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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Critical Reflection on Professionalism and Policy Entrepreneur Roles of Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs)

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role and position of Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs) in the broad context of policy making and implementation. It is partially based on a study conducted in 2018 that produced a typological framework mapping the workflow and exercise of discretion amongst officers of the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare (DSW) who handle child welfare cases. In this revisit to the framework, the authors shed some new information into the context of the framework, particularly regarding the exercise of discretion amongst the officers. The authors explored the relationship between bureaucracy and discretion and concluded that they exist on a continuum and are not mutually exclusive. The repercussion of this is this that discretionary actions of SLBs can be interpreted as an expression of professionalism on behalf of the SLBs. The authors also argue that SLBs have the potential to act as 'policy entrepreneurs,' innovating within their roles in improving service and policy implementation. Such reinterpretation of the status and roles of SLBs could lead to more inclusive policymaking and empowerment to the SLBs.

Contribution/Originality: This study provides a critical discourse and expands on the original findings of a study on street-level bureaucrats involving workers of the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare who handles child welfare cases.

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1. Introduction

Street-level Bureaucrats (SLBs) is the term used by Lipsky (1980, 2010) to designate a category of workforce within the public sector who directly interact with citizens and play a vital role in the implementation of public policies. In his seminal work on the so-called dilemmas of the individual in public services, Lipsky (1980) highlighted the importance of SLBs in policymaking and implementation due to the discretion they exercise in their daily tasks. Street-level bureaucrats possess three distinctive characteristics that position them as significant actors in the policymaking process. First, they have direct interactions with citizens as part of their job responsibilities. Second, SLBs have substantial discretion in carrying out their work. Lastly, they hold decision-making authority within their role. Of these, the use of discretion proves to be pivotal to explicate their position in the policy process and to understand their impact on policy implementation (Chang & Brewer, 2022). Our examination of the roles and responsibilities of front-line workers within the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare has shed light on their unique set of circumstances which effectively designate them as SLBs based on Lipsky's definition (Noor Azizah, Ahmad Shukri, Mariny & Norruzeyati, 2018). It is also essential that their position be comprehended within specific working contexts. Rather than viewing them as lower-ranking officials in the work hierarchy, it is more accurate to perceive them as "policy entrepreneurs" who employ innovation in their job to improve service delivery and policy implementation (Lavee & Cohen, 2018; Arnold, 2015). Moreover, it is equally important to interpret their work as an expression of professionalism (Trappenburg, Kampen & Tonkens, 2020; Freidson, 2001).

2. Under What Conditions SLBs Use Discretions? The Case of Malaysian Department of Social Welfare

Not unlike their counterparts in other service sectors, the front-line workers in the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare play a vital role in translating policy directives into practice (Ahmad Shukri, Noor Azizah & Norruzeyati, 2017; Ahmad Shukri, Noor Azizah & Norruzeyati, 2018). While the entire workforce within the department shares equal responsibility as stakeholders, it is these front-line workers who bear much of the responsibility for executing and implementing social welfare policies. In line with various studies on SLBs, our investigation concurs with the idea that their role in implementation is equally significant to that of policy formulation itself. Lipsky (1980) argues that these front-line workers should be regarded as bureaucrats in their own right, although this label differs significantly from traditional conceptions of bureaucracy (Hupe, Hill & Buffat, 2015). Bureaucrats are often seen as individuals in higher positions of authority within an organization, whereas front-line workers function as the face of the bureaucracy, interacting directly with clients and implementing policies that will mostly affect them – hence the 'street-level' nomenclature.

As a result, the difficult nature of their work often presents them with exceptional challenges. In light of this, our research examines how frontline bureaucrats' ability to navigate these demanding working conditions affects the overall policy process. Drawing from street-level bureaucracy theory, we place emphasis on the exercise of discretion by these workers. By focusing on the dilemmas that arise from their constrained working environments, we gain insights into the dynamics of their workflow (Ahmad Shukri, Noor Azizah & Norruzeyati, 2017). This analytical process culminates in a framework that outlines various factors influencing working conditions and provides an understanding of how discretion is employed within the organizational structure.

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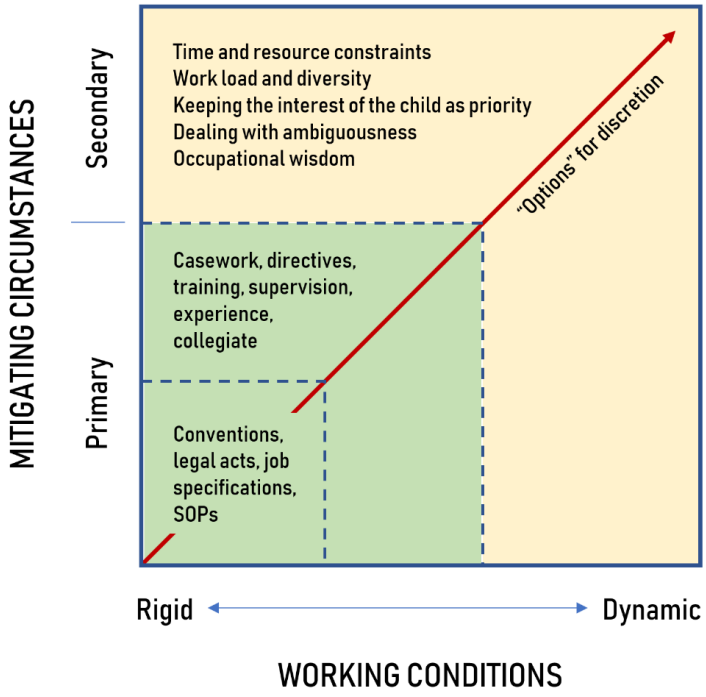
As depicted in Figure 1, the work structure of the front-line workers within the Department of Social Welfare comprised several key elements. It is important to note that this particular framework focuses on investigating the work conditions experienced by workers of the DSW who handle child welfare cases (Noor Azizah, Ahmad Shukri & Mariny, 2018). The framework illustrates how various aspects of work interact with one another to create a unique set of circumstances for those workers. Circumstances may differ for workers attached to other functions within the department. Overall, three main categories make up this framework, which can also be seen as integral components shaping the workflow of personnel within the Department of Social Welfare as reported by those surveyed.

Figure 1: The Typological Framework of DSW Workers Use of Discretion



Source: Noor Azizah, Ahmad Shukri, Mariny Abdul and Norruzeyati Che (2018:23)

The primary working conditions, which include all objective factors that are present and directly experienced by individuals, comprise a sizeable part of the workers' working experience. These elements include departmental or legal regulations, work policies, and standard operating procedures that every employee in the line of duty is required to observe. Because of the structural nature of these elements within an individual's work structure and employment requirements, they are categorized as objective. In addition to casework, directives, training, experience, supervision, and the advice of coworkers, the primary work conditions include a variety of other factors. Despite the fact that some of these may not be viewed as objective factors on their own (such as collegial relationships and supervision), they are still regarded as objective because they are inextricably linked to other tangible factors such as supervisors and colleagues. Moreover, these elements constitute a substantial portion of an individual's daily workflow, including tasks such as managing casework, processing directives, undergoing supervision, participating in training programs, and applying work experience.

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The second group of elements in the framework is referred to as secondary work circumstance. This situation is more subjective compared to the previous component because they arise within working situations as experiences rather than tangible phenomena. While many respondents may encounter these circumstances, not everyone does so, and each individual can interpret and attach different meanings to them. This category encompasses five specific working conditions recounted by the participants. These elements are: i) time and resource constraints, ii) workload and diversity, iii) keeping the interest of the child as work priority, iv) dealing with ambiguousness, and v) occupational wisdom (Noor Azizah, Ahmad Shukri, Norruzeyati Che, Mariny, 2019). As mentioned earlier, these five factors make up the combination of experiences shared by the participants in handling child welfare cases. Some of these elements are broad and can be encountered by workers in various fields, not just limited to child welfare cases. On the other hand, there are specific aspects that are closely associated with working specifically on child welfare matters.

The framework also considers these groups of elements as mitigating circumstances that shape much of the workflow. The workers need to be constantly aware of these circumstances and incorporate or make use of them into their decision-making process. The primary working conditions, being objective, can be seen as the foundational building blocks of the worker's environment. These conditions underscore the importance of processes and hierarchy in ensuring the welfare department functions efficiently. The secondary working conditions illuminate the nuanced challenges and experiences that can be interpreted as deeply personal and varied, as they stem from individual interpretations of one's work environment. They highlight the intricacies of handling sensitive matters like child welfare.

The primary and secondary work circumstances are closely connected to the rigidity and dynamism of the working condition. The framework reveals that the Department of Social Welfare front-line respondents experience a range of workflow variations, with some being highly rigid while others are highly dynamic. A rigid working condition occurs when the work is heavily influenced by or dictated by a strict work structure. On the other hand, a more dynamic working condition arises when workers encounter more demanding situations in their tasks. In both cases, these conditions can be experienced either voluntarily or as a result of external factors compelling them into such situations.

By applying the above-mentioned spectrum of working conditions to the initial set of mitigating factors, a clearer understanding can be gained regarding the different scenarios that workers frequently encounter in their roles. A greater appreciation might be gained for the complexities of the job and the need for workers to exercise discretion in navigating these circumstances. For this reason, the third element of the framework is posited as an emergent explanation for the use of discretion within these working circumstances. Compared to the previous factors, discretion is the most subjective element. Instead of considering it as a fixed part of the work structure, this particular factor is viewed in the framework as something that emerges. This essentially means that while individuals may exercise discretion knowingly or intentionally to accomplish tasks, many could be unaware that such actions might deviate from their established workflow. Unintentionally, their decisions introduce an aspect of bureaucratic decision making into the policy implementation process. In some cases, this introduction of discretion can have unpredictable effects on the overall policy process itself. Therefore, it is essential to label the use of discretion in relation to work as an ‘option’ rather than a permanent characteristic embedded within the workflow.

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3. Revisiting the Framework: Shedding New Light into the Roles of SLBs

The comprehensive examination of the potential ramifications of SLBs' exercise of discretion on policy implementation was not adequately addressed within our first framework. The framework presents a typology that elucidates the circumstances in which SLBs may exercise discretion. However, it does not clearly examine the consequences of this discretion on the broader policy process and, more specifically, on the workers involved. Furthermore, the framework underscores the inherent emergence of discretion within these conditions. Given the ongoing discourse surrounding the theory of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and the notion of discretion, it is imperative to enhance our existing framework by recognizing the nuanced yet substantial influence that discretionary behaviors exhibited by street-level workers exert on the policy-making process. The aforementioned observation holds significant consequences for comprehending the interplay between discretion and bureaucracy, two ideas that are frequently perceived as distinct but can be regarded as opposing poles along a continuum from an alternative standpoint. Moreover, the acknowledgement of the capacity of SLBs to instigate transformation within the policy-making process necessitates a shift in perspective from regarding discretionary actions as random choices to employing strategic problem-solving approaches. This reinterpretation enables a reassessment of the positioning of SLBs within this particular setting.

3.1. From Street-Level to Professionals

Our framework demonstrates implicitly that discretion is an element of the decision-making process. It reveals a variety of influencing factors that can affect the degree of flexibility in a worker's behavior, as opposed to viewing discretion as an autonomous action conducted by workers while performing their duties. These factors range from conditions that are rigid and inflexible to those that are malleable and adaptable. On the more rigorous end of the spectrum is bureaucracy, which adheres strictly to rules and regulations. In such a setting, discretion is practically nonexistent because decisions are based on predetermined guidelines and protocols. In more fluid and adaptable circumstances, street-level bureaucrats may have greater discretion in making decisions based on their professional judgment and the particular requirements and circumstances of the individuals they serve. The continuum defining the connection between these two extremes has not been emphasized in our prior discussions. Nonetheless, upon reflection, it is necessary to acknowledge this bridge, as it is the point where the potential implications of discretion on the policy process become more pronounced.

One of the prevailing interpretations of bureaucracy is that it is often linked to rigid adherence to rules and a lack of adaptability, ultimately limiting the autonomy of both workers and the citizens to whom they are accountable. The concept of discretion, on the other hand, is viewed as contradictory to the characteristics commonly associated with bureaucracy, such as hierarchy, formal procedures and structures, adherence to rules and regulations, and well-defined roles and responsibilities. This dichotomy shows a harsh separation between discretion and bureaucracy, which is the dominant view of the nature of bureaucracy espoused by many within public administration and organizational fields of study (Perrow, 2014; du Gay & Pedersen, 2020).

However, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between discretion and bureaucracy reveals that they are not necessarily separate entities, but rather exist on a continuum. This interpretation is not new, however. The notion of interlinking between

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bureaucracy and discretion goes back to Max Weber's discussion on bureaucracy. Built into Weber's idea of bureaucracy is the insistence on the necessity of situation-specific judgment, which recognizes that bureaucratic conduct depends upon prudential judgment and the use of discretion (du Gay & Pedersen, 2020). The term professional and professionalism are of consequence in explicating this. What constitutes professional and professionalism under such scrutiny? One view posits that bureaucracy and professionalism are linked by virtue of training and the indoctrination of skills and knowledge (Mintzberg, 1979). Through time, one who has been inculcated with profession-specific knowledge and skills - technical or otherwise - would learn to put them into practice. This process involves a considerable amount of discretion in the form of the exercise of wisdom and expertise based on professional standard, thus indicating significant professional autonomy (Freidson, 2001).

This analysis is consistent with the notion of discretion as a range of actions and decisions that front-line employees can employ in their professional duties. Despite being perceived as occupying inferior positions, these employees are professionals in their own right, possessing the specialized knowledge and skills necessary to perform their duties effectively (Virtanen, Litinen & Stenvall, 2016). By recognizing the ability of SLBs to influence the policymaking process, it becomes evident that their position within the organizational hierarchy should not be disregarded or undervalued. For example, in a healthcare setting, front-line nurses have the specialized knowledge and skills to assess patient conditions, make critical decisions on treatment plans, and communicate essential information to the policymaking team. Their expertise in understanding patient needs and challenges can greatly influence the development of policies that prioritize patient care and safety. Therefore, involving front-line employees like nurses in the policymaking process can lead to more effective and informed decisions (Hajizadeh, et al., 2021).

Street-level workers, who possess expertise in their respective domains and are therefore ought to be recognized as professionals, are anticipated to utilize their know-how, skillsets and understanding on 'how to do things' to apply regulations judiciously (Virtanen, Litinen & Stenvall, 2016). In this context, discretion suggests that street-level workers actively contribute to the execution, consequences, and efficacy of policies (Lipsky, 2010). By virtue of the above logic, the more they exercise their professional knowledge and skills, the more they engage with discretion which constitutes a function of professionalism and competency. Discretion, in this sense is not to be understood simply as arbitrary decision-making or the absence of rules and regulations. On the contrary, it pertains to the competence of making informed decisions and adjusting accordingly in specific circumstances as a reflection of their professional expertise and acquired wisdom (Evans, 2015; Freidson, 2001)

3.2. SLBs As Policy Entrepreneurs

Another aspect worth considering within our framework is the potential for street-level bureaucrats to have an impact on broader policy contexts through their discretionary behavior. While SLBs are often seen as powerful yet limited in their ability to shape policies (Arnold, 2015; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003; Hupe & Hill 2007; Hubikova & Havlikova, 2011), our analysis suggests that they can make innovative adaptations when faced with circumstances where strict adherence to rules and regulations may not be viable. This emphasizes the proactive role of SLBs in exploring alternative approaches within their professional responsibilities (Frisch Aviram, Beeri & Cohen, 2021). In our framework, such 'innovations' will mostly occur under the secondary circumstances (see

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Figure 1), where things are more dynamic and much more room available for SLBs to exercise discretion. In this instance SLBs could be termed as 'policy entrepreneurs' (Arnold, 2015), which refers to individuals who actively engage in shaping and influencing policy, often by identifying and seizing opportunities for change.

Street-level policy entrepreneurs create or embrace innovative course of actions with the goal of enhancing implementation processes and integrating these innovations into their daily routines. However, such innovations will be limited to the particular circumstances under which the SLBs operate. Any changes or improvements (including divergence) in the situation remain localized and will not affect policy in any capacity. In fact the actions of SLBs could also bring harm to them if their 'innovations' do not work in favour of the situation or when they deliberately diverge from their prescribed roles.

One potential hindrance in this context is the fact that autonomous actions taken by SLB rarely noticeable to the outside world, much less to be considered as innovation. The perception that discretion could be antithetical to established policies and procedures may make it difficult for SLBs to be recognized as policy entrepreneurs. This is particularly true in the case of young or inexperienced SLBs, who may face skepticism or resistance from higher-level decision-makers who may see their actions as deviating from established protocols. According to Mettang (2022), this has something to do with the fact that the policy process can happen in top-down and bottom-up fashion. The more common top-down approach involves policymaking by higher-up bureaucrats with their lower rung counterparts acting as mere implementers. Discretions or innovations are discouraged because they can lead to divergence and undermine the prescribed policies. On the other hand, according to the bottom-up perspective, SLBs are seen as having the potential to play a part in policymaking because of their direct experience and understanding of specific situations that existing policies do not adequately address. As argued by Virtanen, Litinen and Stenvall (2016) SLBs do not necessarily work according to the service system's principles, but rather they develop their own strategies to work with service users.

As such a rethink of the outcome of our study, as outlined in the framework, indicates that by reframing our perspective, we can view the actions undertaken by SLBs within their discretionary sphere as innovative (rather than prohibitive or disruptive). Although this term may not be widely embraced in policy circles, it underscores the potential for SLBs to greatly influence and improve their service offerings. If a more grassroots approach to policy development were applied, in which SLBs are recognized as policy innovators, any positive course of action initiated by the SLBs has the potential to result in a legitimate means of affecting policies and policy outcomes (Arnold, 2014; Trappenburg, M., Kampen, T., & Tonkens, E., 2022).

An offshoot from the preceding discussion is the recognition of the role of SLBs as part of the policy-making process. In other words, policymaking could become more inclusive and at the same time empowering for the SLBs (Marston & Davidson, 2020). The aforementioned concept of policy entrepreneurship is an approach that pleads recognition for their contributions, appreciates their valuable knowledge and frames their expertise as something valuable rather than disruptive. Effectively, SLBs are professionals in their own right. Professionalism, as previously stated, involves the inculcation of values pertinent to the nature of the profession. If the profession itself demands a certain amount of autonomous action and discretionary decision-making, then it is crucial that SLBs are trained and equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge

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to navigate these responsibilities effectively (Arnold, 2014). More importantly, is the recognition that they are in the position to make judgment calls whenever is necessary. Therefore, their role as policy innovators should become imbued into their professional status. Achieving this however requires reimagining of the work structure and perhaps more crucially training with the right mindset, not only on behalf of the agency but the SLBs themselves.

4. Conclusion

This article revisits the prior discussions pertaining to the outcomes of a study that was conducted in the year 2018. The study presented a typological framework to comprehensively capture the diverse working conditions experienced by front-line workers of the Malaysian Department of Social Welfare who are involved in child welfare cases. The concept places emphasis on the interconnectedness between various work situations and the discretionary power wielded by street-level workers. It could be argued that the act of exercising judgment aligns with the duties and obligations of street-level workers as they navigate their work environment. This article provides more emphasis on the responsibilities of front-line workers within the context of current discussions surrounding the SLB hypothesis.

Based on our previous findings, this article provides further observations on the emerged framework and its interpretation. Particularly, we delve into the concept of discretion and its implications for street-level workers in the policy process. Our revised analysis based on the framework reveals a stronger connection between bureaucracy and SLB's exercise of discretion than previously acknowledged. Although they are often seen as distinct entities, there is a crucial connection that reconceptualizes street-level bureaucrats as professionals who have influence and autonomy, rather than just being passive enforcers of policies. Additionally, our study brings forth broader insights regarding the policy process. Street-level bureaucrats play a crucial role as policy entrepreneurs in the complex landscape of policymaking. Rather than being seen as mere cogs in the system, it is important to recognize that SLBs are integral components of an intricate and interconnected network.

How will this fresh reiteration affect our analysis on the roles of street-level workers of the DSW? The revised understanding of the roles of street-level workers in child protection services has significant implications for our analysis. This line of work requires a high level of commitment and motivation due to the numerous challenges posed by bureaucracy, public opinion, and clients' needs. By recognizing these workers as professionals rather than simply street-level workers, their status is elevated and may inspire additional motivation to go above and beyond their occupational duties. The recognition of SLBs as policy entrepreneurs and professionals also has important implications for the development and implementation of public policies (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2022). By acknowledging this unique perspective and expertise of SLBs, policymakers can tap into their insights and experiences to shape more effective and equitable policies. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for institutional actors and political leaders to recognize this role and enact appropriate measures to facilitate significant transformation. Ultimately, embracing this perspective encourages deeper involvement in the policy process while also enhancing the SLBs' professional standing within the field.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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