P85 / Emotions at the Frontline

Topic : Bureaucracy, Administration and Policy Process

Chair : Cécile Vigour (Sciences Po Bordeaux)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

These panels focus on how emotions concretely shape the interactions between agents and the public during public service delivery, across diverse national contexts and policy fields.

Our postulate is that emotions are still underexamined in sociology, political science and public administration regarding citizen-state relations. Yet, emotions arouse a new interest in social sciences. Different works focus on the role of emotions at different stages of the public policy process. They argue that emotions contribute to the agenda setting (Baumgartner, Jones 2005) and the reframing of public problems (Durnová, Hejzlarova, 2017, 2022; Nabi et al. 2018). Emotions play a role in policy change or stability (Zahariadis 2015; see the 2024 Guadalajara IWPP workshop led by Z.Boda & C.Radaelli), by contributing to the mobilization of coalitions (Cairney, Weible 2017; Pierce 2021). As emotions impact political discourses (Szabó et al. 2026) and the deliberation process (Fink et al. 2023), they may shape policy design (Durnová, Hejzlarova, 2023), as well as policy support (Renström & Bäck 2021; Rodríguez-Sánchez et al. 2018; Verloo 2023).

By contrast, these panels focus on the service delivery process and frontline interactions between citizens and the state. Indeed, emotions are still rarely at the forefront while studying public encounters (Hupe 2022), despite notable exceptions (Guy, Mastracci, Yan 2019; Dubois 2016): these works seek for instance to complete the analysis of policy feedback (Soss 1999) or administrative burdens (Nielsen, Nielsen 2024), Tummers et al.'s (2015) typology (Ricotta et al. 2025; Lequeux 2026; Lequeux et al. 2027), or the Cognitive Appraisal Theory for Public Administration (Ropes 2026).

The following research questions guide the panels:

· What are the theoretical frameworks in sociology, political science or public administration, as well as the methodological research designs relevant to finely grasp emotions?

· What roles do emotions concretely play during public service delivery? How do positive or negative emotions shape public-professionals encounters "at the frontline"?

· What are the effects of these interactions: on how citizens experience public services and policies? On how public agents perceive their job and relations with citizens? On the decisions taken? On institutional legitimacy and confidence? (Oberwittler, Roché 2018)

The originality of these panels is based on three main orientations:

1)Researchers need to take into consideration both sides of the relation of service delivery: how street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) perform their work in interaction with the public and how the public experience this encounter. By contrast, the literature often focuses on one side of this relation.

2)Public service delivery encounters, as well as emotions (Durnová, Schmid 2025), are shaped by class, gender, age, race/ethnicity… As social constructions, emotions result from social relationships and are also often embedded in norms and moral values.

3)We are interested in deep empirical and qualitative studies, implying to carefully think to a relevant research design to collect data on emotions. We will also consider with great interest papers based on quantitative survey developing a research design to finely grasp emotions and the context of their emergence in service delivery.

One journal issue will be submitted after the panels.

CALL FOR PAPERS

The panels include 5 key topics.

1)The first aim is to discuss **the theoretical models or frameworks in sociology, political science or public administration** that may be used to precisely understand and explain the role and the impacts of emotions in the encounters between citizens and public agents at the frontline, in addition to or beyond the

concepts developed by Hochschild (1983).

2)Another aim of the panels is to highlight the diversity of positive or negative emotions (confidence, fear, anger…) in the frontline encounters **in diverse policy domains**: social policy, health, education, police or justice…

From a micro point of view, public service delivery experiences and emotions felt in such a context vary depending on gender, class and race/ethnicity, but also according to life and career paths, previous experiences of public services, as well as experiences of inequalities or discriminations. They also depend on the attitudes and emotions of the public agents encountered, as well as the feeling rules prevailing in a policy domain.

3) A third topic focuses on **the emotional labour that street-level bureaucrats** perform during interactions with the public to manage both their own emotions, and those of the public (Guy, Mastracci & Yan 2019). Do public agents refer to specific **feeling rules**? If so, which ones? through which devices? (posters on the walls, verbal reminders…). Considering the role of occupational or professional socialization, papers can also ask how public agents learn about these rules. Do their opinion on them vary across time and depending on professional experience?

From a meso and macro perspective, our hypothesis is that, rather a single bureaucratic emotional regime, diverse emotional regimes exist within the state, with specific characteristics in each policy domain, certainly with significative differences between countries.

4)A fourth issue refers to **the effects of such an emotional encounter between public agents and the public** both on the perceptions of public services, on their decisions (especially due to their discretion) and on public service legitimacy and confidence.

The theory of procedural justice (Tyler 1990) shows how experiencing to be fairly treated, to be listened to, and respected reinforce the legitimacy of the state. May such a theory be enlarged to other policy domains? If so, with what adjustments?

5)A fifth issue deals with **the conception and the implementation of research designs to study emotions in service delivery encounters.** Such papers should present also highlight their impacts on the results. How to identify and measure social and political emotions from a qualitative or quantitative perspective with a fine granularity?

We are interested in:

a) papers taking into consideration both sides of the relation of service delivery;

b) conceptually or theoretically innovative papers,

c) yet implementing empirical qualitative or quantitative research design to finely grasp emotions in diverse empirical and policy contexts.

Comparative papers -between institutions, policy domains, regions or countries - are especially welcome, as well as papers with empirical fields in the Global South. Scholars from all backgrounds are encouraged to submit a paper.