

What happens when politics meets reality? The importance of street-level bureaucracy approach for the analysis of homeless policies

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1. The Research

- ▶ ongoing PhD project
- ▶ The research addresses the ever present question of what happens **when politics meets reality**; it focuses on the implementation's level
- ▶ The approach chosen for analysis is **street-level bureaucracy** (Lipsky, 1980). This perspective differs from policy studies of “*what works*”, instead it seeks to illuminate *how* organizations work'. It challenges the researcher to consider the organizations and people who work in, as a fundamental part in order to understand policy.
- ▶ **case study**: homeless policies in the city of Turin, Italy
- ▶ The research analyze the concept of **professional discretion** and it emphasizes the importance of participant observation in order to encountering homeless people

2. The relevant elements of street-level bureaucracy approach...

- ▶ **public policy** cannot be adequately understood by looking exclusively at what legislators do in the higher spheres, since, in reality, public policy is created in the **crowded offices** and **daily interviews** of workers at the so-called street level (Lipsky, 1980/2010);
- ▶ **street-level bureaucrats** put their own imprint on policy [...] they can be defined as ***de facto policymakers***, since they informally construct and reconstruct policies through their everyday work (Brodkin, 2011);
- ▶ ‘Street-level bureaucracy approach is interested in what influences, and especially **what systematizes**, the **exercise of discretion** producing informal organizational routines that effectively constitute **policy on the ground**’ (Brodkin, 2011, p. i199).

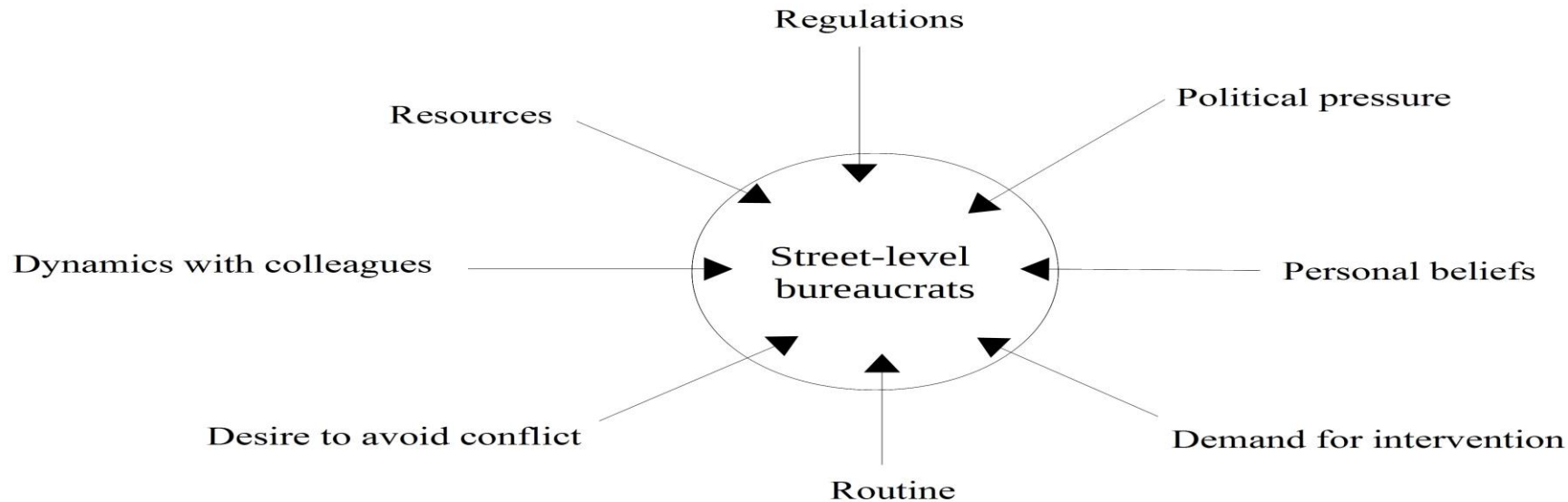
3. ...for the analysis of homeless policies

- ▶ focus on the interactions between the actors involved in the process of implementation;
- ▶ to highlight the political nature of the role of social workers, not just understanding them as anything but mere executors;
- ▶ connecting the **transformations of systems of social protection**, the **active role played by public discourses** in legitimating and shaping these transformations, and the **relationship between street level bureaucrats and recipients**;
- ▶ the level of practices is the level in which the **function of social control and consensus** of the policies are also performed (Dubois, 2009). In the context being examined, the consequences of street-level bureaucrats' work regarding the **guarantee of access to services** by potential recipients is investigated.

4. Social Workers as Street-level Bureaucrats

SLB crucial figures since they are able to manage the key moment in which rules become concrete decisions providing specific answers to individual cases: this is the meeting point between a **macro/micro dimension**

Illustration of the pressures on street-level bureaucrats



Source: Re-elaboration of Ham and Hill, 1986; Saruis, 2015.

5. Italian context

Italian Welfare System

- ▶ It is marked by **fragmented** and **categorical interventions** combating poverty
- ▶ The first national-level official document “*Guidelines to Combating Serious Adult Marginalization in Italy*” was approved only in November **2015**
- ▶ interventions foreseen for the homeless are **strongly discretionary** and left to the initiative of individual **local administrations**

Useful elements

- ▶ **Instituzionalization** of **non-profit** organizations in the Nineties
- ▶ **Enormous cuts** to social policies with the crisis in 2008
- ▶ Increase in services that have shifted from public to non-profit management
- ▶ The role of local administrations has changed: lacking their own adequate resources, promote and co-ordinate mixed networks of non-profit and profit subjects
- ▶ Numerous and diversified actors: in Italy we could speak of combating **poverties**

6. Observation and Participant Observation

- ▶ I am currently doing participant observation in two welfare offices and in two night shelters;
- ▶ Significant element: the direct access of users that characterize the welfare offices in which I am doing participant observation;
- ▶ These services are defined “low threshold”: the first point of contact between people living in situations of serious marginalization and public institutions;
- ▶ I noticed that people asking questions know that it is fundamental to create a sort of agreement with the social worker at the desk. Both social workers and homeless people perform a role. In that moment the street-worker is in a role of power. It is necessary for homeless people to learn “the rules of the game” quickly.

7. The discretion at work

- ▶ The political significance of SLO's derives from how they mediate policy and politics through their practices. **Practical is political** (Brodkin, 2013)
- ▶ Front-line organizations play an active and crucial role in determining 'who gets what, when and how' (Lasswell, 1936).
- ▶ In my case- study observing the discretion means to pay attention to **every opportunity that it is not guaranteed for all homeless people;**

8. Epistemological/Methodological issues

- ▶ The research supports an argument for reflexivity on the part of the researcher: **reflexivity** about the **dynamics of power** and about the asymmetries in the relationship between observer and observed;
- ▶ The question of **role** is central (**double glance**);
- ▶ From the methodological point of view I use **policy ethnography** (Schatz, 2009). The scientific aim and social usefulness of these kind of research is the tendency to **deconstruct prevailing categories** of understanding and reveal the relations of domination (Thomas, 1993);
- ▶ This approach is **highly contextual**;
- ▶ In my fieldwork I use **participant observation, in-depth interviews, vignettes**;

9. Concluding remarks

- ▶ The research is still in progress. Drawing on first evidences I can affirm the importance of Street-level Bureaucracy approach **to give visibility to some hidden forms of politics.**
- ▶ The **implementation's level** is the level in which is possible **encounter** not only numbers and statistics but **homeless people** with their needs and aspirations;
- ▶ At the same time it is a kind of research very demanding because a strong knowledge of the context is necessary, the access to the field is often really difficult and a lot of time is required. This is a different form of policymaking **difficult to observe** and it has **consequences difficult to assess and trace.**