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The Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) Revival: The State-of-the-Art and a New Research Agenda

Matteo Bassoli, Cristina Dallara, Giorgia Nesti

This Special Issue (SI) examines the revival of Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) in the context of contemporary public policy implementation. The introduction includes a literature review highlighting SLB's enduring relevance and its applications in various sectors. It also presents the four empirical articles of the SI covering regional migration policies in Argentina and Brazil, asylum judges in Italy and France, gambling harm reduction in Piedmont, and the implementation of the Minimum Income Scheme in Veneto. These studies underscore the importance of four crucial dimensions: the Critical Role of SLBs in Policy Outcomes, the Need for Support and Resources, the Influence of External and Internal Pressures, and the Importance of Understanding SLB Experiences for Policy Design.

Keywords: Street-Level Bureaucracy; Public Policy Implementation; Discretion; Public Services.

1. Introduction Why and How to Revision the SLB in the Public Policy Debate

Lipsky's (2010) theory of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) emerged as a relevant contribution to the long debate on the role of bureaucracy in implementation processes that began in the 1970s. Emphasising the importance of a bottom-up perspective in the study of public policy (Hjern and Porter 1981; Ham and Hill 1986), the implementation studies, flourishing during these decades, have consolidated the idea of implementation as a complex process involving multiple actors who were able to interpret and even reformulate policy objectives, outputs, and outcomes.

Then, the SLB theory focused specifically on those bureaucrats «who interact directly with citizens in the course of their work and who have considerable discretion in carrying out their work» (Lipsky 2010, 3) and who have power «in determining the nature, amount,

and quality of the benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies» (Lipsky 2010, 13). Widely embraced in sociology, public administration, and organisational studies, the SLB lens offers a nuanced understanding of how discretion shapes the daily practices of front-line public service professionals. More precisely, according to the SLB lens, these practitioners wield discretion in determining the nature, extent, and quality of such services, primarily due to the inherent complexity of responding to individual circumstances that resist reduction to programmatic formats (Lacchei 2024).

Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) are social workers, teachers, police officers, inspectors, and all those practitioners who, by interacting directly with the needs of citizens, concretely take care of the implementation of public policy with their routines and practices, establishing the allocation of goods and services within society (Brodkin 2011). Operating at the street level, these actors play a very delicate role, having to manage the needs of the organisation they work for, those of the users-to whom they provide personalised responses-and the resources available (Ham and Hill 1986). To be able to mediate between these tensions, SLBs have a certain amount of discretionary power: discretion is central to the SLB approach and manifests itself whenever the practitioner is free to choose between possible modes of action or nonaction (Brodkin 2012). As Barberis *et al.* (2019) argue, studying SLB means also studying how public institutions translate regulatory instruments into practices, adapting them to concrete needs, and acting under specific conditions.

An interesting literature review was conducted by Barberis *et al.* (2019) depicting some main traits of the SLB research field until 2019; and thus, prior to the COVID pandemic breakpoint. Their analysis has evidenced the pivotal role of Lipsky (1980) with more than 15,000 citations recorded-almost 400 per year-that make it the reference book well beyond the sub-sector of the implementation studies. The first non-Lipsky contribution is the one of Evans and Harris (2004), which thematises the enduring relevance of discretion in the welfare professions. Then, the literature often pairs this theme with the question of the legitimacy and accountability of public action (Hupe and Hill 2007). Another well-represented area of study is, in fact, the one connecting SLBs with organisational models of public intervention and with the dimension of control over bureaucratic discretion (Brodkin 2011, 2012). There are also several studies investigating the effects of the practices adopted by SLBs on user perception and reaction (Ellis 2007; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

One-third of the articles analysed by Barberis *et al.* (2019) come from authors with US affiliations and more than a half with authors from British institutions, which reflects a well-known Anglo-American hegemonic geography (Paasi 2005). However, some European cores were already identified in 2019: forty Dutch contributions, mostly from only two university centres (Rotterdam and Utrecht), while the authors of ca. 16% of the articles have Northern European affiliations.

Articles have been growing significantly after 2015 (more than 35 per cent of SLB contributions were published between 2016 and 2018). The query was also redefined with keywords related to policy areas, in-depth topics, and methodologies. Regarding the first aspect, the authors show a pluralisation of the policy areas investigated. Those historically mentioned by Lipsky (1980) remain dominant: educational, health, social welfare, and security policies (although the latter with less interest in recent years) are thematised by every sixth/seventh article each. In more recent years, they saw an increasing attention on labour and migration policies. Among the emerging themes in SLB studies, already in 2019, the survey places the issue of digitalisation of PA. Barberis *et al.* (2019) have shown how the topic of technological transformations combined with SLB was still of limited interest in terms of numbers, despite the pervasiveness of the phenomenon, giving space to mainly theoretical studies (Buffat 2015; Busch and Henriksen 2018).

According to those findings, Chan and Brewer (2022) have highlighted in their systematic review of the literature on SLB in public administration, that the interest of scholars in SLB has increased especially between 2000 and 2019, and that the key outcome variables addressed in the articles are bureaucratic discretion, the coping behaviours of frontline workers (Tummers *et al.* 2015), attitudes and motivations and aspects related to SLB accountability.

According to the editors of this special issue, the COVID pandemic in 2020 has represented a turning point also for the academic relevance of the SLB theory in the European public policy debate. As widely confirmed in most of public policy and administration studies analysing if, how and when public institutions adapted and reacted to the pandemic situation (Christensen and Lægreid 2020; Gofen and Lotta 2021; Casula 2022; Steinbach 2022), public services provision was radically modified during the emergency crisis, turning back the attention on the role of the street-level actors. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the autonomy of street-level bureaucrats influenced by organisational and relational factors. Thus, the

attention of scholars has focused on discretion in translating ‘one-fits all’ exogenous stimulus into concrete policy decisions and actions (Gofen *et al.* 2021). Similarly, the pandemic crisis has connected, stronger than in the past, the role of SLB with the mediating effects of technological tools and innovations, with relevant changes in user perceptions. Some tentative reviews are emerging exploring the literature on street-level bureaucracy during and after the pandemic crisis or seeking to understand the influence of the crisis on new emerging challenges in policy implementation at the street level. Among those, there are some interesting Special Issues as the one edited by Gofen and Lotta (2021) or the one of Breidahl *et al.* (2024).

In light of this reflection, we decided to propose this Special Issue with the aim to map if and how, in the last three years, SLB research is spreading among political scientists and which policy sectors and topics are targeted by these studies. Among the most interesting results of our mapping, it is worth mentioning how the SLB research has started covering new or underestimated type of SLB professions. Studies on doctors and other health-care professions are increasing in Europe. As well as research addressing new professional profiles working on new social needs – poverty, marginality, and migration – or new types of addiction, as presented in the articles of this Special Issue. Another sector covered in this Special Issue is the judiciary that, although judges were traditionally listed by Lipsky (1980) as SLB, remains largely unexplored until recent time.

2. Summary of the SI articles

The special issue presents a collection of four articles that study the complex and nuanced domain of SLB, highlighting the indispensable role of bureaucrats (SLBs) in policy implementation across different regions and contexts. Each article provides a unique perspective on the multifaceted challenges and dynamics encountered by SLBs, providing a comprehensive overview of their critical function in the governance and delivery of public services.

The SI starts with the article of Giovanni Agostinis and Leiza Brumat *Implementing Regional Policies in the Global South: The Agency and Strategies of Street-Level Bureaucrats in Argentina and Brazil*. It embarks the readers on a crucial exploration into the intricacies of policy implementation at the grassroots level, particularly within the realms of regional migration governance. By casting a focused lens on Argentina and Brazil, the study meticulously unveils how street-level

bureaucrats (SLBs) – the frontline workers tasked with the execution of policies – exercise their agency through a gamut of strategies that either bolster or impede the application of MERCOSUR’s migration policies, which are designed to facilitate residence and border crossing within these nations.

Central to the study’s findings is the elucidation of the dual role that SLBs play in the policy implementation process. On the one hand, they act as gatekeepers, wielding their discretionary power to determine the pace and nature of policy execution. This discretion allows them to navigate through, and at times circumvent, the challenges posed by the off-complex and rigid bureaucratic structures that characterise the public administration landscapes of Argentina and Brazil. On the other hand, SLBs emerge as crucial mediators of policy outcomes, where their interpretative actions and decisions can significantly alter the trajectory and effectiveness of the intended policy measures.

The article reveals that the agency of SLBs is not a monolithic phenomenon, but is influenced by a myriad of factors including personal beliefs, professional norms, and the broader socio-political context within which they operate. Such a dynamic interplay of factors leads to a diverse array of strategies employed by SLBs, ranging from strict adherence to policy mandates to creative interpretations and modifications of policy directives to meet local needs and realities. Key findings from the study highlight the significant impact of discretionary practices of SLBs on the lives of migrants, illustrating how these practices can either facilitate access to rights and services or serve as barriers to the same. Moreover, the research brings to light the often-overlooked influence of regional policies on local policy implementation processes, suggesting a complex, bidirectional flow of policy influences that transcends national boundaries in the Global South. In conclusion, the study provides a nuanced understanding of the pivotal role that street-level bureaucrats play in the governance of migration policies within the Global South. By uncovering the strategies and agency of SLBs in Argentina and Brazil, the article contributes valuable information on the challenges and opportunities inherent in the implementation of regional migration policies, offering implications for policy design, implementation strategies, and the broader discourse on migration governance.

The SI then moves on to a comparative analysis in the European context. The article by Alice Lacchei *At the Proof of Time Pressure: Asylum Judges at the Frontline of Asylum Appeals in Italy and France* presents the world of asylum policy implementation, with a particular

focus on the judicial phase of asylum appeals in the two countries. Through an analytical lens, the research explores the goal conflict between speed and quality that underpins the daily operations of asylum courts and influences the practices of asylum judges. Lacchei's work is based on a rich methodological approach that combines observations, interviews, and comparative analysis, offering deep insights into the pressures faced by judges and their impact on asylum appeals' outcomes. The study illuminates how organisational arrangements and the inherent tension between processing appeals swiftly and maintaining decision quality shape judges' individual and collective practices. In Italy, the decentralised approach and the challenges of managing a high volume of cases under resource constraints lead to innovative but inconsistent practices among judges. In contrast, France's centralised and bureaucratically supported system aims for efficiency, but grapples with the potential compromise on the thoroughness of case examination.

Lacchei's key findings highlight the significant role of contextual factors, such as organisational structures and resource availability, in shaping the implementation of asylum policy at the judicial level. The study also highlights the adaptive strategies used by judges to cope with the dual pressures of speed and quality, revealing a complex interplay between policy mandates, judicial discretion, and the practical realities of asylum adjudication. The article contributes to the broader discourse on street-level bureaucracy and judicial implementation of asylum policy by providing a nuanced understanding of the challenges and dynamics at play in two different national contexts. It calls for a balanced approach that considers the need for timely and fair asylum decision-making processes, suggesting that reforms in organisational practices and resource allocation could enhance the overall effectiveness and fairness of asylum courts.

The last two articles are based on empirical Italian cases. The first one deals with anti-gambling policies in Piedmont, while the second one on the implementation of Minimum Income Scheme in the Region Veneto. Federico Cuomo and Niccolò Aimo with their *Street-Level Bureaucrats, Relational Factors, and Policy Outcomes: An Analysis of a Gambling Harm Reduction and Prevention Policy* offer an insightful analysis of the multifaceted dynamics that shape the implementation of a gambling harm reduction and prevention policy through the lens of street-level bureaucracy theory. They study the relational aspects between street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and citizens, uncovering how these interactions play a pivotal role in the policy's effectiveness. The study is grounded in empirical research that draws

on qualitative interviews and observations, enabling a deep exploration of the real-world nuances of policy implementation.

Researchers identify two key relational factors that significantly impact policy outcomes: third-party mediation and communicative distancing. Third-party mediation refers to the participation of external entities or individuals who facilitate or obstruct the interaction between SLBs and citizens, thereby influencing the policy's reach and efficacy. Communicative distancing involves the strategies used by SLBs to manage their workload and emotional stress, which can lead to a reduction in the quality of interaction with citizens and, consequently, the effectiveness of the policy. The findings of the article illuminate the critical role of SLBs in navigating these relational dynamics to achieve policy objectives. It highlights the necessity of considering the human element in policy design and implementation, underscoring that the success of public policies is intricately linked to the quality of interactions between bureaucrats and citizens. Furthermore, the study suggests that improving the capacity of SLBs to effectively manage these relational factors could lead to more positive policy outcomes, particularly in areas as sensitive and complex as gambling harm reduction.

Finally *The Impact of the Discretion and Coping Strategies of SLBs on Conditionality. The Role of the Frontline Workers of Employment Centres in the Implementation of Citizen Income in Italy* by Matteo Bassoli and Giorgia Nesti explores the nuanced landscape of policy implementation within the framework of the Italian Minimum Income programme, with a specific focus on the discretionary powers and coping strategies of SLBs in Employment Centres. The study critically examines how these front-line workers navigate the challenges of implementing conditionality, a central feature of the Citizen Income policy designed to incentivise job-seeking behaviours among beneficiaries. Through comprehensive qualitative research, including interviews and surveys, the authors uncover the complexities of applying conditionality in practice. They find that SLBs exercise significant discretion in determining how conditionality is enforced, often adapting policy directives to fit the unique circumstances of beneficiaries. This discretion, while essential for flexibility, introduces variability in policy implementation, leading to disparate outcomes for beneficiaries. The article also sheds light on the coping strategies employed by SLBs in response to the pressures and constraints they face, such as resource limitations and high caseloads.

Key findings of the research also underscore the critical influence of the discretion of SLBs and coping strategies on the accessibility and

impact of the Citizen Income policy. The authors argue that understanding these factors is crucial for policymakers aiming to enhance the efficacy of conditional welfare programmes. They advocate for policies that recognise and support the pivotal role of SLBs, suggesting that more consistent guidelines and resources could help streamline the implementation process and ensure that the policy's goals are met more effectively.

The four articles, while diverse in their regional focus and specific topic, share several underlying themes and findings that highlight commonalities in the challenges and dynamics of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) in different policy areas and contexts. Together, these articles thread a narrative that underscores the critical yet often underappreciated role of street-level bureaucrats in shaping the implementation and outcomes of public policies. Through their daily interactions, discretionary decisions, and coping strategies, SLBs navigate the complexities of policy implementation, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of their role in ensuring effective governance and delivery of public services.

Some topics are recurrent:

The Discretionary Power of Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs): All four articles assess how SLBs wield discretion in their roles, highlighting the importance of their decisions in the implementation of policies. This discretion affects policy outcomes in various settings, from migration policy in the Global South to welfare policies in Europe.

The Influence of Relational Dynamics: The articles on gambling harm reduction and the implementation of Citizen Income in Italy both emphasise the impact of the relationship between SLBs and citizens on policy outcomes. These relational factors, including communicative strategies and interactions, play a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of policy implementation.

The Adoption of Coping Strategies under Resource Constraints and Pressure: The studies highlight how SLBs employ various coping mechanisms to manage workload, time pressure, and expectations placed on them. These strategies are crucial for SLBs to navigate the complexities and demands of their roles, especially under the conditions of limited resources or large caseloads.

The Impact of Organisational Arrangements and Context: Each article points out how the organisational setup and broader context within which SLBs operate, be it asylum courts, employment centres or regulatory frameworks for gambling, shape their practices and the implementation process. This includes centralised vs. decentralised models, support systems, and the regulatory environment.

The four articles help the scholarship to confirm important findings:

Across the board, discretion is found to be a double-edged sword that can either facilitate or hinder policy objectives. While discretion allows SLBs to tailor decisions to individual cases, it also introduces variability and potential inequities in how policies are applied (what we may call the *Dual Nature of SLB Discretion*).

A central finding in the articles is the pivotal role that SLBs play in determining the success or failure of policies. Their day-to-day decisions and practices are instrumental in translating policy intentions into real-world outcomes (what we may call the *Critical Role of SLBs in Policy Outcomes*).

The studies collectively underscore the importance of providing SLBs with adequate support and resources. This includes training, access to information, and sufficient staffing to effectively manage case-loads. This support is crucial for SLBs to perform their roles efficiently and maintain the quality of service delivery (what we may call the *Need for Support and Resources*).

SLBs face pressures from both external sources (such as policy mandates and societal expectations) and internal dynamics (such as organisational goals and resource limitations). How they navigate these pressures significantly impacts policy implementation and their ability to meet both speed and quality targets (what we may call the *Influence of External and Internal Pressures*).

The findings finally suggest that policymakers need to consider the experiences and challenges of SLB in the design and reform of public policies. Incorporating insights from the ground-level can lead to more effective and implementable policies that account for the realities of day-to-day administration (what we may call the *Importance of Understanding SLB Experiences for Policy Design*).

3. Toward a SLB Future Research Agenda?

Similarly to the new topics and ideas on how to readdress the SLB theory in light of the contemporary feature of public policy and services that are emerging in the SLB literature (Hupe 2019), the articles presented in this Special Issue provide some interesting suggestions and reflections about how to build a future research agenda on SLB.

A first line of future investigations concerns a deeper analysis of the role of discretion in SLB's decisions. Although it represents one of the most cited topics in the SLB literature (Barberis *et al.* 2019; Chen

and Brew 2022), more research on the determinants of discretion is needed, especially for what concerns the influence of cognitive dynamics and their interaction with behavioural ones (Tummers *et al.* 2015; Bassoli and Nesti, this issue). Another important, although neglected, aspect of research on SLB discretion refers to the operationalisation and measurement of this concept. How can we observe and assess the use of discretion? What qualitative and quantitative data should we collect for the scope? How can we measure the impact it can have on policy implementation? As suggested also by the articles in the Special Issue, further research on the impact of discretion on policy efficacy should be carried out. An interesting line of inquiry related to this point concerns the use of discretionary power by SLBs in dealing with persons (clients/users) as one of the administrative capacities that front-line workers must develop in order to achieve effective policy outcomes (Nesti *et al.* 2023).

A second research topic relates to the interaction between the theory of SLB and other relevant and newly studied concepts in public administration. For instance, a particularly interesting new field of research could be the impact of SLB on the implementation of public and private partnerships and/or on the co-design, co-production of services (Vershuere *et al.* 2012; Osborne and Strokosch 2013; Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Bassoli and Campomori 2024) with private actors. A crucial dynamic of policy implementation worth studying would be the impact of citizen involvement in service codesign and codelivery on the role of SLB.

A third point conveys the dominance of the micro-meso level in the SLB research. This is something worth considering in order to reflect on how to refine and readdress the SLB theory application in public policy analysis. Although evidence indicates that street-level bureaucrats are influenced and socialised by both formal and informal organisational routines – such as formalised instructions and training, establish rule compliance or informal learning-by-doing practices and interactions – studies focussing on the organisational level are still rare. Gofen, Sella and Gassner (2019) argue that «centralized» or «formalized» organizations could better control unbureaucratic or rebellious behaviours, where the decision power emanates from seemingly impersonal and thus more infallible written rules and procedures (DeHart-Davis 2007). Similarly, in decentralised organisations, where political control is looser, discretion is exercised in meeting the local needs more than in complying to national regulations (Whitford 2002).

On the same vein, although street-level bureaucracy research explores direct delivery of policies, it was rarely considered, especially

in the past, the influence of national policy arrangements on the SLB actions and decisions, or in terms of worker's discretion perceptions in one policy setting or within multiple professions (Tummers *et al.* 2015; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

Moreover, even when seeking to compare different policies, scholars have tended to concentrate on similarities rather on variance (Gofen *et al.* 2019; Hupe 2019). Some pioneering research is emerging (Dallara and Lacchei 2024) although the infra-organisational comparison, especially among different countries, still displays methodological challenges.

Another line of future research should investigate the impact of technologies and digitalisation on the jobs of SLBs (Busch and Henriksen 2018) and, namely, how digital tools, automated decision making systems, and platforms could affect the discretion of frontline workers and service delivery.

Finally, more comparative analyses at the national or regional level would be useful to understand the impact of different political, social, and economic contextual variables on the behaviour of SLB.

By exploring these areas, future research in SLB can provide deeper insights into the complexities of public service delivery and can contribute to more effective and equitable public administration practices.

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