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Introduction



Street-Level Bureaucrats at the Forefront of Pandemic Response: A Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT *Crises' implications for street-level implementation are understudied despite street-level bureaucracy, as the operational arm of the state, by definition, serving on the frontline of crisis treatment. Drawing on multiple public services provided by varied street-level bureaucrats' professions in different countries, this special issue demonstrates key implications for street-level implementation during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, both as perceived by the public and by decision-makers and as practiced. Applying a comparative perspective rarely taken in street-level research exemplifies understudied variance across countries, professions, and time. Fast policymaking cycles inherent to crisis highlight overlooked upward influence of street-level bureaucrats in policymaking.*

Keywords: street-level theory; comparative context; street-level bureaucrats; public services; crisis treatment; COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

Distinguished as a distinct sub-category of government officials by Lipsky (1980) four decades ago, street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) directly interact with citizens in public service provision, while acting based on discretionary power and often required to balance formal policy implementation demands with the priorities of the communities they serve (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Lipsky 2010; Brodtkin 2013). Ever since, rich scholarship has documented the ways through which SLBs exercise their discretionary power and what influences their attitudes, decisions, and behavior during direct-delivery interactions (e.g. Evans and Harris 2004; Hupe and Hill 2007; Tummers et al. 2015; Thomann et al. 2018; Lotta and Marques 2020). Often portrayed as “policy

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makers” rather than “policy takers” (Gofen 2014), SLBs serve as the “face of government to the citizenry” (Smith 2012, p. 442) and as “the intersection of the state, its policies and individuals” (Brodkin 2013, p. 28), while playing a key role in structuring citizen–government relationships (Brodkin 2011) and having “intrinsic importance to social wellbeing” (Lynn et al. 2001, p. 5).

Exploring SLBs during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, this special issue shifts attention to the implications of crises for street-level implementation. Interestingly, street-level implementation and crisis are not disjointed concepts. Street-level bureaucracy was introduced by Lipsky (1980) “in the context of a so-called urban crisis in the US” (Brodkin 2021, p. 3). In addition, the well-known action-imperative feature of street-level implementation (Hupe and Hill 2007) echoes the definition of frontline organizations introduced more than half a century ago as responding to “emergencies or to rapidly changing situations” (Smith 1965, p. 391). Furthermore, pressure and uncertainty inherent to crises characterize street-level implementation even during ordinary routine (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Lipsky 2010; Raaphorst 2018). Notably, though, situations of crisis are not uniform. Specifically, a crisis may be acute or chronic as well as an intersection of both (see Brodkin in this special issue). COVID-19 may be described as a “creeping crisis” (Boin et al. 2020a) to convey that the “pandemic posed novel and complex challenges, even to those policymakers well-versed in the management of ‘acute’ crises, such as plane crashes or natural disasters” (Boin et al. 2020b, p. 189).

From a street-level perspective, crisis is rarely referred to as a contextual construct, and, in accordance, the implications of crisis for street-level implementation are understudied (exceptions include, for example, Stivers 2007; McAdams and Stough 2011; Henderson 2014; Alcadipani et al. 2020; Dunlop et al. 2020). Yet exceptional destabilizing situations, crisis situations in general, and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, inherently disrupt ordinary day-to-day street-level implementation. Specifically, as the frontline of public service delivery in ordinary times, street-level bureaucracy, by definition, serves as the frontier of government response to crises and emergencies. In addition, the well-established professional position of SLBs (Hupe and Hill 2007; Loyens and Maesschalck 2010; Harrits 2019) as “knowledge-agents” (Maynard-Moody and Musheno *forthcoming*) is undermined because their specialized knowledge, skills, and judgement become obsolete in the unexpected, fast-changing conditions and the newly emerging risks inherent to crises (Goodsell 2002; Boin et al. 2008). SLBs’ expertise during ordinary times is replaced with lack of orientation, information, and experience during a crisis (Stivers 2007; McAdams and Stough 2011; Henderson 2014; Alcadipani et al. 2020; Dunlop et al. 2020; Nagesh and Chakraborty 2020). Lastly, COVID-19 and consequent physical distancing policies imposed severe limitations on SLBs’ direct interaction with clients, which not only defines street-level implementation but is also often essential for on-the-ground service delivery (Dubois 2010).

To better understand crises’ implications for street-level implementation, a twofold aim guides this special issue. First, we bring together contributions analyzing the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for varied public services provided by multiple SLBs’ professions in different countries. Individually, the contributions in this special issue draw attention to various key implications for well-documented aspects

of street-level implementation, such as discretion, ambiguity, and professionalism. Collectively, the contributions highlight two distinct implications – that is, implications for the ways in which SLBs are *perceived* and how street-level implementation is *practiced* in crisis conditions. The former is evidenced both in public visibility and attention (Musheno et al. 2021), as well as in official policy decisions, known as *policy-as-designed* or *policy-as-written*, which reflect the formal duties, tasks, and responsibilities that decision-makers require from SLBs in treating the pandemic (Collins et al. 2020; Cox et al. 2021; Davidovitz et al. 2021; Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020). Implications for the ways in which street-level implementation is *practiced*, known as *policy-as-practiced*, are evidenced in SLBs' actions and responses to the conditions imposed by the crisis and by official government policy decisions (Brodkin 2021; Cox et al. 2021; Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Meza et al. 2021; Møller 2021).

Our second aim is to respond to recent calls that stress the scarcity of comparative street-level research and the consequent overlooked variance in street-level implementation, mainly across professions and across states or countries (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003; Loyens and Maesschalck 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012; Hupe and Buffat 2014; Gofen et al. 2019b). Individually, each of the contributions in the special issue applied a comparative perspective, which enabled the highlighting of specific and nuanced differences regarding varied street-level implementation aspects, including between ordinary and crisis times, between professions, between *policy-as-designed* and *policy-as-practiced*, as well as between states or countries (see Table 1). Covering 10 countries on different continents, this special issue refers to different countries' experiences in facing the pandemic. While some of the countries were able to manage the crisis better than others, controlling the number of cases and deaths (Canada, UK, Australia, Switzerland, Denmark, and Israel), others became epicenters of the pandemic and had less control capacity (USA, Brazil, Mexico, Italy).

To avoid redundancy, the papers in this special issue only briefly refer to the context of the pandemic and to the well-established aspects of street-level scholarship, both of which are elaborated in this introduction. After presenting the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic as the context of all papers in this special issue, we specify the implications of crisis for SLBs as identified in the contributions. Implications are discussed in relation to well-documented aspects of street-level implementation, including discretion, ambiguity, and professionalism, and from a comparative perspective. In the conclusion, we discuss two contributions to street-level scholarship in general. First, we note the variance across SLBs' professions and across countries, which draws on the comparative perspective applied in this special issue and which has rarely been taken in street-level studies. Second, we call attention to the overlooked *upwards* influence of SLBs in policymaking. Drawing on these two preliminary insights, we briefly sketch an agenda for future research.

COVID-19 Worldwide Pandemic

In 2020, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged every country and citizen worldwide. As an unprecedented disease, COVID-19 entails an acute, destabilizing crisis, characterized by extreme uncertainty and urgency that derive from a rapid, continuous dynamic of unpredictable circumstances (Rosenthal et al. 1989; Farazmand

Table 1. Papers in this special issue by professions, states/countries and the comparative dimension

Authors	Street-level aspect in focus	SLBs' profession	States/countries	Comparative dimension	Main finding
Brodtkin	Street-level organizations in crisis situations	All	General	Ordinary-crisis	Research agenda for street-level organizations during crisis
Musheno et al.	Public image of SLBs	All	US	Ordinary-crisis	SLBs' public image changed
Cox et al.	SLBs' responses	Nursing home workers	Canada, US	Countries	SLBs respond by resistance, innovation, or improvisation, based on the received support
Collins et al.	SLBs' official roles	Care-leavers	US, UK, Canada, Australia	Countries	SLBs' discretion increases
Lotta et al.	SLBs' tasks	Nurses and CHWs	Brazil	SLBs' professions	SLBs compelled to adjust their roles, but adjustment capacity depends on the support and degree of professionalization
Malandrino and Sager	SLBs' discretion and professionalism	Teachers	Italy and Switzerland	Countries	Quickly adopt online service provision and, many times, without the required resources and knowledge
Perez-Chiques et al.	Discretion and competing tasks	Substance-use treatment officials	US	Before and after crisis	Contradicting effects in multi-level settings on SLBs' work, roles, and discretion, mediated by organizations
Møller	SLBs' autonomy and situational knowledge	Social care and police	Denmark	SLBs' professions	Quality of service provision depends on SLBs' preparedness to use situational knowledge
Meza et al.	Design-implementation gap	Healthcare	Mexico	Policy as designed and as practiced	SLBs respond by developing new types of roles, which shift focus from client-centered to population-centered
Davidovitz et al.	Policy ambiguity, risk and discretion	Police, health, social workers	Israel	SLBs' professions	Government response requires additional duties assigned to SLBs, which reflect three interrelated changes: increased policy ambiguity, higher risk exposure, and expanded discretion

2001; Roux-Dufort 2007; Boin et al. 2010), all of which challenge the behavior of political authorities, public agencies, and citizens (Goodsell 2002; Boin et al. 2020b), and necessitate response in order to avoid social or political breakdown (Boin et al. 2016). Starting in China in December 2019, it soon arrived in Europe, then the USA and Latin America. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global emergency. On March 11, 2020, it was declared a pandemic, which is the worldwide dissemination of a new disease spread across different continents with sustained transmission from person to person (WHO 2020).

Since its onset, countries have adopted different policies to contain the spread and treat sick patients. The countries that quickly closed their borders, implemented strict measures of physical and social distancing, and strengthened their health systems were able to contain the spread quickly and reduce the number of infections and deaths. This was the case in the Scandinavian countries (except for Sweden), as well as Germany, France, Portugal, Israel, New Zealand, and others. However, other countries took longer to adopt restrictive measures and quickly saw the virus becoming uncontrollable and their health systems collapsing. Some examples are Italy, Spain, and the UK. Still other countries with denialist governments were never even able to adopt strict measures, did not invest in health systems, and became the epicenter of the crisis, facing uncontrolled situations, such as the USA, Mexico, and Brazil. Observing the differences in how governments reacted to the crisis, it is clear that facing the pandemic proved to be intensely dependent on political decisions and social cohesion, revealing inequalities and traditional challenges in some countries that were exacerbated by the crisis (Wenham 2020).

Simultaneously, from its beginnings as a public health emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly turned into an economic and humanitarian crisis (Lancet 2020). Data from many countries show how the pandemic has increased inequalities and how some vulnerable groups are more at risk for infection and death, such as poor and black and indigenous people in the US and Latin America. The social and economic consequences of the crisis also affect social groups differently, with worse social and economic consequences for women (Wenham 2020). Therefore, in many countries, the policies to face the crisis moved beyond the health dimension. They also had to incorporate economic issues, social policies, and additional care for vulnerable groups.

In September 2020, when the situation seemed to be more controlled in some countries, the world witnessed the beginning of a second wave. As we write this introduction in November 2020, the situation is becoming uncontrolled again in many European countries, and was never controlled in some countries (such as the US, Brazil, and Mexico). But everywhere cases are increasing again while the pharmacy industry accelerates the production of vaccines. There seems to be hope that, in the coming months, part of the population will be vaccinated. However, so far in December, the pandemic has killed almost 1.46 million (7,000 were health workers) and infected 62.8 million people (Dong et al. 2020).

Implications of the Crisis for Street-Level Implementation

In line with scarce research on the implications of crises for street-level implementation (Henderson 2014), all contributions in this special issue suggest that a crisis situation intensifies the need for, and the dependency upon, public services provided by SLBs,

while disrupting their ordinary day-to-day practice and imposing reformulation of street-level implementation. Prominently, during a crisis, SLBs experience a higher, sudden pressure on demand for essential public services, accompanied by a dearth of resources to meet the needs and demands of citizens, as well as a lack of information entwined with vague and contradictory messages from all managerial levels (Dearstyne 2007; Stivers 2007; McAdams and Stough 2011; Henderson 2014; Alcadipani et al. 2020; Dunlop et al. 2020).

Many of the contributions in this special issue demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic itself, and consequent government response, generated a higher, immediate pressure on demand for vital public services in health, education, policing, and social services. Concurrently, risks of getting infected and infecting others, alongside widely implemented physical distancing and lockdown measures, reshuffled the conditions and arrangements of service delivery for all SLBs, but not with the same intensity (Davidovitz et al. 2021). Specifically, articles in this special issue demonstrate that health professionals and police officers were compelled to direct interactions (e.g. Lotta et al. 2021; Møller 2021), whereas most teachers and providers of social services, even those working with vulnerable populations, were directed to adjust to online delivery (e.g. Collins et al. 2020; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020). Focusing on SLBs during the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the articles in this special issue identified two distinct implications for street-level implementation, that is, as *perceived*, and as *practiced*.

Implications of the Crisis for Street-Level Implementation as Perceived

Shifts in perception of SLBs and of the work SLBs carry out emerged both in the general public and among decision-makers. Notably, public perceptions of SLBs and of street-level work is of high importance as it reflects citizens' trust in government (Smith 2012) and it is essential for the delivery of public services (Gassner and Gofen 2018, 2019). Moreover, street-level scholarship portrays imbalanced power relations in which SLBs hold discretionary power that is exercised according to the perceived worth of the individual policy-client served (Brodkin 2011; Tummers et al. 2015; Thomann and Rapp 2018; Lotta and Pires 2019), who is merely "subjected to street-level decisions and framed as the powerless side of the interaction" (Gofen et al. 2019a, p. 198). Nevertheless, recent studies shift attention to clients' agency in direct-delivery interactions (e.g. Dubois 2010; Gofen et al. 2014, 2019a; Johannessen 2019; Peeters et al. 2020). Furthermore, street-level theory acknowledges public demands for more and better services (Brodkin 2021).

During the pandemic, SLBs "gained a broad recognition for their essential contributions to the society . . . gained attention as essential frontline workers who maintain vital services and institutions in their communities while risking exposure to the coronavirus . . . [and] have been hailed as pandemic heroes" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno *forthcoming*). Comparing media coverage before and during the pandemic, Musheno et al. (2021) uncover "exponential increase in articles that reference frontline workers from mid-February through the end of March, with the peak reached in mid-April . . . [which reflect] more expansive portrayals of who is on the frontlines and what it means to be engaged in this work". Moreover, the image of SLBs as heroes serving at the "frontline"

and risking their lives to help citizens is not only applicable to the common SLB professions studied in street-level research. Rather, “[w]ith considerable focus on low-wage workers, the popular discourse brings substantial attention to the intersecting ethno-racial and gender characteristics of those whose jobs put them on the frontlines and, with it, high risk for coronavirus infections” (Musheno et al. 2021).

Among decision-makers, the perception of SLBs and the work they should carry out is explicitly evidenced in formal policy decisions, known as *policy-as-designed* or *policy-as-written* (Hill 2006). In order to respond to unexpected, continuously changing circumstances (Farazmand 2001; Daléus and Hansén 2011; Henderson 2014; Savi 2014; Dunlop et al. 2020), many countries, although not all, constantly and rapidly updated policy measures to stem the pandemic and address the crisis. Many of the articles in this special issue indeed demonstrate that formal policy decisions adjust policy instruments to newly emerging conditions by requiring additional and modified tasks, higher workload, and also increased risk exposure for SLBs in varied policy sectors, including education, policing, social services, and most prominently in healthcare (Collins et al. 2020; Cox et al. 2021; Davidovitz et al. 2021; Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Meza et al. 2021; Møller 2021; Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020). Interestingly, absence of government measures (Lotta et al. 2021), frequent updates (Davidovitz et al. 2021), and contrasting approaches in multi-level government settings all reflect intensified policy ambiguity (Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020).

Applying a comparative perspective allowed more nuanced insights to be identified. Specifically, different SLBs’ professions were exposed to different levels of risk (Davidovitz et al. 2021). Health professionals were obligated to treat, and thus directly interact with, COVID-19 patients (e.g. Lotta et al. 2021; Meza et al. 2021), whereas others were instructed either to adopt virtual delivery of their services (e.g. Collins et al. 2020; Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020) or to target only extreme cases (Møller 2021). Additional identified variance refers to granted discretion – that is, degrees of freedom delegated to SLBs by official decision-makers to act within prescribed directives (Hupe 2013). The more new tasks SLBs are assigned, and the higher the policy ambiguity, the broader is the expansion of granted discretion (e.g. Davidovitz et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Lotta et al. 2021). Enhancement of SLBs’ granted discretion also derives from formal relaxation of restrictions and more flexibility of services (Collins et al. 2020). However, within a multi-level government context, inconclusive implications for discretion as granted emerged because federal agencies relaxed restrictions while new sub-national regulations tightened the guidelines (Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020).

Implications of the Crisis for Street-Level Implementation as Practiced

Most of the contributions in this special issue emphasize that the conditions imposed by the pandemic and by the newly introduced, or lack of, official government guidelines, reformulate on-the-ground delivery arrangements and SLBs’ roles. Specifically, variance in discretion-as-practiced (Hupe 2013), which emerged as increasing and allowing more space for maneuver (Lotta et al. 2021; Møller 2021) or as decreasing (Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020), may be ascribed to various policy sectors and professions. SLBs’ professions that were compelled to direct interaction were exposed to risk and thus some SLBs faced a dilemma between self-protection and service provision (Møller 2021), which was often

combined with insufficient resources (Lotta et al. 2021; Meza et al. 2021). Different to the well-documented coping strategies of SLBs, which refer to the specific client (Tummers et al. 2015), an additional coping strategy emerged in order to deal with scarce resources, specifically, changing on-the-ground delivery by shifting the focus from a “client-based approach to a public health approach” (Meza et al. 2021).

In addition, SLBs are compelled to execute extra new tasks and/or adapt, rather urgently, their normal day-to-day activities (Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Meza et al. 2021; Møller 2021; Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020). In general, the contributions identify three patterns of response – namely, adaptation, resistance, and innovation (Brodkin 2021; Cox et al. 2021) – as well as more nuanced patterns of adaptation and innovation (Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Meza et al. 2021; Møller 2021). Responses emerged as influenced by the degree of support (Cox et al. 2021) and resources provided (Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021), the way SLBs are managed (Pérez-Chiqués et al. 2020), as well as by the structure of arrangements, such as collaboration (Brodkin 2021). Moreover, professionalism emerged as a key in understanding SLBs’ reactions, because the degree of professionalization may fill the gap caused by the ambiguity and lack of support experienced during the crisis, allowing for better adaptation to the new situation (Lotta et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021; Møller 2021). The degree of professionalism, which refers to training and preparedness, may be ascribed to capability to use situational knowledge (Møller 2021). The findings of the articles in this special issue therefore emphasize that professionalism is a key in SLBs’ capacity to cope with imposed challenges, although a situation of crisis undermines professional knowledge, skills, and judgement.

Conclusion

Collectively, the contributions in this special issue offer two preliminary insights for street-level scholarship. First, the papers refer to different countries which responded at different paces and with varied degrees of intensity. Nevertheless, in all countries examined, street-level implementation is characterized by increased policy ambiguity, demand, uncertainty, and insufficient resources to meet citizens’ needs. One preliminary insight is therefore an emphasis on applying a comparative perspective, which has rarely been taken in street-level studies, not only with regard to macro-level aspects, but also on meso-level aspects, mainly comparing structural and organizational arrangements of street-level implementation (Brodkin 2021; see also Brodkin 2011, 2012, 2013) and the social networks and power relationships in which they are embedded (Nunes and Lotta 2019; Lotta and Marques 2020).

Second, an additional insight emerging from the contributions in this special issue refers to the unexpected, continuously changing circumstances (Farazmand 2001; Dalés and Hansén 2011; Henderson 2014; Savi 2014; Dunlop et al. 2020), which compel comparatively fast policymaking cycles (see Davidovitz et al. 2021). Crisis situations therefore intensify the reciprocal dependence of SLBs and decision-makers and the necessity for bi-directional flow of information between policy formation exercised in decision-making venues and on-the-ground implementation. Indeed, government response to emergencies inherently involves complex information management and multifaceted decision-making processes (Henderson 2014; Zavattaro

2020). As demonstrated in several of the papers in this special issue, the downward flow of information is vital because SLBs' understanding of the fast-changing imposed conditions, and, in turn, work efficacy, both depend upon updated, coherent information provided by higher-ups (see also Weick 2012). Downward flow of information is indeed well-rooted in street-level scholarship through the well-established criticism of policy ambiguity, which is often "insufficient to fully determine what will happen in its name" (Brodkin 2013, p. 23), and the scarcity of formal policy decisions that specify what needs to be known in order carry them out (Hill 2006).

Upward information from the field to decision-making is essential in order to adapt policy design to the constantly changing conditions on the ground. Shifting attention to SLBs as an essential source of information for policy design during emergencies (e.g. Collins et al. 2020; Davidovitz et al. 2021; Malandrino and Sager 2021) emphasizes that current street-level literature, in general, tends to employ a downward perspective, – that is, focusing on what influences shape SLBs' attitudes, decisions, and actions as well as on the ways through which SLBs exercise their discretion during direct delivery interactions (see Gofen et al. 2019b for a review). Hence, whereas the downward influence of SLBs in policymaking is well-documented, their upward influence is understudied.

Borrowing from Brodkin's (2013) notion of the threefold role of street-level organizations, current literature focuses on two of SLBs' roles – that is, as delivering and as mediating policies. In contrast, a third role, namely, mediating politics, which refers to voicing the needs and requirements of citizen-clients to higher-ups, is rarely studied in current street-level scholarship. Although not referred to as an upward influence of SLBs, street-level policy entrepreneurship demonstrates the upward influence of SLBs, which has gained scholarly attention only recently (e.g. Zahariadis 2008; Cohen 2012; Arnold 2015; Frisch-Aviram et al. 2018; Lavee and Cohen 2019). The upward influence of SLBs embodies a well-known normative dilemma regarding SLBs' role within the democratic state, namely, whether merely to control them as "policy takers", who are required to follow official directives, or to empower them as "policy makers", having professional abilities and expertise for effective service delivery and for addressing public problems fairly and equitably (Gofen 2014; Thomann et al. 2018).

From a practical perspective, this special issue stresses the negative consequences of well-documented attempts to control and reduce street-level discretion (Lipsky 2010) – for example, by increasing regulation and red tape (Shim et al. 2017). Specifically, government capacity to address the crisis depends not only upon SLBs' functioning during routine times, but also on creating a supportive environment for SLBs' on-going professional development and training, which enhances the necessary skills, expertise, and self-efficacy to respond to fast-changing conditions. Government capacity to address the crisis also depends on the reciprocal relationships, communication, and trust between decision-makers and SLBs, all of which provide the infrastructure to facilitate citizens' trust and well-being.

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