private actors or is placed entirely under the responsibility of private actors (Cohen et al., 2016; Knill & Tosun, 2012). Public or quasipublic tasks may be contracted out to private organizations. Under these new arrangements, street-level workers are still expected to deliver public policy as designed by policy-makers, but service delivery is profoundly different from the traditional Weberian model. Commitment to the policy is through contracts rather than bureaucratic rules, result-oriented performance evaluations are often much more dominant, the direct employer is usually no longer the state, the workers are usually not unionized and their working environment is more competitive,

with competitive tendering systems or choice-based structures allowing clients to choose their service provider (Cohen et al., 2016).

The occurrence of privatization and marketization, of choice and coproduction, as new governance models for social service delivery does not, however, imply that older models of bureaucratic service delivery through public and nonprofit organizations have been abandoned completely. Instead, in many cases, the new service delivery models have been layered on top of existing governance structures. This has created a rather ambiguous working environment for street-level bureaucrats, as the values and rationalities embedded in the different governance models are often conflicting, even contradictory and incompatible (Klenk & Cohen, 2019).

Based on these observations, street-level bureaucrats, like many other public officials, can be blamed for “implementation gaps” and “policy fiascos” because their narrow self-interests guide their actions (Niskanen, 1971; Tullock, 1967). Indeed, back in the 1980s, Lipsky’s observation that “street-level bureaucracies usually have nothing to lose by failing to satisfy clients” (2010:56) highlighted the potentially negative effects of street-level bureaucrats on public service provision. Decades later, Brodtkin concludes that street-level bureaucrats use their discretion to produce “informal practices that are substantively different from – and more diverse than – what policymakers or managers tend to recognize” (2011:i253) and that their priorities have shifted from focusing on client needs to meeting performance targets. Thus, performance management has prompted street-level bureaucrats to realize quick wins by encouraging them to prioritize “speed over need” (2011:i266) in order to “make the numbers” (2011:i259).

Performance governance has also led to creaming and to focusing on quick rather than effective help for citizens (Considine et al., 2015; Soss et al., 2011). In the context of public welfare agencies, studies have shown that street-level bureaucrats may use their discretion to deny, defer and disregard clients’ claims and needs, thereby limiting their access to benefits and mechanisms to redress their grievances (Brodtkin, 2007, 2012; Cohen et al., 2016). Even more disturbing, Cohen and Gershgoren (2016) note that when street-level bureaucrats’ incentives clash with public interest, the bureaucrats often intimidate their clients and heighten the asymmetry of information, increasing clients’ feelings of uncertainty.

Yet, in many cases and for various reasons, street-level bureaucrats do help their clients (Cohen & Hertz, 2020). They are considered the “miners” of public policy. They dirty their hands for society and are sometimes even willing to risk their jobs to provide assistance to citizens they believe worthy (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003:156–157). The dissonance between policy as designed and desirable policy may prompt them to employ various strategies

to change the situation, what Tummers (2011, 2013) defines as “change willingness.”

Recently, Cohen and Hertz (2020) revealed that street-level bureaucrats’ social value orientation (i.e., the dispositional weights individuals assign to their own outcomes and those of others in interdependent situations) differs when they are on and off duty. They found that police officers favored more allocations to others when off duty than on duty. Moreover, they found that police officers’ experience (years on the force) correlated negatively with their prosocial orientation. While various factors may explain this variation, Cohen and Hertz suggest one additional explanation: the management’s adoption of performance measures and its outcome-based focus that came with the rise of NPM. Guided by NPM, decisionmakers and managers have not only failed to promote cooperation in society by encouraging street-level workers to put their own needs and interests aside for the benefit of their citizen-clients, but have also exacerbated the conflict between street-level bureaucrats and their clients. Conflicts between immediate self-interests and longer-term collective interests are so pervasive that one can go so far as to claim that the most challenging task governments and public organizations face is managing these conflicts successfully.

Street-level bureaucrats’ decisions are influenced by a variety of factors that may affect different individuals in different ways. Hence, no single theory can fully explain how they exercise their discretion (Brodkin, 2011; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2007). Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that different factors have varying effects on individual street-level bureaucrats. However, we do know that street-level bureaucrats’ interactions with both the policy their organizations give them to implement and their clients have an influence on them. Indeed, scholars tend to agree with Lipsky (2010) and Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) that the most defining characteristic of street-level work is the *day-to-day interaction between* workers and clients in the process of delivering public goods and services.

Cohen (2018) has classified the factors influencing street-level bureaucrats’ decisionmaking and actions by differentiating between their personal characteristics, the organization’s characteristics and the environment. Since Kaufman’s (1960) work on the US Forest Service, researchers have noted how street-level bureaucrat’s decisions and actions are influenced by their personal characteristics – their ideology, attitudes, opinions, preferences and values (Brodkin, 2011; Keiser, 2010; Kelly, 1994; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2007; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007); their adherence and commitment to their agency or specific program goals (Tummers et al., 2012); and their feelings about organizational goals (Keiser,

2010). Other influential personal characteristics are the extent to which they feel accountable to clients (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Keiser, 2010) and their attitudes toward (Raaphorst et al., 2018) and emotions about their clients (Lavee & Strier, 2019). Examples include their compassion (Ricucci, 2005), the degree to which they want to make a difference in clients' lives (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014), information about other actors in the organization (Keiser, 2010; Wood & Vedlitz, 2007), and street-level bureaucrats' professional (Brodkin, 2011) and material (Cohen & Gershgoren, 2016) self-interests. Indeed, street-level bureaucrats may not be able to wholeheartedly endorse the goals of the policies they are required to implement for a variety of reasons, including ethical and moral considerations, reasons related to their professional identity and/or rational decisionmaking (Gofen, 2013). They may therefore find themselves in the difficult situation of having to take actions that are at odds with their sense of self (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Hupe et al., 2016; Zacka, 2017).

However, street-level bureaucrats' decisions and actions are influenced not only by their personal characteristics, but also by their work environment and their general surroundings (Evans, 2013). With regard to organizational conditions, May and Winter (2009) note the role of management requirements and organizational constraints. Brodkin (2011) includes this factor in his analysis, with a focus on the context of new managerialism. Tummers and colleagues (2012) have pointed out the influence of organizational implementation. Some scholars point to what peers think and believe (Keiser, 2010) and social networks and interactions with peers (Sandfort, 2000) as key factors; others point to the subjective norms of managers (Tummers et al., 2012), organizational resources and incentives (Brodkin, 1997; Cohen & Gershgoren, 2016) and the organizational environment and culture (Cohen, 2018).

With regard to the environment, scholars mention the influence of various government and nongovernment players, such as politicians (May & Winter, 2009) and bureaucrats in other agencies (Keiser, 2010), nongovernment organizations and political control (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2007). Other scholars highlight the political and general culture (Cohen, 2018), neoliberal ideology (Liebenberg et al., 2013), neoliberalist regime (Lavee & Strier, 2019), the NPM wave of reforms (Brodkin, 2011), the content of policy as designed (Tummers et al., 2012) and street-level bureaucrats' trust in their clients (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2020). However, while interactions with clients and policy content are considered the strongest factors affecting street-level bureaucrats' practices, there is less evidence about how these workers act when they recognize a gap between client needs and policy content (Lavee et al., 2018).

Street-level bureaucrats often have to implement policy that they believe is not optimal for their clients. Tummers et al. (2009) have suggested the concept

of policy alienation as a general cognitive state of disconnection from the policy program being implemented. One element of policy alienation is meaninglessness: that is, feelings that implementing a policy lacks meaning for one's clients and for society. Tummers and Bekkers (2014) have shown that when street-level bureaucrats regard policy as helpful to their clients (client meaningfulness), they are more willing to implement it. Gofen (2013) uses the concept of policy divergence to conceptualize street-level bureaucrats' engagement in practices meant to influence policy outcomes, specifically when they regard policy as wrong. Indeed, this literature, as well as many of the studies reviewed earlier in this section, emphasizes the crucial role of street-level bureaucrats in influencing policy outcomes through implementation processes. Gofen (2013) lists three factors that cause street-level bureaucrats to stray from formal policy: ethical and moral matters, professional identity and rational decisionmaking.

The possible influence of street-level bureaucrats on policy outcomes through policy design is relatively understudied, especially the possibility that they may act as policy entrepreneurs (Lavee & Cohen, 2019). This is not surprising: for most street-level bureaucrats, the policymaking process is a mystery. Public policy decisions made by elected politicians and appointed officials in various government branches are influenced by political factors that are often unfamiliar or irrelevant to street-level bureaucrats. Typically, frontline workers do not consider election outcomes, interest group contributions or grassroots lobbying campaigns when deciding how to conduct their daily work.

Last, the study of street-level bureaucracy is a prototypical example of a long-standing methodological challenge in the social sciences (Flyvbjerg, 2002). It exemplifies all the difficulties of studying the connection between unfolding microlevel processes and emerging macrolevel outcomes (Coleman, 1990). It is difficult to capture and measure the levels of street-level bureaucrats' resources, values, beliefs and even actions and strategies. When it comes to motivations and goals, the task seems even more daunting. Thomann (2019) explains that the prevalence of case studies in this field reflects the need to capture a multilevel web of institutional, political, policy-related and personal factors (see also Hupe & Hill, 2007; Pülzl & Treib, 2007). Single or comparative case studies with a small number of participants are inadequate for identifying the regularities that would make implementation studies more useful for neighboring fields. Accordingly, studies increasingly use sophisticated statistical analyses with large samples (Sætren, 2014). While successfully identifying regularities, such studies often neglect the complex interactions between different explanatory factors

and the context-specific mechanisms of policy implementation (Thomann, 2019).

2 The Civil Servant as a Policy Entrepreneur

Having established the importance of street-level bureaucrats as policy implementers and discussed insights on their role in public administration and policy, I now introduce the concept of policy entrepreneurship, suggesting that street-level bureaucrats may promote formal policy changes in public administration and thus act as policy entrepreneurs. I also present the barriers and challenges they may face in doing so. Finally, I focus on the strategies street-level bureaucrats may employ when promoting policy change at the individual level, and discuss similarities and differences between street-level and “regular” policy entrepreneurs.

2.1 Entrepreneurship in Public Policy and Administration Literature

The study of policy entrepreneurs has developed greatly, supported by increasingly more sophisticated theoretical and empirical research (Petridou & Mintrom, in press). Policy entrepreneurship was established as a theoretical concept in John Kingdon’s (1995) seminal work, *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Kingdon’s approach emphasizes the role of the individual, attributing many of the “whys” and “whens” of policy change to the actions of actors at the right time and providing a clear outline of the environmental structures in which these individuals operate. Since then, ample research worldwide has established the importance of policy entrepreneurship in explaining many policy outcomes. While policy entrepreneurs are not always involved in policy changes that occur worldwide, in many cases one cannot fully understand or explain policy outcomes without considering the role of policy entrepreneurs in setting agendas that result in such outcomes.

The term “entrepreneurship” was introduced into the economic literature in 1755, in Richard Cantillon’s book, *Essay on the nature of trade in general*, published in French. Cantillon, whose work influenced early developments in political economy thought, referred to entrepreneurs as individuals who exercise judgment in the face of the uncertainty in business involving exchanges for profit. Later, in 1803, French economist Jean-Baptiste defined an entrepreneur as an individual who “shifts economic resources out of an area of lower and into an area of higher productivity and greater yield” (Brouwer, 2015:3; Drucker, 1985:21). The term soon entered British and German writing (Hébert & Link, 2009). Since then, entrepreneurship has been considered a critical element of

the economic system. The entrepreneur figures as the prime agent of economic change (Schumpeter, 1947), one whose function is “to reform or revolutionize the pattern of production” (Schumpeter, 1994[1942]:83). Since the work of neoclassical economist Joseph Schumpeter (1883–1950), the term has generally been identified with innovation (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990).

Nonetheless, there is not always common understanding in the economics literature of what entrepreneurs actually are or agreement about their definition (Cohen, 2016; Gunn, 2017). While some economists argue that individuals are the main engineers of entrepreneurship, others maintain it is the province of groups and organizations. There is also disagreement about the important elements in entrepreneurial activity. For some scholars, innovative activities are more important than activities that stabilize the market or management activities, whereas the reverse is true for others.

Not surprisingly, in a gradual diffusion from one discipline to another, scholars have expanded the idea of entrepreneurship and adapted it to the public sector (deLeon, 1996). Here, too, there is lack of agreement about who entrepreneurs are in the political sciences and in the public policy and administration literature.

It was probably Robert Dahl who first introduced the term “entrepreneur” into the political science literature. Dahl identified the entrepreneur as a political leader who “is not so much the agent of others as others are his agents” (1961:6). Since then, different approaches, research topics and focuses on various political phenomena have yielded a variety of terms associated with entrepreneurship so as to provide a new perspective on issues related to politics and administration. Among these terms and concepts are, of course, policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon, 1995; Mintrom, 1997; Sætren, 2016; Zahariadis, 2016a, 2016b), but also many others, such as public entrepreneurs (deLeon, 1996; Ostrom, 2005; Schneider et al., 1995; Schnellenbach, 2007), executive entrepreneurs (Roberts & King, 1991), political entrepreneurs (Dahl, 1961; Schneider & Teske, 1992; Wilson, 1973, 1989), institutional entrepreneurs (Campbell, 2004; DiMaggio, 1988), social entrepreneurs (Sullivan et al., 2003; Mair et al., 2006), civic entrepreneurs (Leadbeater & Goss, 1999) and entrepreneurial leadership (Oliver & Paul-Shaheen, 1997).

An important discussion in the policy literature revolving around the concept of entrepreneurship concerns the involvement of interest groups in the policy process and their influence upon it. In this context, political entrepreneurs are individuals who lead or organize the group. These individuals attempt to supply collective goods to the members of interest groups in exchange for personal or political profit (Salisbury, 1969, 1984). Wilson’s (1980) cost–benefit typology is another theoretical effort that reveals the importance of entrepreneurship in