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Administração Pública e Gestão Social, vol. 16, núm. 2, 2024 Universidade Federal de Viçosa
Disponível em: <https://apgs.ufv.br>



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A Discrecionariedade como um Pressuposto da Implementação de Políticas Públicas: um Ensaio Teórico

La discrecionalidad como una premisa para la implementación de políticas públicas: un ensayo teórico

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Recepción: 28/12/2022
Aprobación: 07/11/2023
Publicación: 25/04/2024

Abstract

Objective: the objective of this essay is to develop theoretical propositions about public policies implementation.

Theoretical Framework: the study is based on the literature about the factors that influence the action of the street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of public policies.

Results: The first proposition argues that discretion, more than an influencing factor, is an assumption of implementation. Another proposition derives from the perception that the action of implementing public policies influences in different ways the principles that govern it — stable core — and its intercontextual factors — dynamic core. The last proposition argues that there must be an effort of policymakers to recognize the influence and to know the factors that influence the way the street-level bureaucracy implements a given public policy. As a result, the original normative framework of public policy would have greater adherence to the reality observed in the contexts in which public policy is implemented, in addition to bringing the consideration of multidimensionality to the bases of public policy as a basic characteristic of street-level bureaucracy. Additionally, an integrative model of dimensions and categories about the subject is presented.

Originality: presents discretion as an assumption when studying the factors influencing the action of street-level bureaucrats, differentiating it from discretionary action. In addition, the proposed model seeks to advance on the debate about existing dynamics between the formulation and implementation of public policies.

Theoretical and practical contributions: from a theoretical point of view, the content of the essay raises arguments that contribute qualitatively to the research area. From a practical perspective, it provides a model that can serve as a parameter for new studies and presents propositions that can be tested in future empirical research.

Keywords: Street-level bureaucracy, Factors influencing the action, Normative framework, Dimensions and categories.

Resumo

Objetivo da pesquisa: o objetivo do ensaio é desenvolver proposições teóricas sobre a implementação de políticas públicas.

Enquadramento teórico: o estudo fundamenta-se na literatura sobre os fatores influenciadores da ação dos burocratas de nível de rua na implementação de políticas públicas.

Resultados: a primeira proposição defende que a discrecionariedade, mais que um fator influenciador, é um pressuposto da implementação. Outra proposição deriva da percepção de que a ação da implementação das políticas públicas influencia de formas distintas os princípios que a regem — núcleo estável — e seus fatores intercontextuais — núcleo dinâmico. A última proposição sustenta que deve existir um esforço de parte dos *policymakers* em reconhecer a influência e conhecer os fatores que influenciam a forma como a burocracia de nível de rua implementa determinada política pública. Como resultado, o *framework* normativo original da política pública possuiria maior aderência à realidade observada nos contextos em que a política pública é implementada, além de trazer para o bojo da política pública a consideração da multidimensionalidade como característica basilar da burocracia de nível de rua. Adicionalmente, apresenta-se um modelo

integrativo de dimensões e categorias sobre o tema.

Originalidade: apresenta a discricionariedade como um pressuposto ao se estudar os fatores influenciadores da ação dos burocratas de nível de rua, diferenciando-a da ação discricionária. Além disso, o modelo proposto busca avançar no debate sobre a dinâmica existente entre a formulação e implementação de políticas públicas.

Contribuições teóricas e práticas: do ponto de vista teórico, o conteúdo do ensaio suscita argumentos que contribuem qualitativamente na área de pesquisa. De uma perspectiva prática, fornece um modelo que pode servir de parâmetro para novos estudos e apresenta proposições que podem ser testadas em pesquisas empíricas futuras.

Palavras chave: Burocracia de Nível de Rua, Fatores influenciadores da ação, *Framework* normativo, Dimensões e categorias.

Resumen

Objetivo: el objetivo de este ensayo es desarrollar proposiciones teóricas sobre la implementación de políticas públicas.

Marco Teórico: el estudio es basado en la literatura sobre los factores que influyen en la acción de los burócratas de nivel de calle en la implementación de políticas públicas.

Resultados: la primera proposición defiende que la discrecionalidad, más que un factor influyente, es una premisa de la implementación. Otra proposición se deriva de la percepción de que la acción de implementar políticas públicas influye de diferentes maneras en los principios que la rigen — núcleo estable — y sus factores intercontextuales — núcleo dinámico. La última proposición argumenta que debe haber un esfuerzo por parte de los formuladores de políticas para reconocer la influencia y conocer los factores que influyen en la forma en que la burocracia de nivel calle implementa una determinada política pública. Como consecuencia, el marco normativo original de política pública tendría mayor apego a la realidad observada en los contextos en los que se implementa la política pública, además de llevar la consideración de la multidimensionalidad al núcleo de la política pública como característica básica de la burocracia de nivel de calle. Adicionalmente, se presenta un modelo integrador de dimensiones y categorías sobre el tema.

Originalidad: presenta la discrecionalidad como un supuesto al estudiar los factores que influyen en la acción de los burócratas de nivel de calle, diferenciándola de la acción discrecional. Además, el modelo propuesto busca avanzar en el debate sobre las dinámicas existentes entre la formulación y la implementación de políticas públicas.

Contribuciones teóricas y prácticas: desde el punto de vista teórico, el contenido del ensayo plantea argumentos que contribuyen cualitativamente en la área de investigación. Desde una perspectiva práctica, proporciona un modelo que puede servir como parámetro para nuevos estudios y presenta proposiciones que pueden probarse en futuras investigaciones empíricas.

Palabras clave: Burocracia de nivel de calle, Factores que influyen en la acción, Marco normativo, Dimensiones y categorías.

1 Introduction

The field of implementation investigates the reasons for the success or failure of public policies (Barrett, 2004; Ferreira et al., 2020; Hjern & Porter, 1981). It has been found empirically that not all of them achieve their initial objectives and, from a technical point of view, the reasons why this happens. Given this, the identification of the factors that influence this result is central to implementation analyses (P. Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Scharpf, 1977)

Implementation is the action which materializes what has been planned in the policy sphere as an alternative to resolving public problems independent of whether their origins are public or private (Hill & Hupe, 2002; P. Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). Likewise, it is the product of interactions among various actors, who are not necessarily aligned in terms of their interests or equipped in terms of their influence or resources (Lipsky, 2010; Scharpf, 1977).

In addition to actions, the understanding of implementation begins with the behavior of the actors involved and their inaction — when intentional — and it is not possible to predict the results before the implementation, which cannot be dissociated from the problem and the specific context in which the public policy is seeking to produce results. In this sense, there is no guarantee that the purposes of public policies will not deviate from the intentions of the policymakers before the action begins, admitting that they are defined or influenced in the inverted sense, based on the implementation and the idiosyncrasies that occur during this process (Hill & Hupe, 2002).

This view based on implementation represents a break from the classic idea that public policies are actions developed in a sequential, logical, and objective manner (Hill & Hupe, 2002). The Theory of Street Level Bureaucracy analyzes the implementation of public policies based on the implementers, the so-called street level bureaucrats — teachers, doctors, and police officers, among

others. These are the public servants who meet citizens and represent the government. That being so, these agents are responsible for the implementation of these public policies on an operational level. They, in the face of the imprecisions, ambiguities — and subjectivities — of the criteria established during planning are required to use discretion that goes beyond implementation, which also makes them policy formulators (Arretche, 2001; Bronzo et al., 2022; Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016; Lipsky, 2010; G. S. Lotta et al., 2018; Nouman & Cohen, 2023).

Despite the existence of many empirical studies, there is still a need to develop integrated models that make it possible to advance the evolution and theoretical consistency of studies of the actions of street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of public policies (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016). The objective of this theoretical essay is to develop theoretical propositions about the bottom-up implementation of public policies based on the Theory of Street Level Bureaucracy.

To accomplish this, the next section will contextualize implementation from the point of view of the street-level bureaucracy, presenting the main theoretical and epistemological aspects involved. Then, we will discuss the factors that influence the implementation of public policies from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats. In conclusion, our final considerations will reaffirm the main propositions developed during this essay and also offer suggestions for future studies regarding this subject.

2 The Implementation of Public Policies from the Perspective of Street-Level Bureaucrats

Until the end of the 1960s, the assumption of public policy formulators, who usually were in the upper and more strategic levels of public administration, was that these policies were clear and well-defined, and that the proper allocation of resources — what was considered sufficient for their purposes — would lead these administrators and their subordinates to execute them without incident, meeting the expectations and dictates of the law. The legal framework did not mention implementers (Hill & Hupe, 2002). The literature of the time followed this tendency. It was only at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s that studies concluded that the legislation did not produce the expected effects (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973) in their analyses of specific public programs in a wide variety of areas within the public sphere, which led to this concern with implementation (P. Sabatier & Mazmanian, 1980).

From that point on, studies in the implementation field began to be developed which were mainly concerned with the differences between the desired objectives and the results obtained — which constituted the first generation of these studies. Later, interest surged in the actors — individuals and groups — who act as part of an interface with a given public in seeking these results — which constituted the second generation. With the advance of this research a third generation of studies emerged, which sought the convergence of these perspectives in the sense of recognizing that both further the understanding of implementation (Matland, 1995; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987).

Despite its undeniable advances, this third generation of studies of implementation was not able to resolve the differences found in the first two generations, and added important analysis biases, without interrupting the theoretical development and empirical utilization of other approaches (Hill & Hupe, 2002). It therefore represented a new paradigm for implementation studies, rather than a break. In terms of this point we should mention that authors such as Howlett (2019) and G. Lotta (2019) argue that there exists a fourth generation — or wave — of implementation research, which is more influenced by other scientific fields and the use of multiple analysis models.

In any event, there are various ways of studying the implementation of public policies (Hill & Hupe, 2002). The adoption of one of these theoretical perspectives is more a choice of the researcher in terms of which concrete case and problem are being investigated than the conviction that one is superior to the rest.

In terms of this point, we utilize a deeper second-generation analysis. To analyze bottom-up implementation, it considers the integration between formulation and planning which leads to a continuous flow of adaptations and revisions of the objectives originally defined in the policy's formulation when the necessary actions are taken to apply them to concrete cases (Barrett, 2004).

This execution is a *sine qua non* condition of this flow of retro-alignments between what is verified in practice and what was formulated, adapting it to the reality of implementation. This is why these actors who implement these public policies, known as street-level bureaucrats, are central to second generation analyses.

There are three conditions that have an overriding effect on these agents: i) insufficient resources; ii) psychological and in some instances physical threats; and iii) contradictions in the expected performance targets. Likewise, we may note their political and social importance. Politically, understanding the focus of governmental service begins with a knowledge of the functions and characteristics of public servants. From a social point of view, the actions of these agents have an important effect on the lives of citizens, and they play a central role in the exercise of good citizenship (Lipsky, 2010).

The understanding of the challenges that face these front-line public servants involves two central ideas or concepts: i) discretion is the central element of implementation; and ii) public problems should be addressed in a bottom-up manner.

2.1 Discretion as the central element of implementation

Discretion is understood to be the exercise of the judgement that the implementers possess in the performance of their professions (Lipsky, 2010). It operates at the margin of the actions of public servants as they apply the law within its established limits, and it is necessary to bear in mind that legislation normally consists of general rules and does not present minute detail to deal with the multitude of situations encountered in the application of the law in concrete cases (Ferreira et al., 2020; Oliveira, 2012).

In this way, mechanisms that seek to control and guide their behavior do not tend to work in concrete cases. Street-level bureaucrats, due to discretion and mechanisms that resist the dictates of central governmental bodies, are formulators of policy when we consider their specific areas of operation (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977).

As a result, public policies cannot be completely understood without considering that implementation occurs based on the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Since it is not possible to contemplate all of the specificities that are encountered during implementation, public policies need interpretation to be applied to concrete cases. Conflicts occur in this process not only on the level of actors interested in the policy formulation process, but also within the relationship between the implementers and citizens. Thus, discretion is inherent to the function and source of authority of these public servants (Lipsky, 2010) and, together with their individual abilities, they are necessary for the solution of problems that public policies attempt to solve (Elmore, 1979).

Thus, as more than just a passible — or desirable — element of control, discretion is an important element in the implementation of public policies. It is a natural consequence of the limited rationality of the actors involved with public policy and the asymmetry of information that exists between those who are close to an object and those who know it only theoretically or in a superficial manner. It is an inherent element of public policies and the nature of the implementation process.

Other perspectives have made important contributions to the way we conceive of public policies based on changing the focus of analysis from strategic areas to those which are closer to citizens. The contributions below stand out.

The backward mapping approach is an alternative — and complement — to the top-down view of the control and influence of policymakers in the implementation process — forward mapping. It questions the ability of formulators to influence implementation and the idea that success in public policies occurs exclusively through precise definitions of objectives and responsibilities generated by the center. The problem to be corrected or the attitude to be influenced by public policies are to be found in the operational level of implementation. Therefore, the formulation should start there and rise to the strategic levels (Elmore, 1979).

In addition to analyzing policies in the traditional manner, we need to analyze them in the opposite direction. A logical relationship has to exist between the problem that one seeks to deal with, and the strategy selected to accomplish this. That being so, each angle of analysis only contemplates an ideal analysis, which includes both dimensions. The top-down approach seeks

control. The bottom-up approach understands that this control, if it exists, is limited to a group of resources that each implementation actor is capable of influencing (Elmore, 1985). Since public policies are usually vague and ambiguous — or even non-existent — in terms of the objectives they seek to achieve, and recognizing that they can only be altered during implementation, research in this area concentrates on problems that have been established by all of the actors relevant to this process, not only those which are formally termed formulators (Hjern & Hull, 1982).

This recognition of the plurality of actors and their ability to make alterations to policy designs leads to discussions of how they relate to each other. In addition, if policy objectives are a function of this network and are established by existing *pari passu* interactions with implementation itself, the notion of success or failure ceases to be objective and static, and thus becomes subjective — because it depends on the power of the various actors and their perceptions of the expected results — and dynamic.

Implementation studies tend to center around aspects of respecting the rules — law abidance. However, analyses of the judgements made by street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of public policies are affected by cultural factors — cultural abidance. A normative analysis is considered the predominant narrative in this field — the state-agent narrative — and its alternative — the citizen-agent narrative — is frequently ignored. The latter approach works in cooperation with or against the former approach, but they are always closely linked. The citizen-agent narrative is concerned with judgements of a moral order made by street-level bureaucrats in the dynamic interactions they have in providing services to citizens (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Within this aspect, even discretion and the unavoidable status attributed to it by the state-agent narrative are debatable, but they can never be eliminated. Despite democratic controls that seek to alter reality through the implementation of a public policy, discretion always has to play a part at some point. The state-agent narrative prevails in contexts in which, from the point of view of street-level bureaucrats, the law and culture are in alignment. On the other hand, when these public servants have the perception that what should be done is not exactly what the laws, norms, and regulations envision, the citizen-agent prevails (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

That being said, a common characteristic of various approaches, narratives, and theories which study bottom-up implementation is the central status attributed to discretion. One of the results of this attribution is an interest in understanding the factors that influence the way the street-level bureaucracy uses discretion to implement public policies, and this subject will be addressed in the following section.

2.2 Street-level bureaucrats and the factors that influence their actions in the implementation of public policies

One of the difficulties in studying implementation is that the actions of street-level bureaucrats are not always documented. The nature of the relationship between the bureaucrat and the citizen does not always occur in a formal manner. This, for example, is the case of teachers in the classroom. What is more, given that there are situations in which norms or the performed function itself are not clear or not even envisaged, street-level bureaucrats need to make decisions based on their interpretation of the rules (Hill & Hupe, 2002; Lipsky, 2010), acting in dimensions of structure, relationships, and individual actions (Bonelli et al., 2019). Therefore, perceiving that implementation is not a linear and static process with totally known variables and predicted behavior, the street-level bureaucracy establishes analysis criteria which allow a greater understanding of specific aspects concerning implementation.

One of its characteristics is the existence of discretionary actions, to a greater or lesser extent but always present, in the street-level bureaucrats' applications of the rules. From this perspective, it is common for studies in this area to examine the behavior of these public agents (Hill & Hupe, 2002; Lipsky, 2010) because the exercise of judgement necessary in these implementations affects the policies' degree of success (Najberg & Barbosa, 2006). Therefore, discretion is an assumption of implementation. It is a product of interdependent factors which influence the implementations and judgements of street-level bureaucrats — which result in discretionary actions through their judgement and consideration of various contexts which affect the implementation of public

policies, as argued by Arretche (2001), Saetren (2005) and G. S. Lotta et al. (2018).

It is important, therefore, to characterize discretion in the implementation of public policies as an assumption — which is treated, for example, as an inevitable (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003) or unavoidable aspect (P. A. Sabatier, 1986) — differentiating it from discretionary actions, which occur due to its existence and have already been addressed by established authors in this area (Lipsky, 2010; G. S. Lotta & Pires, 2020; Maynard-Moody et al., 1990).

This issue is justified in the street-level bureaucracy literature because discretion is treated as a factor that influences actions (Ferreira et al., 2020; Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016; Henderson et al., 2018; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014), a source of decision-making power which influences the lives of citizens (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002; Carroll et al., 2019; Lipsky, 2010; G. S. Lotta & Pires, 2020; Moyson et al., 2018; Nunes & Lotta, 2019), a tool to deal with rules, contexts, and the resources available for implementation (Balica et al., 2018; Brodtkin, 2011; Lipsky, 2010; G. S. Lotta & Pires, 2020), or as a characteristic of the implementation process — whether this involves high or lower levels of possible discretionary actions — (Collins & Augsburg, 2021; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Thunman et al., 2020), to cite some studies and treatments devoted to treating it not as an element, because without it the discussion of implementation itself would be sterile.

That being said, we consider a discussion of this epistemological positioning of discretion in the street-level bureaucracy to be important for the advance of theory, which is robust and mature, from the perspective defined here in relation to discretionary actions, and not discretion as a prerequisite for the implementation of public policies.

In considering various contexts and their interfaces — intercontextual factors — together with the principles which govern a specific policy framework, here understood as legal and infra-legal norms, guides, and similar material which forms a normative framework for the implementation of a public policy (Ferreira et al., 2020). Adding this to the theoretical plurality developed in respect to the implementation of public policies results in a complex and fragmented field. This complicates the satisfactory understanding of implementation from the point of view of street-level bureaucrats, especially when just a determined group of factors is under analysis, which is another tendency of studies in this area (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016).

Taking these considerations into account and beginning with an assumption that accountability, norms, perceptions, values, individual characteristics, the relationship between the implementers and citizen users, and the management system are all factors that influence the behavior of front-line public servants (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016), with there being no pretensions that this is an exhaustive list in terms of the literature on this subject.

2.2.1 Accountability

Accountability is related to policy management systems, the interactions between street-level bureaucrats and users, as well as the exercise of discretion (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016). It is important to point out that greater autonomy is related to better performance even in contexts where there are fewer available resources. However, without the existence of an accountability mechanism, implementers tend not to follow organizational objectives and instead favor their own interests (Buta et al., 2022). Therefore, it is an influencing factor that is directly linked to the performance of the public policy.

Time is an influencing factor for street-level bureaucrats when they need to present their accounts, which affects the exercise of their duties, their various relationships, their levels of trust and focus on completing established tasks, and not necessarily the providing of good service (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Murphy & Skillen, 2015).

Considering that accountability is part of planning due to its form being generally foreseen in the policy framework, which is based predominantly on the pressure of presenting accounts — at times to those outside the organization where they work — public policy implementers can at times ignore their reasons for being: to solve problems of public order.

Exogenous factors to implementation such as the fact that street-level bureaucrats are unionized have also been objects of study. Unionization does not significantly affect the working experience of street-level bureaucrats. There exists, however, a weak correlation between an increase in unionization and a decrease in the perception of the need to present accounts, without

repercussions in the performance of the studied professionals (Z. Oberfield, 2021).

Accountability can also manifest itself in an informal manner. It is related to aspects of the personality of street-level bureaucrats — defined by types of identity — and the utilization of discretionary actions in certain situations, applying rules to satisfy egalitarian wishes. As a consequence, the principle of impersonality can be questioned in the face of the suggestion that the street-level bureaucracy is influenced by social and political issues (Pivoras & Kaselis, 2019).

This tendency to bend the rules through individual decisions is a particularly important factor when implementers in theory possess an overriding interest in meeting social needs. In these cases, the established rules seem to be even more incapable of predicting their behavior, with the organizational climate, personality, and experience of the public servant being better indicators in predicting it (Borry & Henderson, 2020).

The influence of solidarity — or lack thereof — in taking a discretionary action and the social structure in the locus of implementation — the type of welfare state which is present in the context — are also related to the need to present accounts, especially informally. From these factors, two typologies of street-level bureaucrats arise: the statesperson and the professional. A public servant who is considered to be a statesperson has pro-citizen characteristics, while the professional follows his or her values without overstepping the limits imposed by the legislation and the rules. These characteristics emerge as a way of responding to the pressure of their environment (Møller & Stensöta, 2019).

2.2.2 Norms and regulations

The group of norms and their regulatory institutions are part of the policy framework. Therefore, their influence on implementation is evident. However, as discussed above, there are practical limitations to the breadth of this power and the resulting need to exercise discretion to implement public policies.

Providers of public services, including when these are services are provided by private initiative, systematically prioritize the resolution of problems in supplying services, usually without control from supervising bodies. This affects the sector's regulation. The actions of controlling bodies are limited by asymmetry of information or a lack of information, and because of this they do not seek information frequently (Steenhuisen & van Eeten, 2013).

Compliance with the rules and ethical conduct on the part of public servants also depend on culture, whether it is organizational or social. Individual decisions that seek to resolve situations outside of the established patterns, even if they have cultural justifications, harm the achieving of long-term objectives. On the other hand, rules that do not consider the implementation culture also tend to fail (Cohen, 2018).

There are also repercussions of judicial decisions — derivatives of the existence of norms — regarding the actions of street-level bureaucrats. In situations in which public servants do not have specialized legal knowledge, the mechanism developed by implementers is the construction of an interpretation together with the law and court dictates. This local instance of legislative interpretation results in an increase in uncertainty among citizens who seek this service because requests are rejected based on these interpretations. In this way, legal decisions are capable of influencing the administrative routines of implementers (Mascia, 2020).

2.2.3 Perceptions, values, and individual characteristics

Since discretion assumes the interpretation of norms within a given context, the psychological aspects and individual characteristics of street-level bureaucrats influence their decision making.

In empirical applications, it has been verified that the most relevant aspects to understanding the attitudes of front-line public servants are cognitive, affective — positive and negative — and behavioral in nature (Keulemans & Van de Walle, 2018). These results are in line with observations of how personality traits (Pivoras & Kaselis, 2019) and individual and cultural characteristics (Nouman & Cohen, 2023) influence bureaucrats in their interpretations of the rules.

Another factor which cannot be discounted is self-interest. However, since it inevitably conditions the actions of the street-level bureaucracy on the classic precepts of the state-agent

model, it loses empirical adherence in terms of implementations realized under altruistic conditions by public agents committed to certain problems, especially social ones (Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016). If on one hand, it is expected that there will be decisions made for personal interests, on the other, there is also detachment.

Incorporating interpersonal and social aspects and their origins in analyses of studies of the social dynamics where implementation takes place demonstrates that even the type of contact — direct or indirect — with citizens (Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Keiser, 2010) and peer judgements (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020) are capable of influencing individual decision making.

In a complementary manner, variables such as professional history and relationship profile — including the utilization of social networks — also have the capacity to influence the discretionary actions of implementers. The way that these agents get closer to citizens through the utilization of their language, terminologies, attitudes and specificities, reveals the difficulties faced in implementation, and also the characteristics of those who manage to establish a practical relationship with the various actors who make up the policy process (G. Lotta, 2018). Going further, addressing subjects such as prejudice, gender, and minority issues, indicates that these factors also influence front-line public servants in the implementation of public policies.

Appearance, behavior, housing, and social group are variables considered by street-level bureaucrats to measure trustworthiness. When citizens with lower levels of education and economic conditions provide information of low quality, they are considered less trustworthy than when citizens of higher social status present the same type of information. Therefore, the posture of professionals varies according to the social class of citizen users (Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018).

Another studied case demonstrates that the way in which Latinos receive educational services in the United States is influenced not only by the organization, but also the political context and its power to shape the representativeness of the teachers. Even in environments where Latinos have greater access to positions within the school bureaucracy, political and political party aspects act to limit their academic advances. This limitation occurs through school board members, who are actors that guide local educational policies (Molina, 2020).

In Pakistan, the Khawaja Sira, a gender marginalized by society, cannot use public services fully due to the way they are treated. Marks on their bodies and taunts are part of their daily lives when they deal with front-line public servants. The bureaucracy's attitude tends to use coercion to marginalize minorities. It should be noted that the law does not prescribe the treatment given to the Khawaja Sira. Even so, discretion is used to oppress this group to obey the wishes of the dominant classes (Nisar, 2020). These findings are in line with the discussion of the reciprocal relationship between discretion and public constituents in terms of gender issues (Durose & Lowndes, 2023).

2.2.4 Implementer-user interactions

It is important to point out that the interactions between the street-level bureaucracy and the users of public services — citizens — occur within a context. The inseparability of implementation and context has already been addressed.

In countries like Brazil, which are vast geographically and culturally, the implementation of public policies is particularly complex due to the diversity of the needs and wishes of its citizens. This entails different ways of implementing the same policy considering the diverse contexts in which it is applied (Ferreira et al., 2020).

Addressing the implementer-user relationship in a direct manner, it has been verified that the treatment offered by street-level bureaucrats has less influence on the obedience of citizens than their intentions to be compliant. Analyzing the feedback and comments made by online users regarding in-person service from front-line public servants, one may observe that the enforcement style — the attitude with which the citizen is treated when complying with a norm — has the capacity to generate more positive comments when a citizen is treated well, than negative comments when the citizen is treated poorly (de Boer, 2020).

2.2.5 Policy management systems

The management system of public policies is an influencing factor that is more aligned with the classic precepts of implementation. It is through this system that front-line public servants meet middle- and high-level bureaucrats navigating through the tangle of legal and infra-legal norms, the chain of command, the system of presenting accounts, objectives, targets and other objectives which come with exercising the public functions of implementation.

There are a wide array of variables — or in the context of this work subcategories — which have been identified in the literature as influencing the behavior of the street-level bureaucracy such as: workload (Jewell & Glaser, 2006), the roles and functions performed (Jensen, 2018; Jewell & Glaser, 2006), collaboration between implementation teams, professional norms, structure and adequate resources — which in fact has already been pointed out by Lipsky (2010) in his classic work as a characteristic of the work performed by the street-level bureaucracy (Ferreira et al., 2020) —, organization, ambiguities, conflicts, different levels of commitment, aspects of work satisfaction (Z. W. Oberfield, 2012), and manager leadership (Alcadipani et al., 2020; Jewell & Glaser, 2006; Keiser, 2010).

Even in more specific cases, such as the implementation of humanization policies, characteristics in common with other policy areas have been identified. Lima and D'Ascenzi (2017) observe, for example, that they are interpreted in distinct ways by different implementation teams. The main reason given for this divergence in terms of the interpretation of the concepts in the policy is a lack of public servant training. This situation transforms the interpretation of public policies depending on the locations where they are applied, making formal planning just a guiding element in the implementation process.

A lack of training can also be considered a lack of resources. Ferreira et al. (2020) state that this availability of inputs for the implementation of activities strongly influences and limits the options of street-level bureaucrats themselves in their dealings with daily situations. Equally, G. S. Lotta (2014) points out that relationship, institutional, normative — including informal norms — and structural factors influence the way that implementers relate to citizens, their peers, and superiors, and as a result the public policy itself.

Situations involving public calamities constitute another source of front-line public servant conduct and demonstrate this customary lack of resources. Policy, occupational culture, and the availability of material affect the capacity of public servants to respond to urgent and unpredictable demands caused by tragedies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, it is these situations that demand the utilization of restrictive protocols, affecting discretion which at times like these remains in the background. Even though they are always present in the actions of implementers, also due to public resources being strongly focused on fighting the pandemic — in health services — discretionary decisions can lead to the loss of resources which are not enough even when they are used efficiently (Alcadipani et al., 2020).

Even within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been observed that these crises alter the practices and forms of the implementation of public policies (Brodkin, 2021). Their influence extends to applicable levels of discretion (Collins & Augsberger, 2021; Davidovitz et al., 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021; Malandrino & Sager, 2021) and accountability (Collins & Augsberger, 2021) by aspects related to professionalism in certain categories during the crisis (Collins & Augsberger, 2021), in restrictions concerning available resources for solving emergencies (Collins & Augsberger, 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021), by the development of solutions through resistance, innovation, and improvisation (Cox et al., 2021), by increased normative ambiguity (Davidovitz et al., 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021), the risks present (Davidovitz et al., 2021) and the work demands (Gofen et al., 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021) of implementers, as well as an increase in the motivation of the street-level bureaucracy to mobilize politically and socially (Gofen et al., 2021).

The last topic highlighted is the utilization of Information Technology (IT), which is another influencing factor for the bureaucracy when we consider decision-making factors such as the judiciary. This influence is capable of transforming the street-level bureaucracy in more technologically intensive forms: screen-level and system-level bureaucracy. Software designers, analysts, and developers come to have discretionary powers to the extent that IT assumes the role of front-line public servants, and given this, they need to be supervised in terms of their

transparency in relation to the computational algorithms and processes involved in decision making (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002).

IT also influences the providing of public services when customer service occurs remotely, such as the case study of a Swedish call center for social security. The results suggest that highly regulated organizations are not able to overcome the issue of unpredictability, which is intrinsic in social relations, and on the contrary, they make customer service more complex. Therefore, the utilization of IT for standardization purposes does not lead to simpler customer service, because it is not a depersonalization of customer service and still makes discretionary actions possible to resolve specific issues within the limits of the regulations (Thunman et al., 2020). Even though there is evidence that automation processes are capable of diminishing the perception of street-level bureaucrat discretion (de Boer & Raaphorst, 2023), the utilization of technological solutions in the implementation processes for public policies has shown itself to be capable of increasing the security that implementers feel in their actions, and also permits greater monitoring of them (Aviram et al., 2023).

3 The integration of dimensions and categories with the presentation of a theoretical model

The presented studies confirm the multidimensional nature of the street-level bureaucracy (Hill & Hupe, 2022). In addition, they reveal the heterogeneity and actuality of the implementation discussion from the point of view of the implementers, including when they are used together with other approaches. The grouping of different subcategories, which can become even more numerous when we extend the number of databases and search criteria or researcher needs, seeking to approximate the contributions of studies developed in their own contexts which normally are not generalizable. Because they deal with an unavoidable aspect of the implementation field — its dependence on context — these factors must be tested in implementations in a wide variety of public policies and scenarios.

In addition, investigating the causes of implementer actions makes it possible to break with the tendency to analyze implementation only based on results, switching the focus of implementation studies to the understanding of how implementers and their discretionary actions influence public policies, including determining their comparative bases — the distance between what is predicted and realized — by altering the objectives of public policies themselves.

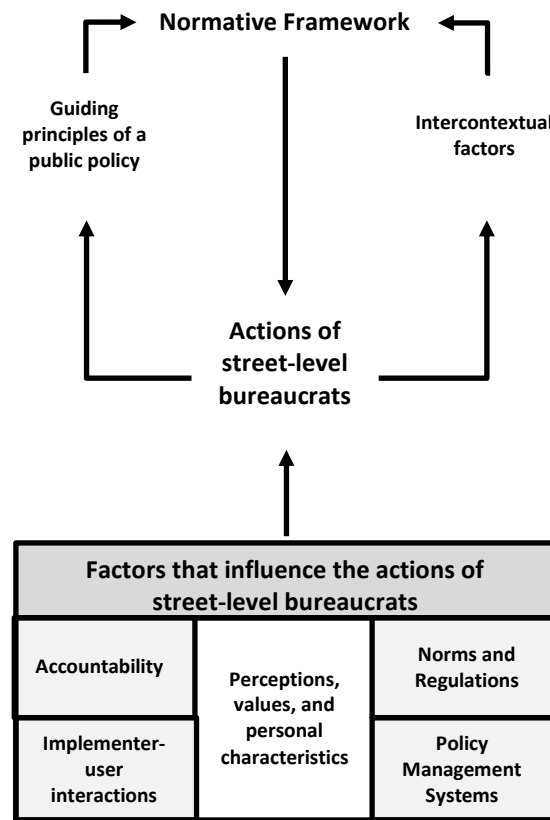
The model presented in Figure 1 is a representation that, in this work, can be understood as a closer approximation of the dynamics that exist in the formulation and implementation of public policies. Ideally, implementation is better understood through longitudinal studies (Tummers, 2011; Van Meter & Van Horn, 1975). However, especially when the study does not seek causal inferences (Henderson et al., 2018; Moyson et al., 2018), cross-sectional studies are also appropriate for this subject. That being said, considering the particularities of the studied context and this study's objectives, this model can be used in longitudinal as well as cross-sectional studies.

As has already been discussed in the previous sections, the applicable assumption is the presence of discretion. In terms of this, we should again point out that discretion as an assumption should not be confused with discretionary actions in a given context. Actions are influenced by and are capable of influencing — over the long term — the intercontextual principles and factors present in a public policy, and they are limited by these relationships. The assumption of discretion is a response to the limitations of actors related to a public policy which functions as an instrument that converges intentions to solve public problems, and the actions exercised regarding public problems as they are really found within the context of implementation.

Based on the concepts we have discussed in this essay and the model proposed in Figure 1, it is possible to discuss the aspects which are inherent to the implementation of public policies. An issue which presents itself is the possible disconnect between the principles which govern public policies and their intercontextual factors. This could help explain why policies do not achieve their expected results. At least this can provide theoretical support for the reasons that lead them to being implemented in ways that differ from their original conceptions.

Figure 1

Model of dimensions and categories of factors that influence street-level bureaucrats in the implementation of public policies



Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Ferreira and Medeiros (2016).

Even when observing a public policy in its integral form, without one-way and linear extensions, a theoretical effort should be made to recognize each dimension capable of influencing it. Thus, we propose that the principles that govern a public policy should be considered the stable core of its normative framework, while intercontextual factors form its dynamic core.

As it is implemented and substantiated by the actions of street-level bureaucrats, we believe that these actions will be more able to alter the dynamic core and less able to alter the stable core. Therefore, the longer it takes to implement a public policy, the greater the distance will be between the original normative framework — the one based on the first version of its formative cores — and the current normative framework — which varies based on the actions used to implement the policy.

This is consistent with the evidence that at times of crisis and when there is a need to accelerate the formulation and implementation cycles — short time horizons — information flows in an intense manner between the formulators and implementers of public policy, increasing the capacity of a governmental response to emergencies (Gofen & Lotta, 2021). Thus, when there are urgent circumstances which demand rapid governmental responses, the rules tend to become flexible (Collins & Augsberger, 2021) and there is an increase in the implementers' discretion (Collins & Augsberger, 2021; Davidovitz et al., 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021; Malandrino & Sager, 2021), because the situation involves increased ambiguity in terms of the applicable norms (Davidovitz et al., 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021) and a decrease in available resources (Collins & Augsberger, 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021).

Thus, it is expected that the dynamic core will be altered after implementation, independent of the time horizon. Given this, we suggest that the degree of flexibility in the stable core is the key to results more in line with the policy's objectives which are naturally dynamic.

Another theoretical possibility is considering that the stable core of the public policy is more than a form of control or a source of parameters to evaluate its results and constitutes a base for the inevitable evolution of the dynamic core. The development of this, based on but not limited to its basic principles, is the main source for establishing the normative framework of the public policy, and thus it is the great motivating force that leads to the implementation of this public policy.

This perception, even though it is subtly distinct from the previous one, leads to different paths. While in the former case flexibility in the stable core in the normative framework would still be a policymaker concern, in the latter it would not. It would be recognizing the evolutionary nature of the implementation of a public policy, grounded on necessary bases only at its creation, but free to establish its own objectives in a variable form within its countless distinct intercontextual factors, based on its implementation by the street-level bureaucracy.

Here, we reevaluate the idea of considering discretion to be a prerequisite for the implementation of public policies, and this demonstrates a consequence, still theoretical, of this positioning by suggesting that in fact the comparison parameters to determine the success of the implementation may not be contained within the principles of the public policy, but rather those that come from the act of implementing it. This line of thinking, which is already tangential to the literature concerning the thesis that the street-level bureaucracy is also the formulator of the public policy by making it effective and adapting it to various contexts (Arretche, 2001; Bronzo et al., 2022; Ferreira & Medeiros, 2016; Lipsky, 2010; G. S. Lotta et al., 2018; Nouman & Cohen, 2023), has not been explored sufficiently. The role of the street-level bureaucracy in the decision making realized during the formulation process of a public policy has not received much attention (Davidovitz et al., 2021). Following this perspective makes it possible to perceive whether the objectives can be developed during or even after the implementation, transforming those initially established by policymakers along general lines to solve a problem. This discussion may have repercussions that extend beyond the field of implementation, permitting theoretical outcomes in the field of the evaluation of public policies.

Finally, even though it is impossible to predict all of them, we argue that policymakers need to make an effort to recognize the factors that influence the way the street-level bureaucracy implements a given public policy. This is an intrinsic aspect of the elaboration process, and the implementation of public policies has not received the attention it should in the street-level bureaucracy literature. Knowledge of these factors, if analyzed case by case *a priori* and considering the contextual peculiarities involved, makes it possible to gain a greater understanding of the dynamic core that results from the act of implementation. This would give them alternatives and information to harmonize the stable core — or, alternatively, to understand it as a base, a point of departure — with what in fact is being sought in implementation, dynamically settling incongruencies in the original normative framework in relation to the reality of the contexts in which this public policy is implemented and the multidimensionality of the street-level bureaucracy. Put another way, if it is understood at first that it is not probable or even possible for the group of legal and infralegal norms, guides and similar items to contemplate the multiplicity of factors and contexts which are encountered in implementation, space should be provided to discuss what the public policy really is seeking and needs to influence, being less concerned with form than the results — analyzing it concomitantly or after its implementation based on dynamic objectives.

4 Final considerations

The objective of this essay has been to develop propositions regarding implementations by the street-level bureaucracy. In addition, it presents a theoretical model of the implementation of public policies, considering its multidimensional character, with the identification of factors that influence the actions of public policy implementers in the exercise of their functions.

The first developed proposition is that discretion, more than an influencing factor in the way the street-level bureaucracy implements public policies, is a product of the interdependent relationships of the factors that influence the act of implementation, and they cannot be confused with discretion itself, which is always present.

The second proposition involves how the actions of the public policy implementers result in

rhythms of adaptation that are different from the principles which govern the public policy — the stable core — and its intercontextual factors — the dynamic core. The more a public policy is implemented, the more distant its original objectives seem to become in relation to the objectives which are effectively pursued by implementers and even its potential objectives.

At this point we have presented two paths: i) the dynamic nature of the stable core is central to public policies obtaining results that are more in line with the problems that they are objectively resolving in their implementation based on the actions of street-level bureaucrats; and ii) the stable core of public policy, more than a form of control or a source of parameters to evaluate the results, provides a base for the evolution of the dynamic core. While the former path keeps its focus on the policymakers of the stable core, the latter path recognizes the evolving nature of the implementation of public policies, built just upon the bases that are necessary for its creation, but free to establish its own objectives, in a variable manner within its countless distinct intercontextual factors, based on its implementation by the street-level bureaucracy.

The last proposition that we debate is the need for policymakers to recognize the influence of the street-level bureaucracy and know the factors that influence the way it implements a given public policy. This would give them conditions, alternatives, and information to harmonize the stable core — or perceive it as a base — in terms of what in fact is being sought in the implementation. As a result, the original normative framework of the public policy would possess greater adherence in relation to the reality of the contexts in which the public policy is implemented and the multidimensionality of the street-level bureaucracy.

Theoretical essays are limited in the number of studies that they consider in the discussion of factors that influence the street-level bureaucracy in the implementation of public policies, and there is also a need to test the developed propositions through empirical studies to support and provide new evidence for this debate.

Future studies can advance in the search for other contributions in terms of the way the street-level bureaucracy acts, which is something that appears to be fundamental to the analysis of the front-line implementation of public policies. Another possibility for future research is to bring street-level organizational concepts (Brodkin, 2011) to the presented model, because it encompasses the actions of individuals who operate on the street-level in their organizations. We also argue in favor of an agenda of studies of how crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, affect the implementation of public policies, which is a subject that has not been widely explored in the literature and has great potential to raise important theoretical and practical developments (Brodkin, 2021; Gofen & Lotta, 2021), especially in terms of the prediction that after the pandemic, their implementation reverted many of the changes observed during this period. This added to the lack of financial resources caused by the emergency spending of public funding led the street-level bureaucracy to operate under even more restricted and challenging conditions (Cox et al., 2021).

Finally, we observe the need to develop studies on this subject in Brazil, especially in terms of the analysis of empirical studies, and make advances in comparative studies (Bonelli et al., 2019; Gofen & Lotta, 2021) internationally. Policies in the areas of healthcare and social assistance are examples of areas that have been studied in this country, but this has not been enough to understand their implementation in a country as diverse and unequal as Brazil.

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