

Street-level workers dealing with the temporalities of waiting in the Italian asylum system

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The Street-Level Bureaucracy (SLB) theoretical framework, introduced by Lipsky (2010[1980]) more than 40 years ago, gained considerable recognition from the scientific community especially in Northern Europe and in the United States of America. The most analyzed topics refer to the uses of discretion and coping strategies by frontline workers (Hill 2003; Hupe 2013; Tummers et al. 2015; Raaphorst 2018), the negotiation of professional identity within the bureaucratic encounter (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Dubois 2010), and the effects of service delivery reforms, such as New Public Management in the 1980s (Brodkin 2011), New Public Governance, and recently, coproduction (Breit et al. 2018; Larsen and Caswell 2020) on street-level work.

However, the adoption of the SLB theory in the Different Souths of the world is still scarce, but a debate about these contexts is starting to manifest itself (Lotta et al., 2022; Lipsky, 2021; Leonardi et al., forthcoming). With the term “Different Souths” we refer to the Southern European countries, South America, Africa and Asia, i.e., all the underexplored contexts where SLB theory could be adopted fruitfully to study public service delivery. Such contexts diverge from the Northern American and European ones in terms of welfare state models (Barberis et al., 2019), the role of the State, citizens’ trust in the public administration (Lotta et al., 2022), degree of digitalization (Bellini and Raspanti, 2023), and public administration functioning. Scholars have begun to highlight the potentiality of SLB theory to study the impacts of neo-liberalism, economic crisis, population impoverishment, immigration and emigration processes, development programmes (e.g., NextGenEU, and United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals), and COVID-19 pandemic on frontline workers work practices. This is the case of Brazil (Eiró 2019; Lotta 2021), Mexico (Ramirez 2021), Nigeria (Ukeje 2021) and South Africa (Gaede 2016), for example.

This contribution aims to explore the theoretical, methodological and practical implications of the increasing mobilisation of the analytical framework of the street bureaucracy approach. The research questions underlying the work are the following: i) how widespread is the SLB theory in the Different Souths of the world? ii) what are the main policy areas considered in these studies? iii) what emerges from SLB-informed research in atypical contexts? And therefore, what are the characteristics of the discretion of SLBs who work in contexts characterized by fragmented welfare systems? What challenges does the adoption of the street-level approach in atypical contexts pose?

The paper aims at reviewing SLB-informed contributions to offer a comprehensive view on the most recent advancement in the stream of SLB literature that focus on Southern countries with a scoping review of the most recent contributions which use SLB perspective to analyse local dimension in transition contexts. We conducted the search “street-level bureaucrat* OR street-level-bureaucracy AND development countr*” in Scopus and Google Scholar databases.

The paper contributes to the theoretical and empirical advancement of the field by getting a general picture of what exists on the subject at an international level. The first results demonstrate that different institutional environments have important effects on the strategies adopted by street-level bureaucrats and affect politics and their clients.