P214 / The policy work of intermediaries: a relational perspective on the role of non-state actors in street-level implementation

Topic : Implementation/Street-Level Bureaucracy

Chair : Jonathan Miaz (University of Lausanne)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Lipsky's seminal book on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) highlighted the policymaking role of street-level bureaucrats, whose discretionary practices not merely implement policies but actively shape their content and effects in practice. In this sense, street-level organizations (SLOs) are crucial sites where policy is translated into concrete experiences, structuring access to public services, rights, justice, welfare benefits, and institutional arrangements designed to address public problems. The concept of SLOs reflects broader transformations of public policies as both for-profit firms (Dias and Maynard-Moody 2006) and nonprofits (Fyall 2017; Smith and Lipsky 1993) have become increasingly directly involved in policy implementation and service provision on behalf of the state (Brodkin 2013).

Street-level research also emphasizes the relational nature of implementation, which emerges through interactions among multiple actors and organizations (Achermann, Borrelli, and Pfirter 2023; Halliday et al. 2009; Infantino 2023; Miaz and Achermann 2022). Within a given policy sector, these actors are embedded in distinct social fields and institutional logics. Street-level bureaucrats operate within the bureaucratic field, judges and lawyers within the juridical one, while other professionals, such as social workers, mediators, and health practitioners, are rooted in distinct professional and policy fields (Dubois 2012). As they engage in implementation, their respective logics overlap, compete and are continually negotiated (Halliday et al. 2009) . Such hybridization can generate tensions among multiple accountability regimes, including political-administrative, vocational, charity- or activist-oriented, clients- and shareholders-oriented, as well as participatory (Thomann, Hupe, and Sager 2018). In this context, street-level managers, alongside frontline workers, play key role in mediating these tensions and reconciling plural accountabilities (Gassner and Gofen 2018).

Building on this body of research, this panel focuses on non-state street-level actors who serve as policy intermediaries in shaping access to rights, justice, public services, benefits, policy provisions, and more broadly to the state. Positioned between individuals, public institutions, regulations, legal frameworks, and policy programs, these actors influence implementation processes, despite not being always formally mandated or contracted by the state to carry out public policy tasks. Through social and legal support, they help individuals understand their rights, identify the benefits to which they are entitled, challenge administrative decisions, and navigate complex institutional and legal procedures. For instance, organizations supporting victims of domestic violence, sexual harassment, or state violence may help individuals interpret their experiences through legal categories and assess potential avenues for redress. Similarly, trade union representatives may assist workers in recognizing discriminatory treatment, framing it as a legal grievance, and identifying appropriate procedures and institutions through which to pursue a claim, while also informing them of the practical and legal obstacles such claims may entail. In doing so, these intermediaries often participate in the process of "naming, blaming, and claiming" (Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980). At the same time, they can function as gatekeepers, filtering, selecting, or directing potential claimants and welfare recipients according to legal, strategic, moral, or political considerations (Hamidi 2017).

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel seeks to bring together studies examining the role of non-state actors operating as street-level policy intermediaries. Building on the literature on legal intermediaries (Lejeune and Spire 2021; Pélisse 2019; Talesh and Pélisse 2019), we define street-level policy intermediaries as actors who act as filters, gatekeepers, facilitators, or translators between individuals and public policies, thereby shaping how policies are understood, accessed, and delivered. They include lawyers, social and legal advisers, social workers, mediators, trade union representatives, and other professionals, as well as activists and volunteers. Adopting this broad definition aims at gathering a variety of contributions examining a wide range of

non-state actors and SLOs involved, to varying degrees and in different capacities, in policy implementation.

We aim at understanding how these non-state actors shape policy implementation and policymaking through their interactions with other SLOs. We are also interested in how they affect and are affected by broader transformations in governance and public action, including processes of legalization and judicialization, digitalization, and managerialization, as well as the changing forms of street-level management (Gassner and Gofen 2018). Relationships between non-state policy intermediaries and the state can take multiple forms, from cooperation to resistance. At one end of the spectrum, policy intermediaries may work closely with public authorities by facilitating implementation and improving individuals' access to policies, rights, services, and benefits. They may also play a complementary role by extending the reach of public action and providing services, support, or resources that state actors are unable or unwilling to offer. We welcome contributions examining actors working within public or private organizations, and who participate in the endogenization of policy instruments by interpreting, translating, and implementing them within organizational settings (Edelman 2016). At the other end of the spectrum, certain non-state policy intermediaries may adopt a more contentious stance by challenging, contesting, or actively resisting public policies, administrative practices, or state interventions at the street level.

Contributions may address a wide range of policy fields, including migration and asylum, gender equality, welfare, family policy, housing, health, disability, as well as taxation, justice or law & order. The proposals may engage with one or more of the following questions:

- Who are these policy intermediaries? How are they positioned in relation to the state and other SLOs ? What roles do they perform, and what objectives, professional norms, and logics shape their practices?

- How do the professional logics of different policy intermediaries interact with those of other actors within a given policy field? What tensions, dilemmas and accountability demands arise from their intermediary role? And how are these managed by individuals and organizations?

- What effects do practices of policy intermediaries have on policy processes, particularly policy implementation and policymaking? How do they shape the practices of state actors, street-level bureaucrats, and other SLOs? How do they influence the ways in which polices are eventually enacted, interpreted, and delivered?

- How do the practices of policy intermediaries affect policy recipients, their experiences of and relationships to public institutions (Dubois 2020), their legal and rights consciousness or perception and understanding of the public policy, their access to rights and services, and their trajectories?

- More broadly, how do policy intermediaries shape, mediate, transform, or contest public policies?

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