

T06P05 / Desk Power: Insights Into Bureaucrats' Autonomy

Topic : T06 / Policy Implementation

Chair : Tobias Eule (University of Bern)

Second Chair : Federica Infantino (University of Oxford/Université Libre de Bruxelles)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

While we know that bureaucrats that enact policies on the "street-level" or "front-line" of the state hold significant autonomy over their actions, there is still too little attention paid to the potential consequences of this. The literature at least since Lipsky points to the fact that state agents can shape policies through implementation - but do they? In what circumstances? With what motivation? Similarly, anthropological accounts of bureaucracy point to the fact that discretion and "petty sovereignty" (Butler) can add an "illegible" element of power (Das) that furthers the reach of the executive. But does this influence the effect of policy, or clients' perceptions of the state?

This panel seeks to go further than merely pointing to the potential for messy practices on the lower echelons of bureaucracy. Therefore, it invites contributions from scholars who analyse what bureaucrats actually do with their autonomy. By focussing on autonomy in general, the panel seeks to stimulate a broader debate on how bureaucratic activities contradict and reinforce each other and how it potentially effects the actual implementation process itself. This panel is thus open to studies of state agents' practices across national context and policy fields.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel seeks for contributions that shed light onto the effects of state agents' autonomy in the implementation of policy. While we know that this autonomy exists, and that it can potentially influence or alter policy outcomes, we have too little information on whether and how it is actually exercised. This panel thus seeks to further our insight into bureaucrats' autonomy, its various causes, forms and its potential consequences. Through its broad frame, it aims to prompt a debate that goes beyond specific lines of enquiry, such as studies on discretion or corruption. Instead, we seek to understand the underlying mechanisms of exercising bureaucratic autonomy, or "desk power".

The panel is open to scholars that focus on the autonomy of state agents in all policy fields and national contexts. While papers with longitudinal, ethnographic or otherwise in-depth research designs are particularly encouraged to be submitted, the panel also invites other proposals that study phenomena like political resistance, corruption, occupational survival, creaming/skimming, etc. All papers should include original empirical material and demonstrate an intention to contribute to furthering our theoretical understanding of street-level or front-line bureaucracy.

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Session 1

Wednesday, June 28th 16:15 to 18:15 (Block B 3 - 5)

Discussants

Tobias Eule (University of Bern)

Bureaucrats behaving badly - using administrative traditions to legitimise adherence to old ways

Prudence R Brown (University of Queensland)

This paper examines how bureaucrats use their autonomy to respond to the inevitable tensions between implementing new ways of working and bureaucratic traditions. I suggest that a significant barrier to change is that they do so by co-opting other traditions, such as accountability, to legitimise adherence to old ways of working.

My case study centres on the implementation of new approaches to tackling major inequalities experienced by Australian indigenous people. In common with elsewhere in the world, Australian Indigenous people experience significant levels of social inequality, however government efforts to date have failed to make significant inroads. For policies and programs to succeed in reducing inequality, policy actors must find ways to increase levels of ownership by Indigenous peoples in the policies and programs that target them. To date, governments have demonstrated limited capacity to adjust their ways of working, and underlying institutional constraints work against meaningful participation in policy design and implementation.

I use the Logics of Critical Explanation (LCE) approach to analyse a recent national trial in remote Indigenous Australia aimed, in part, at a more participatory approach to development efforts. Drawing on documents and interviews with elite policy actors I analyse the policy world through three explanatory 'logics' which focus on the ontological assumptions, norms and narratives that sustain the policy practices complicit in the repeated failure to address inequity effectively.

Creaming practices at the frontline of welfare-to-work policies : An exploration of social workers' autonomy in a social assistance organization in Belgium.

Valentine Duhant (Université Libre de Bruxelles, GERME)

This paper aims at analyzing the autonomy granted to street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of activation policies in the field of social assistance in Belgium. Since the 1990s, the allocation of social benefits is characterized by the paradoxical dialectic between the formalization of assistance, through the increasing uses of formal contracts between recipients and local welfare agencies, and the emphasis on the development of beneficiaries' and social workers' autonomy, through processes of individualization of policy implementation. Indeed, in Belgium, a law voted in 2002 created a "right to social integration", which aims at integrating beneficiaries of social assistance on the job market on a case-by-case basis and grants a huge autonomy to social workers in charge of its implementation. Nevertheless, final decisions regarding the individual cases of recipients are taken by a board of local politicians at the head of local social assistance agencies ("Centres Publics d'Intégration Sociale" – CPAS), which formally limits the power of street-level bureaucrats.

This paper will investigate the actual autonomy of those social workers in charge of helping recipients to find a job ("integration agents"), through the analysis of the organizational dynamics which constrain or allow for their autonomy on the one hand, and the uses of their autonomy on the other hand. More specifically, it will focus on creaming practices, in an attempt to assess the power of integration agents in granting access to their service and its different programs. In other words, do integration agents have the power to "cream" part of the public? If so,

how do they use it, and on the basis of which selection criteria?

The results draw upon a four-month ethnographical study in the “socio-professional integration service” of a CPAS in Wallonia, the southern Region of Belgium, encompassing observation of the everyday-life of the service, observation of interactions between workers and recipients, interviews with workers and their hierarchy, as well as the analysis of internal documents of the organization and individual files of recipients. The diversity of sources allows for an analysis of decisions taken both in the synchronicity of face-to-face interactions between workers and recipients and in the long-term temporality of individual cases, with the aim to assess the concrete consequences of integration agents’ autonomy on recipients’ access to socio-professional integration services.

How Street-Level Bureaucrats Become Policy Entrepreneurs: The Case of Urban Renewal in Israel

Nissim Cohen (University of Haifa)

Einat Lavee (University of Haifa)

Under what conditions will implementing bureaucrats act as policy entrepreneurs seeking to change policy? What strategies do these entrepreneurs adopt to promote their influence on policy design?

In recent decades the environment of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) has undergone far-reaching changes (Brodkin, 2011; Lipski, 2010; Cohen et al 2016a). Under the structural conditions of neoliberal policies, SLBs are working in an environment characterized by increasing privatization and the withdrawal of the welfare state. As part of these changes, public social service organizations are operating under the influence of New Public Management (NPM) wave of reforms. The main goals of most of these reforms is improving efficiency, contracting out, privatizing the delivery of services, and adopting private-sector management methods including an outcome-based orientation.

Social workers are SLBs whose professional routine has been strongly influenced by this neoliberal ideology (Cohen et al., 2016b). The withdrawal of the welfare state has also led to increased hardship among disadvantaged populations that has translated into direct pressure on public social service providers. In many countries that were influenced by the neoliberal ideology, poverty and increased inequality have become a common phenomenon (Pierson, 2001). Social workers are often the front-line workers who must deal with these issues. Among other changes, the organizational demand to adopt more innovative activities and change traditional modes of practice has becoming increasingly loud, emphasizing the important role of social workers as policy actors who facilitate and enrich the formulation of social policy (Weiss-Gal and Gal, 2014). In this changing environment, social workers are often confronted with situations in which they lack the knowledge needed to respond to the pressures arising from their clients’ hardships, particularly when they must deal with new areas outside their traditional routines and beyond their professional expertise.

While previous studies argue that street-level bureaucrats can become policy entrepreneurs, the basic assumption is that they will do so through the implementation of policy. We argue that the combination of three elements leads social workers to adopt innovative strategies aimed at influencing policy design on the individual level through a process we call street-level bureaucrats’ policy entrepreneurship. These three elements are acute crises, lack of effective knowledge in the area, and the demand that they implement policies in the context of NPM. In acute crises, social workers believe that their clients face severe threats that require an immediate response. However, they often do not possess the required professional, organizational, and political knowledge to address these needs. These circumstances, combined with the requirements of NPM, often push them to become part of the political game and influence public policy. Nevertheless, as we will explain, street-level bureaucrat policy entrepreneurs have several characteristics that they can leverage, leading them to engage in unique entrepreneurship strategies.

Based on in-depth interviews, focus groups and textual source analysis, we demonstrate our theoretical insights using the case of social workers working with disadvantaged populations in the context of urban renewal in Israel.

THE IMPLEMENTAION OF CONDITIONAL CASH TRANFERS PROGRAMS IN BRAZIL AND MEXICO: ANALYSING THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE STREET LEVEL AGENTS TOWARDS THE EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONALITY

Breyner Oliveira (Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto)

This paper analyzes the implementation process of two national conditional cash tranfers programs (Bolsa Família/Brazil) and Oportunidades/Mexico) from the perspective of public-level bureaucrats, based on educational conditionality. Both are programs that provide a monetary benefit to families living in poverty, linking the provision of this benefit to the condition that families comply with co-responsibilities in the areas of education and health. The work of Lipsky (1980) is considered an important reference for the implementation literature because, when

analyzing this process from the perspective of the actors who are closest to the citizens, it assumes that these agents exert influence on these policies, altering their course of action. When analyzing these programs in Belo Horizonte (Brazil) and in San Luís Potosí (Mexico), the professionals of education, social assistance, the Responsibles de Atención (RAs) and Vocals are the agents at the local level that correspond to the characterization of Lipsky (1980). In Brazil, two public schools located in a region of extreme poverty were the gateway to the field analysis. It was identified that the Centers of Reference in Social Assistance emerge as one of the spaces of articulation so that the educational conditionality is fulfilled by the families. In Mexico, the Regional Attention Units are responsible for the mobilization of the holders. In order to analyze how educational conditionality is perceived by these agents, teachers and principals of two public schools were interviewed. By the analysis of the data obtained, we conclude that there are different types of interaction and mediation, explained by the different perceptions, values and interpretations that these actors construct as they perform their functions. In Belo Horizonte, the implementation of the policy stimulates the creation and strengthening of cooperation networks. In San Luis Potosí, the program, because it is more regulated, makes it difficult to create intersectoral links. Despite the nature of the program in this country, the role of RAs and vowels indicates that they are important references because they have created bridges between citizens and the state, as well as strengthening the bonds between the beneficiaries. The same is identified in Brazil when the behavior of social care professionals, school principals and pedagogical coordinators is analyzed. In both countries, the role of teachers is not decisive, probably because of their perception of educational conditionality and of existing monitoring processes. The research reveals that, in different ways, this conditionality mobilizes and approximates agents at the local level, even when intersectorality is still an institutional problem. It is concluded that the evidence on the action of street-level agents reinforces Lipsky's (1980) thesis, serving as a contribution to both formulators and public policy implementers. It should be noted that the perceived discretion in their daily work, combined with interaction styles, availability of services and their attitudes towards programs effectively produces changes in the design of the programs investigated.

Key words: Policy Implementation, Street-level Bureaucracy, Conditional Cash Transfer Programs, Education

Exploring the Role of Ideas in Street-Level Bureaucracies: The Case of Canada's Compassionate Care Benefits Program.

Francesca Scala (Concordia University)

Street level bureaucrats play a critical role in the policy process. Through their discretionary actions, public servants influence how policy is interpreted and experienced by citizens 'on the ground'. While the influence street level bureaucrats wield in the policy process is now widely recognized, little is known about how normative ideas shape their implementation strategies and affect policy outcomes. Using the case of Canada's Compassionate Care Benefits program, this paper aims to remedy this gap by exploring if and how ideas matter in policy implementation. Drawing from policy implementation research and feminist social policy, the paper addresses three inter-related questions. First, how do the ideas that street level bureaucrats have about a policy issue or program shape their 'implementation work' and their interactions with clients? Second, how do normative ideas about gender, work and care influence whether street-level bureaucrats apply, adapt, or defy formal policy objectives? Third, how do normative ideas interact with local organizational imperatives to shape the implementation strategies of street level bureaucrats?

These questions are explored through a case study of Canada's Compassionate Care Benefits (CCB) program. As a case study, the CCB program is an ideal theoretical and empirical site for investigating the effects of normative ideas on street level behavior and policy outcomes for a number of reasons. First, from an implementation standpoint, the CCB program is largely viewed as a failure. While designed to provide income assistance to individuals who have to temporarily leave work to provide care for an ill family member, program uptake among eligible clients – mostly women - continues to be abysmally low. This suggests a gap between the program's formal intentions and the manner in which the program is understood and implemented in street-level bureaucracies. Second, street-level bureaucrats working in this area, i.e. social workers, have substantial discretion in how and when they refer citizens to the CCB program. Hence, we can examine what lies behind the use of discretion in frontline practice. Third, the CCB program is located in a policy domain – work-family reconciliation – that is highly gendered, both in terms of its underlying assumptions and its outcomes. This enables us to explore how normative ideas about gender, especially as they relate to work and care, shape the discretionary acts of street -level bureaucrats. Finally, by examining the implementation of the CCB program in the local setting of a government agency, we can bring to the fore the organizational and contextual factors that interact with normative ideas to shape implementation work on the frontlines.

Drawing on documentary analysis and in-depth qualitative interviews with frontline workers in social services agencies, this paper explores the micro-level dynamics of policy implementation and the role normative ideas play in how street-level workers behave, make choices and interact with citizens in local settings. In doing so, it offers new insights into the role of ideas in discretionary decision-making in street level bureaucracies.

Policy Friction: An Explanation of Policy Implementation Deviation in China

LEI QIAN (SUN YAT-SEN UNIVERSITY)

Implementation deviation is common and interesting in the process of policy implementation in China, and many policies are even deviated from the original intention of the policy because of implementation deviation. Implementation deviation mechanism is necessary to solve the challenges of policy implementation. The existing research mainly focuses on the perspective of different levels of government in china, and believes that the local decentralization system of authoritarian regime is the main reason for policy implementation deviation in China. The research is based on the perspective of government and enterprise, taking the risk compensation policy series of innovation as an example for case analysis. Combining the performance and mechanism of policy deviation in China, the research puts forward the conception of "policy friction" as a new interpretation for policy implementation deviation in China. The research shows that the policy implementation deviation has three characteristics: more dissatisfaction but less conflicts in policy, action changed but the policy text unchanged, implementation deviation but policy implementation can be sustained. The research argues that the deviation of policy implementation is "policy friction", which is the result of the interaction between the enterprises and government, since public policy is not only a tool of public affairs management but also a tool of government blame-avoiding. The attribute of government blame-avoiding leads to strong government in the process of policy formulation and implementation. Therefore, the opinions of enterprises can only be expressed in the way of non-implementation or modification. But as a public affairs management tool, the policy would rely on the participation of enterprises. "Policy Friction" is formed. The research tries to break through the limitations of policy implementation process, taking policy attribute as consideration, further explained the interaction mechanism between government and enterprise.