

A Review of Literature on Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory

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Abstract: This paper reviews the "street-level bureaucracy" theory, originated by Lipsky (1980), focusing on frontline public servants with direct citizen interaction, high discretionary power, and resource constraints. Key features include direct public engagement, adaptive decision-making under scarcity, and role conflicts between institutional rules and public needs. The theory's evolution spans five stages: germination (Simon's bounded rationality), formalization (Lipsky's framework), global expansion, contextual localization (e.g., China), and technological integration (AI-driven accountability). Central debates revolve around discretionary power's dual role—enabling flexible policy implementation while risking arbitrariness. The review highlights its contribution to understanding grassroots policy dynamics but notes limitations in addressing systemic structures. Future research should balance discretion with technological oversight and deepen cultural adaptations.

Keywords: Street-Level Bureaucracy; Discretionary Power; Policy Implementation; Frontline Governance; Theoretical Localization

1. Definition of Concepts

1.1 Concept

The 1970s and 1980s, policy implementation received attention in the field of public policy in the United States, and a study on the "implementation movement" was in full swing. In this context, public policy researchers began to pay attention to the importance of grassroots civil servants, and the "street-level bureaucracy" theory came into being. The concept of "street-level bureaucracy" was first mentioned by American scholar Michael Lipsky in "Towards a Theory of Street-level Bureaucracy" published in 1977. In 1980, Lipsky officially published

"Street-level Bureaucracy: The Personal Confusion in Public Service", marking the formal establishment of the street-level bureaucracy theory^[1].

According to Lipsky's definition, "street-level bureaucrats" refer to grassroots civil servants who directly face the public and implement policies in the field of public services, such as police, teachers, social workers, etc. They have a high degree of discretion in their actual work and can handle problems flexibly according to specific circumstances, thus having an important impact on the actual implementation of policies^[2].

1.2 Concept Analysis

Street-Level Bureaucracy is a special term composed of street (Street-Level) and bureaucracy (Bureaucracy). To accurately grasp the concept of street-level bureaucracy, it is necessary to examine the meanings of street and bureaucracy respectively. At the same time, the development of street-level bureaucracy theory is a continuous and progressive process. Therefore, it is very necessary to sort out and define the research on this theory from the dimensions of semantic analysis and academic interpretation. First, it is necessary to explore the etymology and semantics of street-level bureaucracy. Second, it is necessary to sort out the representative views and controversies on the theory of street-level bureaucracy in the academic community.

Semantic analysis mainly includes two parts: etymological analysis and semantic evolution. In terms of etymological analysis, the English word "Street-Level" for street bureaucracy is composed of "Street" and "Level", which means grassroots scenes or front-line workplaces close to the public. This mainly emphasizes the direct contact and interaction between the policy implementation subject and the service recipient. "Bureaucracy" comes from the French word "bureaucratie", and its roots can be traced back to the Latin words "bureau" (desk, office location)

and "kratos" (power, rule). In terms of semantic evolution, combined with Lipsky's definition, Street-Level Bureaucracy can be summarized as "street" (street, front-line scenes) and "bureaucracy" (bureaucracy) and "cracy" (power). The evolution path of this term shows a change from describing scenes to revealing the role behavior of grassroots bureaucrats. Initially, "street" and "bureaucracy" separately referred to the specific scenes of the grassroots and bureaucratic systems. By combining the two, Lipsky proposed the concept of "front-line public service workers", aiming to reveal their characteristics of being nested in the bureaucratic system but with unique working situations. Subsequently, this term gradually evolved into an important analytical framework for policy implementation research and became a core tool for understanding the complexity of policy implementation and the "last mile" problem. It is worth mentioning that as a foreign word, the "bureaucrat" in street-level bureaucracy does not have a derogatory meaning in the historical semantics of Chinese^[3]. "Street" refers to an abstract working interface between street-level bureaucrats and citizens, rather than a specific working scene^[4]. In terms of theoretical interpretation, after Michael Lipsky, the street-level bureaucracy theory has become an important research topic in the field of policy science and public administration. However, the academic community is not completely consistent in the use and understanding of this concept. There are some disputes, but also some consensus has gradually formed. The disputes are mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, there are different views on the function and impact of street-level bureaucratic discretion. Second, there are different views on the identity of street-level bureaucrats, that is, whether they are policy implementers or policy makers. Third, there are different views on the boundaries of the research scope, that is, the types and number of administrative roles included in street-level bureaucrats. At the same time, the academic community has also reached a series of consensus on this theory, which is mainly reflected in the following aspects: First, discretion, as a key component of street-level bureaucracy theory, is the core feature of street-level bureaucracy theory. Second, as the "first contact point" of policy, the importance of the role of street-level bureaucrats is increasingly highlighted. Third, policy implementation and

formulation have a two-way relationship, that is, the feedback made by street-level bureaucrats in the process of implementing policies is an important basis for the "secondary design" of policies.

2. Feature Analysis

According to Michael Lipsky's classic research and subsequent scholars' supplements, street-level bureaucrats, as front-line workers who directly face the public in the field of public services, mainly include the following four characteristics.

2.1 Directly Facing the Public

The first core characteristic of street-level bureaucrats is their direct contact with the public, that is, they are directly facing the public. As the "first contact point" of policies, street-level bureaucrats directly represent the government to interact with service recipients. Their behavior not only affects the effectiveness of policy implementation, but also determines the public's understanding and trust of the policy. Lipsky pointed out that "street-level bureaucrats are the link closest to the public in the policy implementation chain, and their behavior constitutes the basis of the relationship between the government and the public^[5]." At the same time, Hupe and Hill also pointed out that the nature of the work of street-level bureaucrats requires them to interact directly with the public, which directly affects the effectiveness of policy implementation and public satisfaction^[6]. This characteristic shows that when implementing policies, street-level bureaucrats must find a balance between achieving institutional goals and meeting public needs.

2.2 Resource Constraints

Street-level bureaucrats usually work under limited resource conditions, including human, material and time constraints. The reason for this is mainly due to the peculiarities of the interaction between public service supply and demand. If service providers provide additional supply, demand will increase to consume these services. In other words, the demand for public services will increase as supply increases.

This resource limitation forces them to prioritize or respond strategically during the execution process. Therefore, the long-criticized difficulty in improving the service quality of street-level bureaucrats has been reasonably explained: first,

if street-level bureaucratic agencies have idle resources, they are more inclined to choose to provide additional services rather than improve services. Second, it is one-sided to evaluate the quality of services provided by street-level bureaucrats based on the time they spend. Third, improving the quality of work by reducing the amount of work has little effect.

Lipsky pointed out that "street-level bureaucrats must develop simplified strategies under conditions of insufficient resources to ensure that policies are implemented" believes that resource constraints not only affect the efficiency of street-level bureaucrats, but may also force them to make "marginal decisions" in implementation, thereby affecting the rights and interests of service recipients^[7]. Resource constraints reflect the complexity of the working environment of street-level bureaucrats and the limitations of policy implementation, and further highlight the importance of their discretion.

2.3 Development Context

Discretion is the core of street-level bureaucracy theory and also its most controversial feature. Street-level bureaucrats have a relatively high degree of freedom and can adjust the way policies are implemented according to actual conditions. Lipsky believes that the existence of discretion is the source of flexibility in policy implementation, but it may also lead to policy deviation. Tummers and other scholars further added that "street-level bureaucrats are often affected by institutional constraints, personal values and public pressure when exercising their discretion^[8]." Gofen and Sell et al. believe that street-level bureaucrats have a high degree of discretion when performing their duties, which enables them to adjust services and decisions according to specific circumstances^[9]. It is not difficult to see from the above that, on the one hand, discretion can make street-level bureaucrats more flexible in the process of policy implementation and help promote the implementation of policies. On the other hand, it also reflects that in the process of specific application, they are also subject to the game of multiple forces.

2.4 Multiple Role Conflicts

Street bureaucrats face multiple role conflicts. They need to comply with the policies and system requirements of their superiors, respond to public needs, and are also influenced by their

own values and professional ethics. Lipsky believes that the multiple role conflicts of street bureaucrats come from the ambiguity of policy goals and the complexity of the implementation situation^[10]. Cai Lihui pointed out that "street bureaucrats need to seek a balance between multiple goals in policy implementation, and this role conflict is one of the inherent contradictions in policy implementation^[11]." This role conflict not only increases the complexity of the work of street bureaucrats, but also further exacerbates the uncertainty in the policy implementation process.

3. Development Context

The development of the "street-level bureaucracy" theory can be roughly divided into the following stages.

First, The embryonic stage. The embryonic stage can be traced back to the "limited rationality decision-making" theory proposed by Simon in the 1950s. Simon believes that due to the complexity and uncertainty of the decision-making environment, decision makers can only pursue limited rationality, that is, to make the most reasonable decision possible under given time and information constraints^[12]. This view coincides with the real situation faced by street bureaucrats. It can be said that this theory provides theoretical support for the decision-making behavior of "street bureaucrats" in policy implementation. Since then, some scholars have tried to analyze the "street bureaucracy" theory from the perspective of organizational science. For example, Aiken and Hage pointed out that external dependence affects the structure and functional configuration of organizations^[13]. This view emphasizes that the external environment has a significant impact on organizational behavior and decision-making, which is similar to the "street bureaucracy" theory in which the policy environment and social expectations affect the discretionary behavior of street bureaucrats. It is worth mentioning that although relevant research is in full swing, the concept of "street bureaucracy" theory has never been mentioned. It can be said that the research on the application of "street bureaucracy" is earlier than the research on the "street bureaucracy" theory.

Second, Initial stage. The initial stage was roughly from the 1960s to the early 1980s. Lipsky first proposed the concept of street bureaucracy in *Towards a Theory of Street*

Bureaucracy in 1969, focusing on the problems in the contact between the government and the people^[14]. In 1971, he further summarized the connotation and characteristics of street bureaucracy in his book *Street Bureaucracy and Urban Reform Analysis*^[15]. In 1977, Lipsky explored the discretion of street bureaucrats through the case of special education reform, pointing out that their work is essentially discretionary^[16]. In 1978, Lipsky and Protas further explored the structural sources of street bureaucratic discretion in *The Power of Street Bureaucrats in Public Service Institutions*. Finally, in 1980, Lipsky officially published the book *Street Bureaucracy: The Confusion of Individuals in Public Service*. In this book, the theory of "street bureaucracy" began to be systematically and comprehensively presented. This has enabled people to have a deeper understanding of the exercise of street bureaucratic discretion and the logic of their actions, and it also marks the formal establishment of the theory of street bureaucracy.

Third, Expansion stage. The expansion stage lasted from the 1980s to the late 1990s. It not only refers to the fact that the street bureaucracy theory broke through geographical restrictions and expanded to other countries or regions, but also refers to the expansion of its application areas and scope. In terms of geographical expansion, the street bureaucracy theory has surpassed the context of the United States and has been applied to countries such as the United Kingdom, South Korea, and India^[17]. The research in this stage mostly uses interviews and case studies to test and expand the street bureaucracy theory. In terms of the application areas and scope, by the end of the 1990s, Bowens and Rong Ruidis proposed that with the development of communication and network technology, "screen bureaucrats" were formed, which greatly compressed their discretionary power. Later, due to the popularization and application of embedded technology, "system bureaucrats" were formed, whose decision-making became more procedural, and they mostly existed in large institutions with a considerable probability of homogeneity.

Fourth, the localization stage. The localization stage began in the early 21st century. It means that more and more scholars began to explore the "street-level bureaucratic theory" that suits their own national conditions based on their own national realities. For example, in China, Ye

Juanli and Ma Jun first introduced the street-level bureaucratic theory to China in 2003. Since then, more and more scholars have begun to explore the applicability of the street-level bureaucratic theory in China based on specific situations and specific research methods.

Fifth, Deepening stage. In the deepening stage of street-level bureaucrat theory, the integration of big data and artificial intelligence has significantly changed the working methods and decision-making processes of street-level bureaucrats. This technological integration not only improves the efficiency of policy implementation, but also enhances the personalization and precision of services. As for big data, it provides a basis for quantitative analysis, enabling street-level bureaucrats to make decisions based on a wider range of information resources. By analyzing large amounts of data, both historical and real-time, street-level bureaucrats can more accurately predict and respond to public needs, thereby effectively addressing the resource shortage problem faced by street-level bureaucrats. As far as artificial intelligence is concerned, the application of artificial intelligence technology can assist street-level bureaucrats in risk assessment and decision-making analysis, and identify potential threats in advance through predictive models, which can effectively reduce the abuse of street-level bureaucrats' discretionary power.

4. Core issue: Discretion

4.1 Definition of Discretion

Discretionary power refers to the power of policy implementers to make judgments and decisions based on specific circumstances in uncertain situations. Because it directly affects the specific form of policy at the implementation level, it has become a core issue in street-level bureaucrat theory. Lipsky believes that discretion is an inevitable product of street-level bureaucrats facing the complexity of work and resource constraints, and is a key tool for street-level bureaucrats to deal with the contradiction between public needs and institutional requirements^[18]. He also believes that the motivation for street-level bureaucrats to exercise discretion is not for personal interests, but to solve practical problems in daily work¹. In addition, Tummers and Bekkers emphasized the discretion of street-level bureaucrats in

policy implementation, defining it as the of freedom perceived by street-level bureaucrats in the process of policy implementation. This degree of freedom allows them to adjust policy implementation according to specific circumstances to better meet actual needs^[19]. Ye Juanli pointed out that discretion is a "double-edged sword" that can promote flexibility in policy implementation, but may also lead to out-of-control implementation due to lack of supervision^[20]. In addition, Evans, T. He further explored professional discretion in welfare services, arguing that discretion is a key factor that enables street-level bureaucrats to flexibly adjust and adapt policy implementation when faced with complex social service demands^[21].

Through the interpretation of the definition of discretion, we can further know that it has the following basic characteristics: First, interpretability, that is, the implementer can explain the policy details according to the situation. Second, flexibility, the implementer can adjust the policy implementation method to adapt to the actual needs. Third, normativeness, discretion operates within a certain framework of rules and is not a completely free decision.

4.2 Academic Community's Attitude towards Discretion

Academic attitudes toward street-level bureaucratic discretion can be divided into two main categories: those who support the use of discretion and those who oppose or weaken the use of discretion.

4.2.1 Support the use of discretion

First, the use of discretion can effectively solve problems caused by complex environments and uncertain goals. In his book *Street Bureaucrats: Personal Confusion in Public Service*, Lipsky pointed out that street bureaucrats are in a state of environmental uncertainty and vague goals, and discretion is crucial to solving practical problems^[22]. At the same time, Evans and Harris proposed that discretion can help street bureaucrats complete tasks in complex environments while adapting to changing needs^[23]. Tummers and Bekkers also pointed out that discretion enables policy implementers to adjust their behavior according to public needs in actual situations, thereby improving the effectiveness of policy implementation and public satisfaction^[24].

Second, discretion can effectively deal with the problems caused by policy ambiguity and

resource scarcity. Lipsky proposed that based on the reality of resource shortage, street-level bureaucrats need to use discretion to optimize resource allocation¹. At the same time, Brodtkin also proposed that discretion allows street-level bureaucrats to flexibly allocate resources according to specific situations, thereby alleviating the contradiction between insufficient resources and institutional rigidity^[25]. In addition, Harrison also proposed that because policies are usually issued in the form of broad orders, discretion becomes a necessary political strategy^[26].

Third, discretion can avoid management rigidity. Baldwin emphasized that discretion enables street bureaucrats to complete tasks through informal decision-making when they are overloaded^[27]. At the same time, Stone also believes that over-reliance on systems may lead to management rigidity, thus affecting the resolution of practical problems. In this case, the use of discretion becomes a wise move^[28].

4.2.2 Opposing or undermining the application of discretion

First, discretionary power will threaten the political environment and democracy. Keiser and Soss pointed out that the decisions of street bureaucrats may be affected by the external political environment, which will damage democracy and fairness^[29]. At the same time, Rohr also pointed out that discretionary power gives street bureaucrats more political power and may be out of voter supervision^[30].

Second, discretionary power brings potential risks of arbitrariness. Wilson pointed out that discretionary power may lead to arbitrary behavior, especially in the absence of legal basis or incomplete information^[31]. Musheno et al. pointed out that in actual operation, discretionary power may be abused, leading to unfair implementation of policies and damage to public interests^[32].

Third, discretionary power can harm the public interest. Hupe and Hill pointed out that uncontrolled discretionary power may cause street-level bureaucrats to deviate from policy goals, or even harm the public interest due to personal bias or interests^[33]. Li Xuqin also pointed out that street-level bureaucrats are prone to dislocation in the exercise of discretionary power, which can produce negative effects^[34].

4.2.3 Thoughts on Discretion

In general, the academic community's attitude

towards discretion is not simply support or opposition, but is based on the results of analysis in different regions, different perspectives, and different situations. Taking different regions as an example, the street-level bureaucrat theory originated in the United States, and the police can be called typical street-level bureaucrats. However, American society is lax in the management of guns, which makes American police often face serious threats in the process of law enforcement. Therefore, in the United States, more emphasis is placed on the police's reasonable and legal discretion. China's management of guns is extremely strict. Usually, the public is in a "weak position" when facing police enforcement. Therefore, in China, more emphasis is placed on limiting the police's discretion to reduce the occurrence of illegal acts such as arbitrary law enforcement and selective law enforcement.

Therefore, the author believes that we should not simply support or oppose the discretionary power, but should make timely responses according to the specific circumstances. It is worth mentioning that with the development of big data and artificial intelligence, the law enforcement behavior of street bureaucrats has been further standardized. For example, by using law enforcement recorders in the process of law enforcement, the police can not only regulate their own behavior, but also protect the rights and interests of the subjects of law enforcement. Therefore, the future discussion on the discretionary power of street bureaucrats must be closely related to the background of big data and artificial intelligence.

5. Evaluate

The evaluation is mainly divided into two parts: one is the evaluation of the street-level bureaucrat theory, and the other is the evaluation of the academic community's research on the street-level bureaucrat theory.

5.1 Evaluation of the Street-Level Bureaucrat Theory

In today's society, the government administrative system and the market system are the two greatest forces that control and influence society. As the final link of policy implementation and the first point of contact with the public, street bureaucrats play a self-evident role in the policy implementation process. Before the birth of the street bureaucracy theory, whether it was

"thousands of threads above and one needle below" or "thousands of threads above and thousands of needles below" might be a mystery. When policies are not satisfactory, policymakers often blame the problems of the policies themselves, and never pay attention to the street bureaucracy group. The street bureaucracy theory pioneered the perspective of administrative research from broad to micro, and paid attention to the importance of street bureaucrats. That is, in the process of implementing policies, street bureaucrats will also have a unique set of action logic based on their own interests. Since the advent of this theory, many issues related to policy implementation have been responded to or even answered, making a huge contribution to the development of the government administrative system.

At the same time, we must also be clear that the street-level bureaucrat theory is not omnipotent and it also has its shortcomings. That is, the theory overemphasizes the subjective judgment and discretion of grassroots civil servants, while ignoring the influence of systemic, structural and external environmental factors in policy implementation, which makes it easy to fall into difficulties in studying policy implementation.

5.2 Evaluation of Academic Research

By searching more than 140 core journals in China National Knowledge Infrastructure, it was found that academic research on street-level bureaucracy theory mainly focuses on the following aspects.

First, discretion. Researchers focus on the discretion of street-level bureaucrats in policy implementation and its impact. Second, policy implementation deviation. This is mainly based on specific cases or emphasizes the deviations and correction methods of street-level bureaucrats in policy implementation in special situations. Third, responsibility control and accountability. Explore how to regulate the behavior of street-level bureaucrats through responsibility control and accountability mechanisms. Fourth, administrative ethics and moral dilemmas. Analyze the ethical and moral dilemmas faced by street-level bureaucrats in the administrative process. Fifth, the impact of information technology. Study the impact of information technology on the working environment and behavior of street-level bureaucrats.

Through the research summary of the above scholars, it is found that in terms of research content, scholars all focus on the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats and their impact on policy implementation. At the same time, the research of scholars also reflects certain differences. First, in terms of research methods, some scholars use case study methods, while others use empirical analysis. Second, the focus areas are different. Some focus on specific areas such as urban management law enforcement, while others explore a wide range of public service areas.

At the same time, the research methods are mainly reflected in the following three categories. First, case study. Analyze the behavior of street bureaucrats and policy implementation deviations through specific cases. Second, empirical research. Use questionnaire surveys, experimental research and other methods to collect data for analysis. Third, theoretical discussion. Analyze and construct the behavior of street bureaucrats from a theoretical level.

In addition, by sorting the literature from the earliest to the latest publication time, it is found that over time, scholars' research has gradually moved from traditional discretion and policy implementation bias to the following directions. First, more attention is paid to the impact of digitalization and information technology, which is mainly reflected in how the former affects the working methods and administrative efficiency of street-level bureaucrats. Second, more attention is paid to the morality and ethics of street-level bureaucrats, and how to solve the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by street-level bureaucrats in a complex social context. Third, cross-border and collaborative governance. That is, research on how to improve the effectiveness of policy implementation through cross-border actions and collaborative governance.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that although the theory of street-level bureaucracy has been developed for several decades, during which scholars have conducted corresponding research based on different methods and different groups. However, most of the research is still based on Lipsky's definition, and no scholar has truly localized the theory, that is, rooted the theory in the thousands of years of research on subordinates, and explored the internal connection and extension between the theory and Chinese subordinates. Therefore, there is

still a long way to go to localize the theory of street-level bureaucracy.

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