Literature Review
Meeting (or not) at the street level? A literature review on street-level research in public management, social policy and social work

Nothdurfter U., Hermans K. Meeting (or not) at the street level? A literature review on street-level research in public management, social policy and social work

This literature review analyses the adoption and development of a street-level perspective in public management, social policy and social work. The last years have seen a prominent revival of a perspective based on Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach in the debates conducted within all three disciplinary fields. Based on 71 key publications in public management, social policy and social work, the review analyses the adoption of the street-level bureaucracy approach during the period 2005–2015, pointing out the main themes of the debate within, as well as overlaps and differences between, the three disciplines. The findings show the potential of better integrating the different perspectives and taking stock of the articulated debate. Lastly, the review discerns a common viewpoint for further street-level research, emphasising its importance for the critical analysis and understanding of street-level work as a vital dimension of responsive and accountable institutions and as a decisive moment to shape positive policy outcomes on the ground.

Key Practitioner Message: • *The use of discretion by frontline practitioners and their role as policy actors on the ground has become an important focus of research;* • *This literature review shows that the debate has gone far beyond discussing discretion as an all-or-nothing issue, pointing out both positive and negative aspects of discretion and developing comprehensive frameworks to explain the use of discretion at the street-level;* • *However, street-level research has traditionally rather neglected the notion of professionalism. The social work literature brings in the perspective of professionalism; more research efforts are needed to better explore and explain how professionalism matters in relation to challenges and dilemmas of different policy and practice fields.*

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Although public management, social policy and social work are closely interrelated, their debates have been characterised by different perspectives as well as different theoretical and methodological approaches. Especially in relation to social policy and social work, it has been pointed out that, despite their mutual dependence, their relations are an underexposed matter and their perspectives and debates barely ever converge (Green & Clarke, 2016; Keating, 2015; Ramon, 1998; Weiss, Gal, & Katan, 2006).

However, the prominent revival of Michael Lipsky's (1980/2010) street-level bureaucracy approach during the last 15 years has done much to identify a common feature of the debates in public management, social policy and social work. Lipsky's approach addresses the dilemmas faced by the individuals at the frontline of public services. An important contribution of Lipsky's approach is that he has highlighted how the use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, the devices

and strategies they apply in order to cope with work pressures and uncertainties and the decisions they eventually make, effectively become the public policies they have to carry out in practice. As Lipsky (1980/2010, p. xiii) states,

> ... public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course, but they do not represent the complete picture. To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. Further (...) policy conflict is not only expressed as the contention of interest groups, as we have come to expect. It is also located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing.

This approach is, of course, relevant to all three fields as it concerns the implementation question, the outcomes of policy, street-level discretion and frontline behaviour in street-level organisations. This literature review traces the adoption of the street-level bureaucracy approach within public management, social policy and social work, and identifies points of contacts, intersections and common concerns between the different perspectives.

Methodology

The review identifies key contributions based on a street-level perspective from public management, social policy and social work research published during the period 2005–2015. The study analyses how the street-level perspective is applied and how debates in public management, social policy and social work contribute to its further development.

Accordingly, first of all, a systematic literature search in public management, social policy and social work journals covered by Web of Science Citation Indexing was carried out. The search was performed by means of the Social Sciences Citation Index (Web of Science) database. The keywords used for the database search were *street-level bureaucracy, discretion* and *Lipsky*, and they were used both separately and in their different combinations. As a first step, this database search yielded a picture of the amount of literature available and the sources of relevant articles.

In a second step, it was necessary to identify the main places of publication and to reduce the amount of literature to the contributions most likely to impact on the discussion. For this purpose, it was decided to concentrate on the articles from the journals of each discipline with: (i) the highest number of contributions as the first criterion, and (ii) the highest impact factor as the second criterion. Based on this choice, the journals taken into account are the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, the *Public Management Review*, the *International Journal of Public Administration*, *Administration and Society* and the *Public Administration Review* for the field of public management, and the *Journal of Social Policy*, *Social Policy and Administration*, *Social Policy and Society* and *Critical Social Policy* for the field of social policy. For the field of social work, the journals taken into account are *The British Journal of Social Work* and the *European Journal of Social Work*. As a search within the field of social work turns up an extensive amount of contributions, although not all of them being central to the debate, the further analysis includes only the social work articles with at least one of the keywords either in the title or in the abstract. For social work, the analysis also includes a special section and a special issue of two other journals, one on negotiating dilemmas in the practices of street-welfare work (*International Journal of Social Welfare*) and one on labour market policy at the street level (*Social Work & Society*; not covered by Social Sciences Citation Indexing).

The total number of articles taken into account for the detailed analysis is 71, of which 25 concern Public Management, 11 Social Policy and 35 Social Work (Table 1).

As the aim of the review is to identify how the street-level bureaucracy approach has been adopted and developed within the three disciplines, a transversal analysis of the sample of articles was carried out. For each discipline, the analysis points out the use of the street-level bureaucracy perspective, highlighting the most important themes and aspects of concern in the contributions' theoretical and empirical engagement. Against this background, the analysis identifies intersections and common themes of street-level research, showing how the street-level perspective connects the different fields.

Findings

The following sections present the main findings of the review for the fields of public management, social policy and social work. For each field, transversal themes of the debate are pointed out and the main points of the respective contributions are briefly outlined.

Public management

Contributions from public management journals adopt the street-level bureaucracy approach as an important theoretical reference for a nuanced debate, characterised by the following three key themes: (i) discretion as a positive or negative characteristic (including

Table 1. The article identification procedure.

1. Electronic database search	
Database	Social sciences citation index (Web of Science) database
Keywords (Used both separately as well as in their different combinations)	*Street-level bureaucracy* (and/or) *Discretion* (and/or) *Lipsky*
2. Identification of the most important places of publication	
1st criterion	**Number of contributions**
2nd criterion	**Journal impact factor**
3. Selection of the articles	
Public management	**25 articles** from *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* *Public Management Review* *International Journal of Public Administration* *Administration and Society* *Public Administration Review*
Social policy	**11 articles** from *Journal of Social Policy* *Social Policy and Administration* *Social Policy and Society* *Critical Social Policy*
Social work	**35 articles** from *The British Journal of Social Work* *European Journal of Social Work* + Special insert ('Mini Symposium') of the *International Journal of Social Welfare* (vol. 19, issue 3) + Special issue of *Social Work & Society* (vol. 13, issue 1) (not covered by Social Sciences Citation Indexing)

discretion as a determinant of implementation success), street-level workers as entrepreneurs and instigators of policy change, the use of discretion as cause of non-take up of social rights and benefits); (ii) the determinants of the use of discretion; and (iii) the negative impact of New Public Management on street-level work.

Discretion as a positive or negative characteristic. A first group of articles deals with discretion as both a positive and negative aspect of implementation. Based on a large survey of health professionals, Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, and Musheno (2015) discuss discretion as having a positive impact on implementation willingness because street-level bureaucrats are better able to tailor their decisions and the procedures to the specific situations and needs of their clients. Arnold (2015) and Gofen (2014) also portray the positive effects of street-level workers on policies. Arnold (2015) shows how street-level workers can be 'street-level policy entrepreneurs' who seek to develop or adopt policy innovations intended to improve the implementation processes. Gofen (2014)

shows that divergence from policy goals is not necessarily a negative characteristic of street-level work. On the contrary, some types of divergence tend to trigger policy change. By contrast, Brodkin and Maimundar (2010) highlight the negative consequences of 'procedural discretion' as operational practices that can add hidden costs to claiming benefits and services to the extent that they are complicated, confusing or cumbersome.

Determinants of the use of discretion. Most articles within the public management debate seek to pinpoint the factors that determine the use of discretion. Either they identify the effects of specific variables or they develop comprehensive models of different factors that determine the implementation process and the use of discretion.

With regard to the first type, a number of studies focus on the effects of face-to-face interactions (Keiser, 2010; Wenger & Wilkins, 2009), the local political constituency (Stensöta, 2012), the racial background of street-level workers (Watkins-Hayes, 2011), their programme perception (Isett, Morrissey, & Topping, 2006) and their perception of the deservingness of clients (Riccucci, 2005). Other studies focus on managerial decisions with regard to job design (Hill, 2006), organisational networks (Chung-Lae, 2005) and fields (Garrow & Grusky, 2013), team characteristics (Foldy & Buckley, 2010), organisational socialisation (Oberfeld, 2010) and types of professions (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). Keiser (2010) suggests that in bureaucracies without physical interaction with clients, client assessments might be less important than in more traditional street-level bureaucracies. Isett et al. (2006) show how perceptions of system changes affect attitudes towards the work environment, even if the new system is more effective and efficient. Riccucci (2005) shows that workers will break or ignore rules for clients perceived as 'worthy', but in the case of 'unworthy' clients they may use rules to protect themselves and to withhold or minimise services. Garrow and Grusky (2013) show that institutional logics supply the moral categories and legitimate practices that play a key role in shaping the quality of services provided to vulnerable client groups. Oberfeld (2010) adds an analysis of how new workers are introduced in the organisation. Entrants shaped by peers and experienced workers are less likely to be default rule followers, while those influenced by training and instructors are more likely to be default rule followers. Chung-Lae (2005) shows how variations in perceptions of effective implementation depend on the experience, expertise and entrepreneurial skills of professionals and on reported increases in authority devolved to local implementation networks. Tummers and Bekkers (2014) highlight differences in the street-level behaviour of different professions. Healthcare

professionals and teachers are historically seen as 'helping professions', while police officers – and increasingly social workers – are more focused on sanctioning and disciplining and are far less inclined to break the rules than are healthcare professionals and teachers.

Comprehensive frameworks on factors determining implementation are developed by Jewell and Glaser (2006), Hupe and Buffat (2014) and Rice (2013). The analytic framework by Jewell and Glaser (2006) distinguishes six factors: authority, role expectations, workload, client contact, knowledge and expertise, and incentives. Hupe and Buffat (2014) call for more international-comparative research to understand and explain the 'public service gap'. Their model enables the systematic capture of macro- and meso-contextual influences, thereby enhancing comparative research on street-level bureaucracy. Rice (2013) combines a street-level perspective with micro-institutionalism. Her comparative contribution identifies different layers that influence the implementation process of activation policies: the professional identity of the caseworker; caseworker's ideas of the worthiness of clients; organisational characteristics; and wider political, economic, cultural and social developments and institutions that frame and/or restrict the actions that are relevant, appropriate or permitted in certain types of situations.

New public management and accountability. A third group of articles deals with the challenge of accountability in a context of New Public Management. Hupe and Hill (2007) rethink the concept of accountability of street-level bureaucracies, given the shift from government to governance. They introduce three types of accountability, namely 'public-administrative accountability', 'professional accountability' (peers and professional organisations) and 'participatory accountability' (various forms of client-based and citizen-based evaluation), as well as three action scales of practising accountability (the system, the organisation and the individual). Street-level bureaucrats are confronted with different expectations on the part of different actors and must constantly weigh how to act (see also Marinetto, 2011). Hupe and Hill (2007) conclude with a plea for more comparative empirical research that analyses how these accountabilities are practised at the street-level. Brodkin (2007) focuses on the effects of performance measures on the actions of street-level workers, stating that '(p)aradoxically, performance measures may give the appearance of transparency, but actually obscure a full understanding of how agencies work and the real content of what they are producing' (p. 332). Based on empirical examples, she shows how performance measures distort performance and erode the responsiveness of community-based organisations to their constituents. Street-level research, by contrast, helps to understand the logic of street-level practices and to explore the policy experience at the street-level. In a more recent article, Brodkin (2011) further integrates these insights into an analytic framework for understanding the street-level logic of choice and constraints under new managerialism. She states that street-level practitioners do not just *respond* to performance incentives, they also use their discretion to *adjust* to them, producing informal practices that are substantively different from – and more diverse than – what policymakers or managers tend to recognise. Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011) similarly study the effects of performance measures as disciplinary regimes. They conclude that performance pressures promote the use of sanctions to discipline the poor because they are a form of coercive power that drives and directs action, and because they are a form of productive power that shapes subjective understandings, perceptions and choices at the frontlines (Soss et al., 2011).

The public management literature shows – interestingly – a nuanced debate that highlights both the risks and potential of street-level discretion as well as relevant factors that determine its use, while also pointing out the negative consequences of New Public Management strategies for street-level practice.

Social policy

In the social policy literature, the street-level bureaucracy perspective is applied in studies regarding the following social policy domains: income support and activation, personalisation and the use of individual budgets in adult and eldercare, child protection, homelessness. The transversal thematic analysis of the contributions highlights two main themes: (i) types of street-level bureaucrats and factors influencing the practices of street-level workers, and (ii) the effects of street-level bureaucrats and bureaucracies on social policy outcomes.

Types of street-level bureaucrats and factors determining the use of discretion. A first type of study focuses on the effects of managerialism on the use of discretion. Ellis (2011) reviews four of her own studies to analyse to what extent Lipsky's framework is still valid, given the breakthrough of New Public Management strategies. She develops a taxonomy of frontline discretion in adult social care based on two dimensions: professionalism versus managerialism, and formal versus informal discretion. This taxonomy leads to four types of workers: practitioners, street-level bureaucrats, bureau professionals, paternalistic professionals. She concludes that the interaction between both dimensions of the taxonomy

and its effects on the street-level workers differ between policy fields and can be determined only through empirical inquiry. Jessen and Tufte (2014) scrutinise the Norwegian shift to activation policies and focus on the effects of managerialism on social work practice. They establish that the discretionary power of trained social workers is decreasing and challenged by the push for uniform practices.

A second aspect concerns the decentralisation of social policies and, as a consequence, how the local construction of deservingness of clients influences the use of discretion. Altreiter and Leibetseder (2015) examine the two main administrative tasks of the contemporary social assistance scheme in Austria: checking for eligibility ('people processing') and effecting change in the client's behaviour ('people changing'). Given the strong degree of decentralisation of social assistance policies in Austria, local constructions of deservingness are an important factor influencing both the use of discretion and the social policy outcomes. Further, in the *Journal of Social Policy* there is a debate on the attitudes of caseworkers in activation policies. Dunn (2013) uses interviews to show the existence of a welfare dependency culture in the United Kingdom, while Wright (2013) reinterprets his results, stating that popular ideas on poverty also influence social caseworkers. In other words, she too points to the construction of deservingness of clients.

Third, Cosmo (2012) states that rules do not necessarily lead to a stronger protection of social assistance claimants. On the contrary, in the contemporary neoliberal context, rules developed by policymakers are more likely to be geared towards making payments conditional on client activation and restricting the generosity and leniency of frontline staff.

A fourth aspect is the interaction between client characteristics and types of street-level workers and its effect on the implementation of activation policies. Djuve and Kavli (2015) develop a framework that distinguishes between two ideal types of service users: 'pawns' (passive users) and 'queens' (autonomous users), and two types of service providers: care-oriented 'carers' and rule-oriented 'clerks'. When carers are confronted with 'pawns', they tend to *postpone* decisions and wait until the service user expresses stronger agency. When encountering disagreeing 'queens', they are inclined to *give in* to the wishes of the service user, even though they might not think the goals and measures suggested by the service user are the best ones. The 'clerks', on the other hand, tend to *decide* on behalf of the 'pawns' and to *overrule* wishes from disagreeing 'queens'.

A fifth issue pertains to neoliberalism and the privatisation of welfare services. Suvarierol (2015) shows that street-level bureaucrats become the authoritative faces of government who treat welfare subjects without empathy. As such, these private state agents close their eyes to the social suffering that welfare subjects endure and contribute to the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful. Paradoxically, they tend to be precarious citizen-workers of the neoliberal state themselves.

Effects of street-level bureaucrats on social policy outcomes. A second type of article is concerned with the effects of street-level practices on social policy outcomes. Toerien, Sainsbury, Drew, and Irvine (2013) examine the implementation of the personalisation agenda. They differentiate between substantive and procedural personalisation, or *what* is done and *how* it is done. Combining the two types leads to diverse results with regard to the extent of personalisation. Alden (2015) focuses on outcomes in homelessness services in England, showing that street-level workers either witness or practice gatekeeping in response to a lack of resources and a target-driven environment. The tightening of the budget in combination with growing numbers of homeless people leads to 'negative discretion' (unlawful discretionary practices that contravene the housing law). By contrast, Watts (2014) shows that legal rights have a strong impact on the empowerment of homeless people. The Scottish case demonstrates that having clear and simple legal rights minimises provider discretion and enhances the assertiveness of service users. Comparing Alden and Watts, it emerges that it is not just the degree of discretion, but also, and especially, the national policy goals that affect social citizenship. Murray (2006), in the study of the implementation of the Home Supervision programme in Scottish child protection, concludes that not only workers but also clients shape policy. A striking result is that non-compliance or lack of cooperation can lead to the termination of the order. For example, instead of prompting a stricter or more compelling supervision by child protection, in a particular case a family's refusal to cooperate caused the intervention to be terminated; so the families who probably needed more supervision in fact managed to escape from child protection. Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2012), analysing the effects of different types of activation work on the effectiveness of activation, reveal some evidence in favour of a professional design of activation work. A professional approach is reflected in a more personalised approach, a better match of clients with services and a more effective use of sanctions. At the same time, Van Berkel and Van der Aa (2012) stress that professional activation work is under pressure because of the dominance of managerialism in the services which elicits administrative coping strategies.

The social policy literature connects tendencies in social policy development with practices and

interactions at the frontline of services, showing an increasing interest in the role of street-level workers and their use of discretion as an important dimension for social policy outcomes.

Social work

Within the social work literature, the street-level bureaucracy perspective has been taken up broadly, with references to both Lipsky's classic study and a seminal article by Evans and Harris (2004). The latter article uses Lipsky's work to review the then-dominant and dichotomised debate on the curtailment or continuation of professional discretion in social work, particularly as part of the imperatives of New Public Management. Evans and Harris (2004) show that both the curtailment and the continuation per-spective tend to treat professional discretion as an either/or issue. They argue that the proliferation of rules and regulations should not automatically be equated with greater control over professional discre-tion. Furthermore, they question the assumption, found particularly in the curtailment literature, that professional discretion is necessarily positive by pointing out that 'in some circumstances it may be an important professional attribute, in others it may be a cloak for political decision-makers to hide behind or it may be an opportunity for professional abuse of power' (Evans & Harris, 2004, p. 871).

Subsequently, the street-level bureaucracy approach is applied in a number of studies in different fields of social work practice. The articles taken into account here address questions in the fields of child and family work, adult social work and eldercare, social support practices and employment-related services and social work in the context of immigration. The transversal analysis of the articles reveals the following key themes: (i) dilemmas and complexity of social work practice; (ii) the impact of managerialism; (iii) the com-plex and multilayered factors that influence the use of discretion, with particular attention for the role of pro-fessionalism; and (iv) the role of social workers as policymakers.

Dilemmas and complexity of social work practice. The street-level bureaucracy approach is used to shed light on the everyday reality of social workers charged with implementing public policy in different practice fields. Hjörne, Juhila, and van Nijnatten (2010) underline that these studies share the idea that there are no straightforward solutions to the central dilemmas of street-level work and that street-level practices have to be approached and studied as an empirical matter. Although the focus of the studies is on the detailed analysis of street-level practices at the micro-level, they make visible how policy and organisational frameworks are present in the here and now of street-level work and how the resulting dilemmas are negotiated and with what consequences (Hjörne et al., 2010). Hall, Slembrouck, Haigh, and Lee (2010) analyse how child welfare workers nego-tiate their professional role, showing that the ways professionals construct clients' needs and attend to professional interventions are highly complex and socially negotiated. Barberis and Boccagni (2014) concentrate on the role of professional social workers in managing immigrant clients' needs against a back-ground of residual welfare provision, inconsistent policy frameworks and piecemeal integration. Analy-sing encounters with irregular migrants in Sweden, Cuadra and Staaf (2014) show how street-level staff in public social services face contradictory demands concerning international and national regulations and, consequently, face legal ambiguities open to discre-tionary powers. Analysing service provision for post-care adults seeking access to their care records, Kirton, Feast, and Goddard (2011) point out a series of tensions, for example those surrounding questions of ownership of files and their content and rights of information, as well as between administrative and professional aspects in handling requests to access care records. Kjørstad (2005) focuses on municipal social welfare offices in Norway as gatekeeping insti-tutions, pointing out the challenging ethical position of social workers charged with the implementation of a workfare policy. van Berkel, van der Aa, and van Gestel (2010) explore the tension between administra-tive aspects and professional challenges in activating social support recipients in Dutch local welfare agen-cies, showing that the discretion of frontline workers has increased significantly. Ash (2013) presents the findings of a study carried out in a social services department in Wales in order to identify realities and constraints of policy implementation to protect older people from abuse. The author uses the metaphor of a cognitive mask to describe how social workers manage the dissonance arising from dilemmas inher-ent in the structure of their work and suggests how this mask could be removed. Tuurnas, Stenvall, Rannisto, Harisalo, and Hakari (2015) underline that the complexity of interactions among street-level workers and detached professional frameworks should be kept in mind when co-production is applied as a policy intended to improve and deliver public services.

These contributions adopt the street-level bureauc-racy perspective to point out professional challenges in different practice fields. They go beyond a narrow interpretation of frontline workers as those whose interest is merely in minimising dangers and discom-forts or maximising income and personal

gratifications of their job, pointing out dilemmas and complexities in professional and ethical terms.

Impact of managerialism on social work practice. The central preoccupation with managerialism from a social work perspective concerns its impact on professional discretion and autonomy. However, the debate has gone beyond a mere curtailment discourse, with contributions analysing the significance of managerial reforms and new challenges resulting from the introduction of new management and decision-making tools.

Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, and Pithouse (2010) examine how social workers organise their practice within the shift towards a managerial model of control. They point out 'the emergence of a pattern of formally conformant behaviour in which the letter of the organisational law is obeyed but without genuine commitment' (p. 310). Ponnert and Svensson (2015/2016) point out that increased standardisation has been seen as a way to reduce uncertainty and increase the legitimacy of human service organisations, but at the expense of traditional professional discretion. They show, however, that standardisation continues to put high demands on professionals and on their ways of making use of professional discretion. Standardisation in human service organisations requires professionals to be capable of handling a mix of partially new logics without completely giving up discretionary power and professional judgement. Hoybye-Mortensen (2015) focuses on decision making regarding eligibility as one of the cornerstones of welfare provision. Based on a qualitative cross-sector study of three decision-making tools used in employment services, child protection and elder services in Denmark, the author shows that decision-making tools based on a theoretical foundation have greater impact on caseworkers' room for discretion than those based on an understanding of information as simply neutral and objective. Ellis (2014) argues that the increase of risk management technology in adult social work strengthens the routinisation of decision making at the expense of traditional bureaucratic and professional standards. At the same time, little is done to discourage informal strategies that have long been used to control the contingencies of frontline practice. Analysing the street-level implementation of workfare in USA, Brodkin (2015) underlines that regimes of managerial comprise more than technical strategies for improving efficiency, effectiveness and accountability. Brodkin (2015) looks beyond the assumed political neutrality of such reforms to show how they play out on the ground and can skew policy in systematic and politically significant ways.

These studies contribute to a more refined understanding of the impact of managerialism on professional practices and on unsolved issues and ongoing and new professional challenges. Managerial reforms, processes of standardisation and the introduction of new tools and technologies have profoundly changed professional practice. They have not, however, (completely) eliminated discretionary space and powers.

Complex and multilayered factors that influence the use of discretion in social work practice. A third important theme focuses on different factors that influence the use of discretion in social work practice. Evans and Harris (2006) challenge a dichotomised view of two alternative forms of practitioners' response to the constraints of street-level bureaucracies, namely adapting working practices to the disfavour of service users or challenging work conditions to achieve better practice. The authors suggest that, rather than as a fixed model, Lipsky's work should be approached as a tentative analytical framework to examine contexts, circumstances and statuses of practitioners in order to understand how these different factors shape specific forms of street-level behaviour. Östberg (2014) discusses factors that influence decision making in frontline child welfare in Sweden, showing that high work pressure increases the focus on gatekeeping activities in deciding eligibility for scarce services. In this context, demands of protection and welfare issues are handled by individualising difficult social conditions and by using consensual ideology. Viewed in an institutionalised context, Östberg (2014, p. 63) points out that 'social workers' discretion can be explained as a rational way for practice to handle organisational limitations, restricted resources and changing policies'. Söderberg, Ståhl, and Emilsson (2015) seek to understand why care managers normalise a restrictive approach when older people consider moving to a residential care home. The authors distinguish two dimensions of discretion given by structural aspects as choices between different alternatives, and epistemic aspects as practical reasoning under conditions of indeterminacy. Ellis (2014) applies a taxonomy of discretion, identifying four types of discretionary behaviour depending on the extent to which frontline practice is either formalised from the top down or shaped by bottom-up decision making, and on the type of formalisation, namely managerialism and professionalism. Ellis shows that discretionary decision making is constrained by the routinisation of assessment practice as well as differentially influenced by managerialist disciplines and professional values and methods.

Among the authors who have contributed to the debate in social work, Evans's work on street-level

bureaucracy and the use of discretion stands out. In a contribution published in 2011, he offers a critical examination of Lipsky's account of discretion, arguing that Lispky gave insufficient attention to the role of professionalism and its impact on the relationship between managers and frontline workers, as well as on the nature of discretion. Drawing on a qualitative case study of adult social work within a local authority, Evans (2011) illustrates how the professional status of social workers influences both the nature of their discretion and the way in which discretion is managed. Against this background, Evans (2011) argues that in relation to social work practice, Lipsky's approach needs to be augmented by other perspectives, such as professionalism. In another article, Evans (2013) argues that even in rule-saturated organisations, social workers retain significant freedom in their work. In this context, a key dimension of discretion is given by the ways in which professionals relate to organisational rules. Evans (2013) identifies two of ideal-typical groups of social workers. While one group tends to emphasise the importance of rules with their inherent authority and clarity, which reduces the need for discretion, the other group focuses on rules more as a means to an end. Within the latter perspective, authority lies in the compliance with the desired goal, requiring wide-ranging discretion in the use of rules. Furthermore, Evans (2015/2016) points out that Lipsky's analysis is focused on the problem of frontline discretion but disregards the discretion of senior managers. Evans draws on a qualitative study to show that senior managers can also exercise significant discretion, which contributes to the conditions of policy confusion and contradiction as well as to the inadequacy of resources of service provision. In this context, discretion may be used by frontline practitioners to bridge the policy implementation gap created by the discretional power of senior managers.

Scourfield (2015) shows that in order to understand how policy is mediated at the point of delivery, it is necessary to go beyond the examination of the practices within a single bureaucracy. Based on a case study of how older people's care-home placements are reviewed, Scourfield (2015) shows that 'the exercise of discretion is multi-layered and dispersed among multiple stakeholders, blurring accountability for decision-making and making the task of empowering older care home residents more complex' (Scourfield, 2015, p. 914). Going even further, Carson, Chung, and Evans (2015) ask whether the street-level bureaucracy perspective is still relevant in post-state bureaucratic delivery contexts. Carson et al. (2015) show that neither New Public Management contractualism nor the social contractualism and network governance of post-neoliberal collaborations have resolved the variations that derive from worker discretion and the ensuing implementation gaps. Contractualism rather 'adds more layers and interstices, where multiple points of discretion need to be documented and understood' (Carson et al., 2015, p. 181).

These contributions highlight the complex and multilayered factors that influence the use of discretion. These factors relate to the dimension of professional status and agency of both street-level workers and managers, as well as to the dimensions of organisational and governance frameworks and delivery contexts.

Social workers as policymakers. A fourth key theme relates to social workers' role as policymaker. Making use of discretionary spaces and powers, social workers negotiate between policy goals and service users' needs, interpret and adapt policies to concrete individual situations and serve as gatekeepers in the access to scarce services and benefits.

Ellis (2007), Hoybye-Mortensen (2015) and Östberg (2014) focus on the role of social workers in deciding on the allocation of scarce services and benefits to the 'right' clients. Similarly, Kjørstad (2005) and Söderberg et al. (2015) point out the role of social workers and care managers as gatekeepers, while Kirton et al. (2011) show the variations in the street-level implementation of a policy regarding access to childcare files. Kjørstad (2005) shows that social workers use their freedom to make decisions in a very active way, especially by not imposing conditions on benefit recipients. Van Berkel et al. (2010) emphasise the increased discretion of frontline workers in the context of activation and, given the low professional institutionalisation of activation work, the risks of highly individualised, unpredictable and non-transparent practices. Barberis and Boccagni (2014) and Cuadra and Staaf (2014) describe the crucial role of street-level workers in managing immigrant clients' needs against the background of inconsistent and ambiguous policies and legislative frameworks. Carson et al. (2015) underline that implementation (also in the third sector) is more than just a passive individual process or a reaction to management decisions in the context of a linear causal process. Instead, it involves negotiating and creating meaning in the interaction between the professional and the client, as well as between the profession, the team and the organisation.

These contributions underline social workers' role as policy actor and, more generally, the political nature of social work practice. Social policies do not work automatically; their internal ambiguities permit and require considerable discretion for their implementation and street-level delivery.

All in all, the social work literature presents a wide range of contributions that adopt the street-level bureaucracy approach to shed light on dilemmas and complexities in social work practice, to engage with the impact of managerialism and the use of discretion and to underline the role of social workers as policy-makers on the ground.

Discussion

This review confirms that Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy approach has become a central point of reference in the fields of public management, social policy and social work. In all three fields, numerous studies inform an ongoing and increasingly nuanced debate on implementation and delivery processes, on the role of frontline workers and managers and on their use of discretion in street-level organisations. The review thus confirms that there is a broad spectrum of common concerns and intersecting themes in the debates of public management, social policy and social work. At the same time, the dialogue and the mutual exchange between the different fields and perspectives still seems rather limited. With a few exceptions of 'border-crossing' authors, both receptions of, and contributions between, the three fields remain below their potential. This limitation should be overcome in order to better integrate the debates, to exchange specific concerns and findings between the different fields and to define a common viewpoint for the further development and outlook of street-level research.

Within the social work literature, some authors, such as Evans (2011, 2013, 2015/2016), Scourfield (2015) and Carson et al. (2015) have contributed to the conceptual refinement of the street-level perspective by including the notion of professionalism and by showing how the use of discretion is not only an issue of contingent frontline behaviour, but also a more complex phenomenon that involves managers, organisational settings and rules within, and also between, different bureaucracies in changing policy and governance frameworks. Especially the concept of professionalism is traditionally rather neglected in the street-level bureaucracy approach. Contributions within the social work debate refer to the notion of professionalism, pointing out that professional commitment is not just a mask for self-interest (Carson et al., 2015) but is also an important factor for the use of discretion and that it can, therefore, make a difference in dealing with the dilemmas of street-level practice. However, as many contributions remain rather vague about how professionalism comes into play, more research is needed to elucidate how professionalism in terms of both ethics and knowledge is defined and how it matters in relation to street-level behaviour in different policy and practice fields. Further developing and bringing in this aspect could be an important contribution to the debate from a social work perspective.

The theoretical and empirical developments within public management and social policy literature have yielded two outstanding insights. The first is the explicit consideration of the negative effects of discretion, not only in terms of implementation hurdles, but also in terms of negative outcomes for service users. Brodkin and Maimundar (2010) write about 'procedural discretion', referring to the informal practices of street-level workers to increase the cost of benefit claiming for vulnerable groups. They also link these micro-practices to broader organisational and, by extension, macro-level priorities, such as reducing the number of welfare claimants. Alden (2015) speaks of negative discretion, which refers to unlawful discretionary practices that contravene legal foundations. These negative effects of the use of discretion can be linked to factors on the meso- or macro-level, such as the tightening of budgets and the different ways that street-level workers define and operationalise their role and their view on the deservingness of clients (Djuve & Kavli, 2015). The second insight, developed mainly within the public management perspective, derives from comprehensive and holistic frameworks to explain the use of discretion (Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Rice, 2013). Further, both Hupe and Buffat (2014) and Jewell and Glaser (2006) advocate an international-comparative perspective and more comparative street-level research.

In general, the social policy perspective is interested in the role of the street-level in relation to policy outcomes. As the respective literature shows for different policy fields, what happens at the street-level shapes policy possibilities and the ways policies eventually interact with their target groups. This is probably shown best in regard to the street-level delivery of activation policies that can be more or less supportive and enabling, or disciplining and punitive (Altreiter & Leibetseder, 2015; Van Berkel & Van der Aa, 2012).

In the end, the importance of the street-level in shaping policy possibilities might also be the common point of reference in defining a shared viewpoint and effort for further street-level research. There is now a nuanced debate with a variety of contributions throughout the fields of public management, social policy and social work. As this review shows, there are common interests and intersections as well as specific characteristics of the street-level debates in these neighbouring fields, and the further development of street-level research could benefit from better tying together the perspectives and taking stock of the

debates. What emerges clearly is that adopting Lipsky's approach is not just useful to describe street-level processes in different fields; its very potential lies in pointing out that what happens at the street-level goes far beyond something merely technical. From its very first elaboration by Lipsky (1980/2010), the street-level bureaucracy approach has highlighted the very political question of what happens when people get together through institutions to make policy (work) on the ground. In this sense, it remains important to ask what street-level research can eventually contribute to the normative propositions of responsive and accountable processes of policy implementation and of positive outcomes for people in need of institutional responses. Keeping in mind these questions may be helpful in determining where to go from here. They also offer a decisive and unifying opportunity to better define a common interest and agenda in the development of street-level research.

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