

Street-Level Organizations and How They Matter

*Opportunities and Challenges for
Migration Research*

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On migration, displacement and a world in turmoil

- Ordinary crises and research knowledge

The Essential Position of SLOs

Organizations that directly bring policy to people; the operational arm of the state; spaces in which ordinary, and esp. marginalized individuals, encounter the state in everyday life.



How do SLOs matter?

- SLOS bring policy to people.
- But they are more than mere policy implementers. Nor are they simply “agents of the state.”
- SLOs perform both policy and political functions, operating as de facto (if indirect) mediators of policies and politics.

SLOs as Mediators

- As policy mediators: They construct policy on the ground. Through their everyday activities, they indirectly determine who gets what, when, and how.
- As political mediators: They channel the relationship between individual and the state, where they play an indirect role in who gets heard and how.
- Tasked with the responsibility for addressing social needs and contested social problems, SLOs often occupy a deeply conflicted political space. What happens in that space, why, and to what effect are key questions for street-level research and theory.

Street-Level Theory: Explaining SLOs and What Makes Them Tick

- Varieties of SLOs and what they have in common.
- Moving from assumptions of hierarchy to understand *what* SLOs do and *why* they do it.
- SLPs (street-level practitioners) don't do just what they want. They do what they can.

Shaping Possibilities: Conditions of Work

- Directing analytic attention to the factors that shape what SLOs can do.
- Consider: Structural constraints and the mismatch problem
- The street-level calculus of choice as a function of resources and demands moderated by incentives $C=(R:D)^i$
- Conditions determine possibilities for how discretion will be exercised. In effect, they SYSTEMATIZE the exercise of discretion and produce informal patterns of practice.
- How do SLPs manage conditions of work? Using discretion to develop informal coping strategies as a common response (e.g. rationing, redefining, shortcuts)

The street-level approach in brief

- Provides a strategy for taking investigation beyond what policies *say* to examine what they *do* in everyday organizational life.
- Street-level theory recognizes that although formal policy matters, it is not definitive. Under certain circumstances, law is more of a political *référentiel* or cognitive frame that deploys “fuzzy generalities” to mask “divergent realities” (Barbier).
- Street-level research investigates how SLOs construct “divergent realities” on the ground.
- It also investigates how SLOs shape the relationship of citizens to the state, structuring possibilities for voice, claims-making, resistance, status, trust.

The State at the Street

From European Refugee Crisis to the Front-Lines of the Welfare State



In collaboration with Karen Breidahl (Aalborg University) and Staffan Hojer (Univ. of Gothenburg)

Project overview

- Brings a street-level perspective to the study of contemporary asylum politics.
- Analysis extends from the level of the state - where formal policies are made -- to the level of the street -- where administrative arrangements and informal organizational practices shape the realities of asylum and its lived experience on the ground.
- Focus on advanced welfare states, comparing on-the-ground organizational responses to asylum-seekers in Sweden and Denmark

What is asylum in everyday organizational life?

- Practices of asylum: Social regulation (containment, activity requirements) or human development (encouraging autonomy, preparation for integration or deportation)?
- Humanitarianism/meaningful life v. economic efficiency.
- How do conditions shape the possibilities for front-line practitioners to advance different asylum realities in everyday organizational life?
- How do conditions shape the possibilities for asylum-seekers to advance different asylum realities in everyday organizational life?

How to find out?

- Track organizational developments over time, including law, regulations, and organizational arrangements (e.g. funding, contracts, etc)
- Field studies in selected SLOs: including staff, volunteers, and asylum-seekers. How do they manage asylum in everyday organizational life?

Wrapping up: How SLOs Matter

- SLOs are more than policy implementers; they also should be understood as mediators of policy and politics.
- They shape policy's "divergent realities" and its lived experience.
- More broadly, SLOs structure the relationship between the government and the governed, although in ways are difficult to discern, may seem nonpolitical on their face, and may or may not be purposely political in intent.

The Research Challenge

- A street-level approach can make visible the otherwise invisible processes through which the state responds to deeply-conflicted social problems, in this case, incrementally and indirectly shifting in the boundaries between work and the welfare state.
- Implications for democracy: Difficult to challenge what is not seen.
- To the extent that street-level research brings visibility to hidden corners of the welfare state where the government and the governed meet in everyday organizational life, it makes the state more legible and transparent. It is a worthy effort.

To follow our work:

<https://voices.uchicago.edu/stateatthestreet>

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