

Social Workers and Policies for the Homeless: Dilemmas, Tensions, Restrictions

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The relevant elements of Street-Level Bureaucracy Approach for the Analysis of Homeless Policies

The Discretion at Work



Overview

Concluding Remarks

Methods and Techniques

The Research



Ongoing PhD project

Case study: **homeless policies** in the city of **Turin**, Italy

Focus on the implementation's level

The research addresses the ever present question of what happens **when politics meets reality**


Professional Discretion

Analysis on the concept of **professional discretion** and emphasis on the importance of the relation between social workers and homeless in order to understand policy

How organizations work

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' (Brodin).

The relevant elements of Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory...




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);

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).

...For the Analysis of Homeless Policies



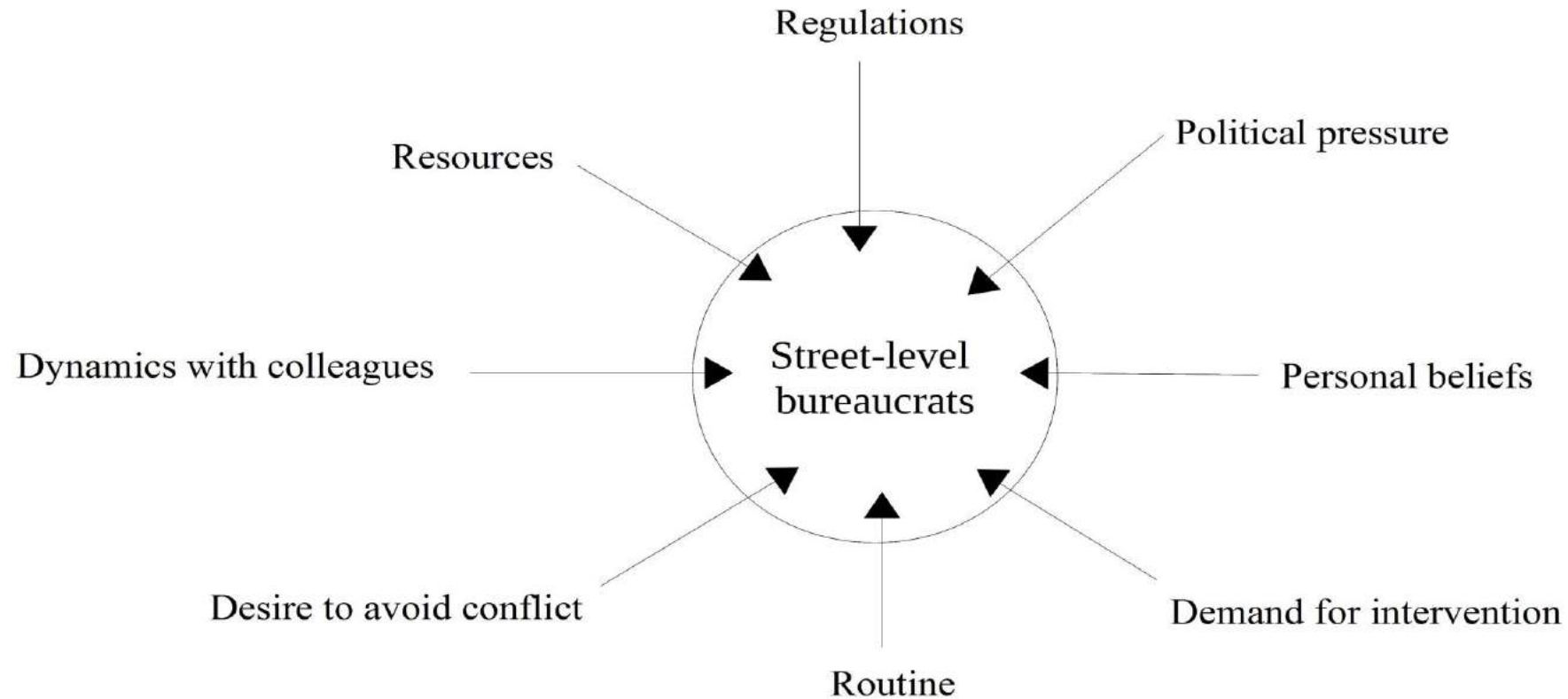
To highlight the **political nature** of the role of **social workers**, not just understanding them as anything but mere executors;

Connecting the **transformations of systems of social protection**, the **active role** played by **public discourses** in legitimating and shaping these transformations;

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.

Social Workers as Street-Level Bureaucrats

Illustration of the pressures on the street-level bureaucrats.



The 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**

Instituzionalization of non-profit organizations in the Nineties

Enormous **cuts to social policies** with the crisis in 2008 and increase in services that have shifted **from public to non-profit management**

Change in the role of **local administrations**: lacking their own adequate resources, coordinate mixed networks of non-profit and profit subjects. We can speak about combating **poverties**



The discretion at work



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;**



The political significance of SLO’s derives from how they mediate policy and politics through their practices. **Practical is political** (Brodkin, 2013).

'Etnographic methods provide a way of seeing big by looking small' (Brodkin, 2017, p. 133).

How to?

Methods and Techniques

Policy ethnography (Schatz, 2009) a research method that is based on close-up and real-time observation of actors involved in political processes' (Baiocchi and Connor, 2008). **Observation** permits data on interactions between policy "providers" and "receivers" to be generated in the **specific context** in which they occur

In progress :

participant observation in two welfare offices and in two night shelters

In progress:

15 **in-depth interviews** with social workers

15 **in- depth interviews** with homeless people

2 **In- depth interviews** with policymakers of Service for Adults in Difficulty (S.A.D.)

In progress:

During the interviews I propose 3 **vignettes** to each social worker

Night shelters

Open 7/7; 365 days a year; open from 8 p.m to 8 a.m.

Low threshold services, direct access of homeless people

Services:

Food, hygiene, beds, informations, support



The one designed for the homeless is another city, psychedelic, it is born around 8.00 p.m. and then die in the morning at 8.00 a.m. (Floris, 2007)

Night shelters

Access to the field

From the outside it may appear like this, a closed gate, the interior hidden from view...

Difficulty of access to the field

Previous experience as social worker: “double glance”



Night shelters

They are often anonymous places without signs indicating the presence of the shelter or signs with the name

In Turin shelters do not have a proper name , they take their name from the street in which they are located

Some shelters are masonry structures, others are containers



*'Short scenarios in written or pictorial form, **intended to elicit responses** to typical scenarios (Hill, 1997, p. 177)*

*A technique providing sketches of fictional scenarios. The respondent is invited to imagine, drawing on his/her own experience, how the characters in the scenario will behave. Vignettes thus collected situated **data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour** (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 183).*

Vignette Technique

Scenario 1

During beds assignment Mara, the social worker, leaves the office and approaches the gate. She wants to communicate to Yashin - a homeless man of about 40 years, in the night shelters for a couple of years - that unfortunately that evening there is no place for him. Not even in the other night shelters. Yashin gets angry and tells Mara that she does not like him and that when she is at work he can never sleep inside because she does not want him.

Scenario 2

Federico goes for the first time to a shelter on advice of his social assistant. Because he is new, the operators responsible for assigning the bed decide to give him a place for a week. Federico works in a restaurant without a contract and he never knows when his shift end, so he can not respect the agreed return times. The following night Massimo, the social worker, let Federico enter even after the agreed time. The next morning the homeless people who shared the room with Federico go to complain with Massimo about being disturbed in their sleep.

Stimulus

Scenario 1

- Could you comment the story?
- What did Mara do in your opinion?
- Why would Yashin react like this according to you?

Scenario 2

- Could you comment the story?
- Why, in your opinion, Massimo acted in this way?
- How he managed the complains?

Example of Vignette



Stimulus

Could you please
comment the scenario?

Preliminary results

Drawing on first evidences I can affirm **the importance of Street-level Bureaucracy approach to give visibility to some hidden forms of politics. Street-workers can mediate politics** by structuring the possibilities for advancing claims, asserting rights, and pursuing redress (Brodkin, 2013).

The aim is to make visible the **importance of the interaction** between social workers and potential beneficiaries **in shaping the policy making process.**

Participant observation - as tool of

analysis - is fundamental **to deconstruct the common discourse about homelessness and to shed light on asymmetries of power** that characterize the relationship between social workers and beneficiaries in the welcoming system for homeless people;

The level of implementation is fundamental because it is the level in which the real possibility of **access to rights** for homeless people is played.

Standardized system