Street-Level bureaucracy in public administration: A systematic literature review

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Abstract
Research on street-level bureaucracy has burgeoned since Michael Lipsky published his seminal book on the topic in 1980. Yet little effort has been made to comprehensively overview this stream of research. This study undertakes a systematic literature review on street-level bureaucracy in the field of public administration. Our analysis confirms that street-level bureaucracy is a centrally important and ever-popular topic in public administration, but more as a setting or context for research rather than as a primary research topic. We also find that researchers tend to interpret street-level bureaucrats' behaviours differently based upon their disciplinary frame of reference.

Research on street-level bureaucracy has increased since Michael Lipsky published his seminal book on the topic in 1980.[1] The number of published studies has grown steadily over time, especially in the 2000s. Within this accumulating body of literature, some focal points have emerged: some scholars investigated the discretion of street-level bureaucrats as agents of the state (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000); other scholars concentrated on how street-level bureaucrats implement policies and influence organizational outcomes (Brewer 2005; May and Winter 2009). Studies also probed the inner-world of street-level bureaucrats, often depicting them as well-meaning employees who cope with dilemmas and make on-the-spot decisions shaped by their challenging work environment and close proximity to clients (Brodkin 2011).

Increased decentralization and devolution of government has pushed public services closer to the frontlines of government in recent years, and this has resulted in more frequent interactions between street-level bureaucrats and citizens. This trend has renewed concerns about the managerial control and accountability of non elected bureaucrats. Social movements have erupted because of racial injustice, public health crises, purported election fraud, and deep state conspiracy theories, all of which shine a spotlight on street-level bureaucrats. Despite the accumulation of studies across the social sciences, little attention has been devoted to comprehensively overviewing and analysing the literature on street-level bureaucracy in the field of public administration.[2]

The concept of street-level bureaucracy deserves scholarly attention for several reasons. First, street-level bureaucrats work on the frontlines of government and interact directly with citizens. Different from the traditional bureaucrats,[3] these frontline professionals need to meet citizens' demands while achieving policy objectives (Lipsky 1969). Second, street-level bureaucrats have substantial discretion in their work. Higher-level officials may wield more formal authority, but street-level bureaucrats are more likely to affect the lives of citizens. Lipsky (1980, 2010) points out that street-level bureaucrats are regulated by their occupational rigidities and professional ideologies. His assessment reveals the paradoxical nature of street-level bureaucracy, which is not only grounded in professional expertise and discretion but also bounded by dense rules and client demands.

Lipsky's insight that street-level bureaucrats are important political-administrative actors emerged in the late 1960s. He was likely influenced by social and political turmoil of the times and what many saw as an elitist political system unable to cope with tumultuous events such as the Civil Rights movement, Vietnam, and Watergate. Lipsky's initial argument that street-level bureaucrats are important participants in the policy process was quite guarded. He felt, for example, that bureaucratic discretion resulted from coping with administrative dilemmas rather than from bureaucrats' own self-directed values and preferences. Nonetheless, Lipsky made it abundantly clear that discretion exists and that it is inevitable, leaving future scholars to grope with the implications.

Moreover, the topic of street-level bureaucracy engenders many other concepts such as bureaucratic accountability, control, and performance.[4] Some questions about the topic can be answered by mere description (e.g. what trends are apparent in the literature?), while others challenge our core understanding of public administration as a scholarly discipline (e.g. does bureaucratic discretion undermine top-down theories of governance and accountability, or is it integral to improving bureaucratic performance and accountability?). While the literature on street-level bureaucracy may provide insights on these matters, those insights require a clear understanding of how research on street-level bureaucracy has influenced the field of public administration over the past forty years.

To this end, we conduct a systematic review of street-level bureaucracy in public administration from 1980 to 2019. The study proceeds as follows. First, a methodological approach is explained. Second, the main trends are described (including articles, journals, authors, geographical origins of research, lines of study, methods, and outcomes that have been studied). Third, we report our findings and analyse the underlying structure of the literature, providing insight on how street-level bureaucracy studies have affected public administration. Then, we offer an assessment of research progress on the topic by noting some gaps in the literature, directions for future study, and some suggestions for pedagogy and practice.

Methodology for systematic literature review

A systematic literature review on street-level bureaucracy is needed for several reasons. First, the topic has long been important to the public administration community because so many public administrators are employed in frontline roles

in government. Growth in the number of publications implies that a topic is relevant and dynamic. Second, a comprehensive review can document trends in the literature and help to integrate and consolidate research findings. Systematically reviewing the literature provides insights about research progress and the current state of knowledge. Third, a systematic literature review can assess the strengths and weaknesses of cumulative research efforts by highlighting not only the explicit findings reported in the literature, but also by observing 'what is not there'. This can stimulate future research by highlighting gaps in coverage and research needs.

We performed a systematic search through the Web of Science's Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Our time frame was 1980 to 2019, starting with the publication of Lipsky's (1980) book on street-level bureaucracy.[5] For our purposes, journal articles were considered published when they appeared in print, not when they were released online. The sample included articles that cite Lipsky's (1980, 2010) first or second edition. Articles that address the topic of street-level bureaucracy in a meaningful way were included in the sample.

The keywords for our search were 'Lipsky' and 'street-level'. After numerous trials, we determined that these keywords, when deployed together, are narrow enough to eliminate most irrelevant articles, but flexible enough to include the various terms that have been used to refer to street-level bureaucrats. Also, we included English-language articles appearing in the Web of Science's SSCI under the topic of public administration. We then manually verified each article appeared in print that addressed the topic in a meaningful way. This process yielded 214 articles. During the search, we observed that many articles meeting our criteria were associated with both public administration and other social science disciplines, indicating that research on street-level bureaucracy has been interdisciplinary.

Findings

Figure 1 shows that articles on street-level bureaucracy were published in 47 journals, which implies the cross-disciplinary nature of the topic (Recall that many articles in our sample were published in cross-disciplinary journals, but they were deemed relevant to public administration by the Web of Science). The annual number of publications from 1980 through 2019 is shown in Figure 2. The public administration community was slow to take up Lipsky's work in the 1980s, but the level of interest grew from the 1990s onward and particularly during the 2000s. The largest number was recorded in 2018, when 27 articles were published. These increasing numbers reflect the growth of street-level bureaucracy as a research topic in public administration. The recent increases also coincide with the publication of Lipsky's (2010) second edition. While the overall number of articles has increased, the year-to-year growth trend has been relatively flat. Articles on street-level bureaucracy are a steady presence in the public administration literature, but their numbers have not dramatically surged or declined. Nonetheless, a noticeable increase did occur from 2017 to 2018.
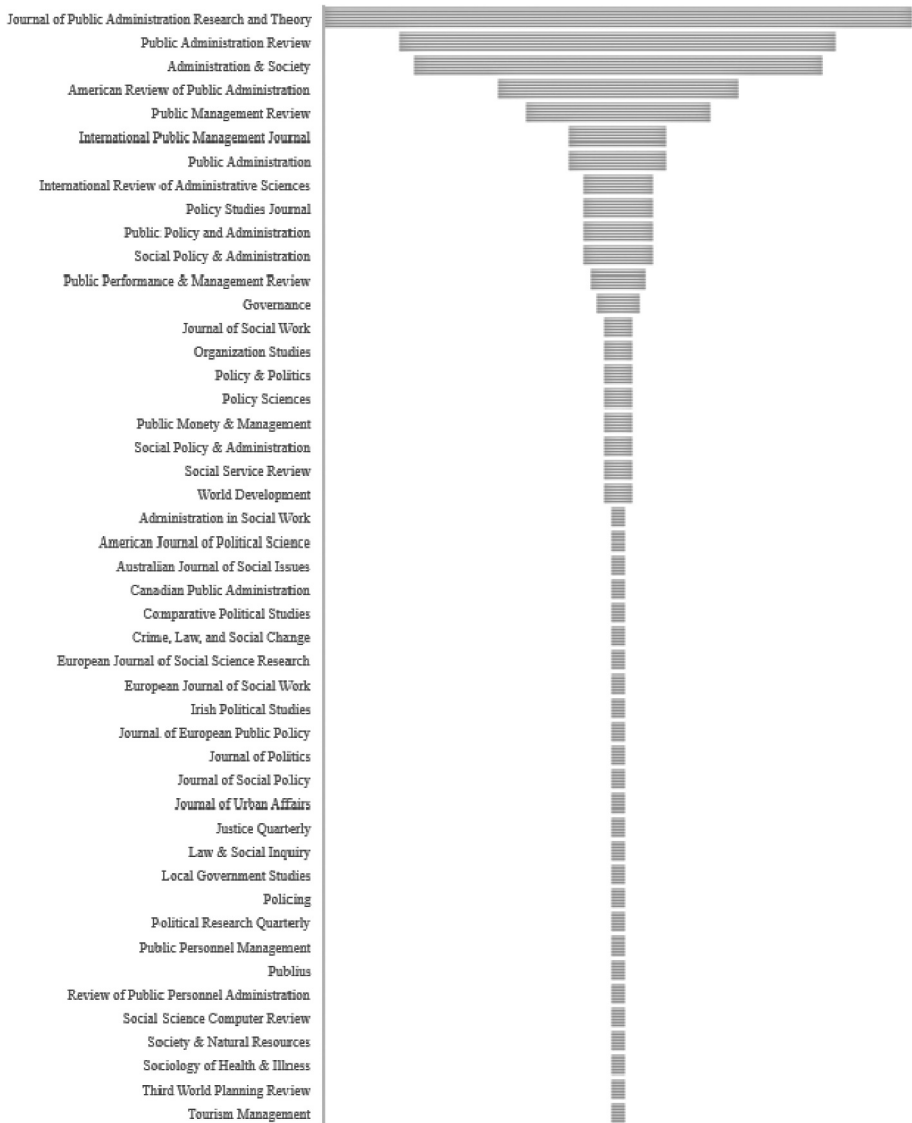
Figure 1. Street-Level bureaucracy articles by journal (1980–2019).

Authorship

Figure 3 shows the number of new authors publishing articles on street-level bureaucracy each year. These counts are based upon the number of new authors per year; thus, each author was only counted once. In total, 381 authors have published on the topic of street-level bureaucracy in the field of public administration. The number of new authors significantly increased after 2000 and peaked in 2019, when 41 new authors published articles. The same trends noted on publications seem to apply here; the number is growing over time, but the annual increases are modest. This,

Figure 2. Number of publications on street-Level bureaucracy by year.

Figure 3. Number of first-Time authors on street-Level bureaucracy by year.

however, confirms the existence of a steadily growing research community but no period of rapid growth. More than thirty authors published their first articles on street-level bureaucracy in the last two years.
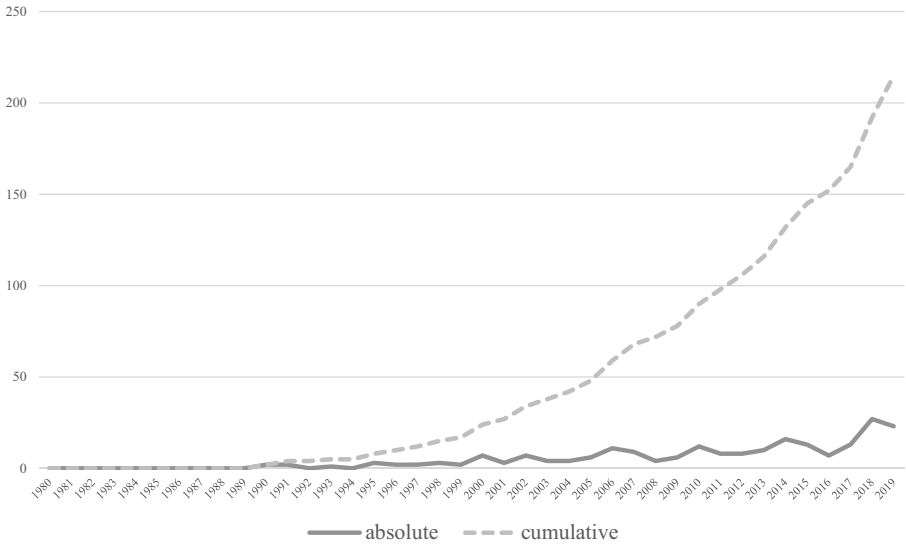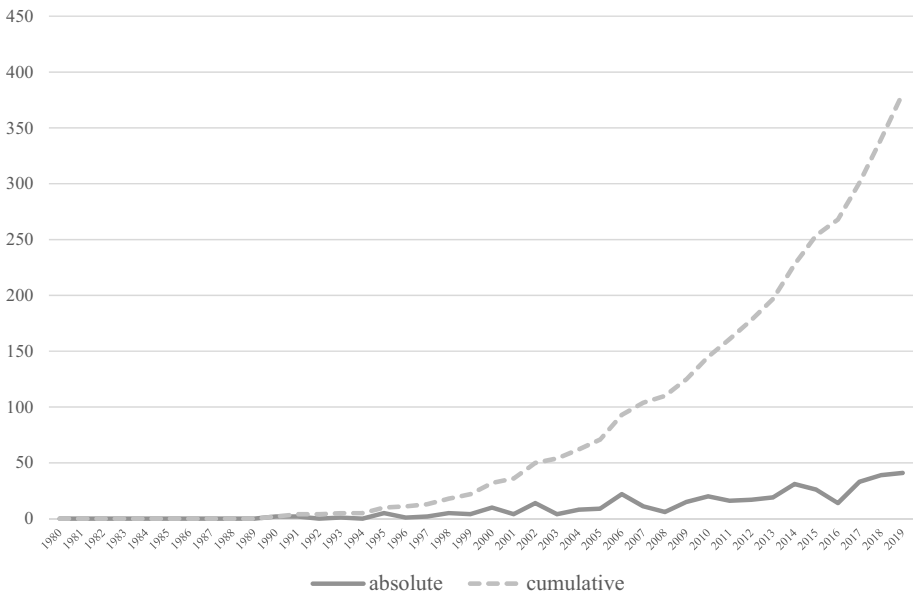
Table 1. Country origins of street-level bureaucracy studies.

Country (ISO ALPHA-2 Code)	Freq	%	Continent	Freq	%
US	102	42.0	North America	105	43.2
NL	22	9.0	Europe	81	33.3
GB	18	7.3	Asia	11	4.5
DK	15	6.1	Oceania	10	4.1
AU	8	3.3	Middle East	6	2.5
European Union	6	2.4	South America	3	1.2
IL	5	2.0	Africa	2	0.8
CH, KR	4	1.6			
BR, CA, CN, FR, SE	3	1.2			
BE, DE, FI, ID, NG, NZ	2	0.8			
AT, IN, IT, NO, RO, SA, TW	1	0.4			
Not defined	25	10.3	Not defined	25	10.3
Total	243	100.0	Total	243	100.0

Note: The countries are followed by their ISO Alpha2 code except for the European Union. Multiple classifications per study were allowed.

Country origin of studies

We examine the geographical origin of the articles to gauge the international and cross-cultural relevance of research on street-level bureaucracy (see Table 1). Although 25 articles (10.3%) did not name a specific country of origin, most were of authored by researchers working in American and European universities who tended to address the topic from a native perspective. Authors of the remaining articles clearly indicated where their studies originated and/or where their data came from. Since some were comparative case studies and/or used data from more than one country (e.g. Biland and Steinmetz 2017), multiple classifications were recorded. Most published research featured U.S. cases or samples (102 studies, 42.0%) and many remaining studies were European origin (81, 33.3%). Of the latter, researchers were mostly originated from the Netherlands, UK, or Denmark. Only 11 studies (4.5%) used samples from Asia, and even fewer employed samples from South America and Africa. In particular, we acknowledge that our focus on English-language publications might overlook articles published in native languages.

Table 2. Data collection methods used in street-level bureaucracy articles.

Data Collection Methods	Freq	%
Interview	83	31.3
Archival survey data	47	17.7
New survey data	44	16.6
Non-survey-related archival data	36	13.6
Field study	24	9.1
Only based on reviewing previous literature*	19	7.2
Experiment (including survey experiment)	12	4.5
Total	265	100.0

* The 19 articles in this category did not utilize any other method. Otherwise, multiple classifications per study were allowed.

Types of data collection

Table 2 shows that the most widely used technique was interviews of street-level bureaucrats or their clients (83, 31.3%). Some researchers used archival survey data (47, 17.7%), conducted their own surveys (44, 16.6%), or analysed register data (36, 13.6%). Other authors conducted field studies (24, 9.1%), making direct observations and employing ethnographic analytic techniques (e.g. Jos and Watson 2019). Some scholars also relied solely on selective reviews of previously published journal articles and book chapters, without collecting empirical data (19, 7.2%; e.g. Buffat 2015). Relatively few studies conducted experiments (12, 4.5%) including survey-based experiments (e.g. Andersen and Jakobsen 2017) and randomized field experiments (e.g. Jacobsen, Jacobsen, and Serritzlew S 2019). One study conducted two different types of experiment simultaneously (e.g. Andersen and Guul 2019). Although many studies analysed readily available data, a few took novel approaches.

Analytical methods

Researchers used many different analytical techniques once their data was collected (see Table 3). We classified these techniques without judging their appropriateness for answering the research questions under investigation. Some publications reported using multiple-methods, so multiple classifications were allowed per study. Many authors relied on qualitative techniques (112, 40.1%). This category includes articles based on literature reviews, ethnography, narrative, or case studies. However, most quantitative studies employed descriptive statistics (68, 24.4%), multiple regression analysis (49, 17.6%), measures of association or tests of difference (20, 7.2%), logistic regression (12, 4.3%), and factor analysis (9, 3.2%). Fewer studies used structural equation modelling (5, 1.8%) and bivariate ordinary least squares (4, 1.4%). Overall, researchers tended to use qualitative methods more frequently than quantitative methods, reflecting the heavy reliance on case studies and think pieces in the street-level bureaucracy literature.

Lines of study

We identified six different lines of study for articles in the sample based upon the main research questions or hypotheses under investigation. In the qualitative studies, we flagged the sentence(s) explaining why the study was initiated and used that information

Table 3. Analytical methods used in street-level bureaucracy articles.

Analytical Methods	Freq	%
A qualitative analytic technique	112	40.1
Univariate: descriptive statistics	68	24.4
Multivariate: multiple regression (including multilevel, panel)	49	17.6
Bivariate: measures of association or tests of difference	20	7.2
Multivariate: logistic regression (including multilevel, panel)	12	4.3
Multivariate: factor analysis (and reliability assessment or measures of internal consistency)	9	3.2
Multivariate: structural equation modelling (including panel)	5	1.8
Bivariate: OLS	4	1.4
Total	279	100.0

Note: Multiple classifications per study were allowed.

Table 4. Major lines of study in street-level bureaucracy articles.

Lines of Study	Freq	%
Generally-stated implications of street-level bureaucracy in public service delivery and citizen-state encounters	122	49.0
Theoretical conceptualizations and/or forming conceptual dimensions of street-level bureaucracy	50	20.1
Correlating street-level bureaucracy with specific outcome variables	48	19.3
Documenting the characteristics/attitudes/behaviours of street-level bureaucrats	23	9.2
Correlating specific explanatory variables with street-level bureaucracy	4	1.6
International comparisons of street-level bureaucracies	2	0.8
Total	249	100.0

Note: Multiple classifications per study were allowed.

for classification purposes. As Table 4 shows, more articles addressed the general implications of street-level bureaucrats interacting with citizens and delivering public services than any other line of study (122, 49.0%). Articles in this category highlighted public encounters and interactions between street-level bureaucrats and citizens. Some articles also established theoretical frameworks (e.g. Tummers et al. 2015), discussed conceptual dimensions (e.g. Gofen 2014), or developed research agendas (e.g. Hupe and Buffat 2014) (50, 20.1%). Most quantitative studies used at least one explanatory or outcome variable that was pertinent to street-level bureaucracy (48, 19.3%). Furthermore, some recent studies have tried to document the attitudes and behaviour of street-level employees in their job condition (e.g. de Boer, Eshuis, and Klijn 2018) (23, 9.2%). Some studies examined the effects of street-level bureaucrats' acceptance of performance information (e.g. Petersen, Laumann, and Jakobsen 2019), their assessments of whether clients were deserving of help (e,g., Jilke and Tummers 2018), and how their conflicting roles influence their implementation of public policy (e.g. Sager et al. 2014). Lastly, fewer studies utilized a comparative perspective (2, 0.8%). This is unfortunate because more comparative studies could stimulate more research in underrepresented countries, and it could help researchers generalize their findings more broadly.

Key outcome variables

Table 5 reports the main outcome variables analysed by the articles. While the lines of study indicate the research purpose of each study, key outcome variables pinpoint the specific concepts that have been studied. For the quantitative studies listed in Table 3 (59.9%), the dependent variable(s) was considered the key outcome. For qualitative studies (40.1%), research questions posed by the authors usually named the key outcome variable(s), but these variables occasionally emerged later in the study because of its inductive nature. Together, these key outcome variables provide insight on the priorities of researchers and their main outcomes of interest in street-level bureaucracy studies. The most frequently studied outcome variable was bureaucratic discretion (137, 50.7%). Most of these articles focused on discretion in policy implementation (117, 43.3%; e.g. Tummers and Bekkers 2014), but some concentrated on discretion in administrative decision-making (20, 7.4%; e.g. Keiser 2010). These studies generally dealt with the middle stages of the policy process (i.e. policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation) rather than earlier or later stages (i.e. agenda setting or evaluation). Some articles focused on street-level bureaucrats' behaviour or their interaction styles (25, 9.3%; e.g. Van Parys and Struyven 2018). Recent studies have

Table 5. Key outcomes studied in street-level bureaucracy articles.

Outcomes	Freq	%
Discretion	137	50.7
• In policy Implementation	117	43.3
• In administrative decision-making	20	7.4
Behaviour	25	9.3
• Coping behaviour	9	3.3
• Behavioural change	6	2.2
• Attitudes/Perceptions/Willingness to behave	5	1.9
• Sanctioning behaviour	3	1.1
• Enforcement/Interaction style	2	0.8
Perceptions (about delivering public service or on clients)	20	7.4
Program effectiveness/Performance	13	4.8
Delegation	8	3.0
Representation	8	3.0
Work efficiency	8	3.0
Citizen attitudes or evaluations of public service	7	2.6
Accountability/ Managerial responsibility	6	2.2
Personal Identity	6	2.2
Responsiveness to clients	4	1.5
Government realignment	3	1.1
Policy learning/Training	3	1.1
Public service motivation	3	1.1
Network/Emotional ties	3	1.1
Rule interpretation	2	0.7
Activation of stereotype	1	0.4
Biases in decisions	1	0.4
Empowerment	1	0.4
Engagement in coproduction	1	0.4
Engagement in social process	1	0.4
Legal entitlement to services	1	0.4
Moral assessment	1	0.4
Organizational cheating	1	0.4
Participation in neighbourhood	1	0.4
Policy entrepreneurs	1	0.4
Professional knowledge	1	0.4
Trust in citizens	1	0.4
Turnover	1	0.4
Value conflict	1	0.4
Total	270	100

Note: Multiple classifications per study were allowed.

started to examine street-level bureaucrats' attitudes, motivation, and behaviour, while a few studies focused on street-level bureaucrats' perceptions of programme effectiveness or policy goals (20, 7.4%; e.g. May and Winter 2009) and their performance (13, 4.8%; e.g. Sager et al. 2014), which relate to policy outputs and impact.

Some studies named representation, delegation, or work efficiency as their key outcome variables (8 each, 3.0%). Other studies focused on citizen attitudes or public evaluations of service delivery (7, 2.6%; e.g. Brown 2007). Several studies addressed closely related themes such as bureaucratic accountability (6, 2.2%; e.g. Hupe and Hill 2007), public service motivation (3, 1.1%), and bureaucratic responsiveness (3, 1.1%). Other more novel research topics were also addressed, such as street-level bureaucrats' use of stereotypes, engagement in coproduction, participation in civic affairs, trust in citizens, level of professional knowledge, and value conflicts experienced when delivering public services (1 each amounting to 0.4% each). More intensive research on these latter topics could provide traction for future research.

Table 6. Policy domains studied in street-level bureaucracy articles.

Policy Areas	Freq	%
Social welfare	56	25.7
Education	29	13.3
Law enforcement (i.e. police, immigration and corrections)	25	11.5
Health	12	5.5
Employment	10	4.6
Urban	10	4.6
Environmental regulation	8	3.7
Information/ Science technology	5	2.3
Elections	3	1.4
Taxation	3	1.4
Food safety	2	0.9
Tourism	2	0.9
Biology	1	0.5
Fire service	1	0.5
Law	1	0.5
Military	1	0.5
Veterinary	1	0.5
Not defined	47	22.0
Total	217	100

Policy domains

Policy domain–defined as policy type and policy arena–is an important contextual variable. Street-level bureaucracy may differ across policy contexts. Regulatory actions pose different challenges than social services, and so forth. We therefore recorded the policy domain of articles in the sample (see Table 6). We used a clustering technique to sort articles into policy domains. Articles that examined public school teachers as street-level bureaucrats were categorized as educational policy (e.g. Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard 1999; O'Toole and Meier 2003); whereas articles that studied social workers delivering social services were categorized as social welfare policy (e.g. Thomann and Rapp 2017); studies of policing and corrections (e.g. Paanakker 2019) were labelled law enforcement.

Some 47 studies in our sample did not name a specific policy domain; rather, the authors took a general approach. This is somewhat surprising because street-level bureaucracy is by nature granular and relevant to specific policy contexts. Qualitative studies and narrative research often sought to generalize across policy contexts, but case studies were almost always context specific. Some theoretical articles took a general approach. For example, Hupe and Hill (2007) cover the multiple forms of accountability for street-level bureaucrats without specifying a policy domain while Vinzant and Crothers 1997) develop a general leadership model for frontline bureaucrats, which is apparently meant for all policy domains.

For the articles naming specific policy domains, the most frequent one was social welfare (56, 25.7%), which includes family policy, foster care, elderly care, and other social services. The second most frequently studied policy domain was education policy (29, 13.3%). These 29 articles mostly studied teachers as street-level bureaucrats, but they used school district data and superintendent surveys as data sources. A sizable number of studies were also published on law enforcement (25, 11.5%). These articles normally focused on police officers and their encounters with citizens; however, some focused on immigration officers (e.g. Bouchard and Carroll 2002) and prison guards

(e.g. Paanakker 2019). Other policy domains studied include health policy (12, 5.5%), employment policy (10, 4.6%), urban policy (10, 4.6%), environmental regulation (8, 3.7%), and information/science technology policy (5, 2.3%). Some researchers also investigate two or more policy domains at the same time (e.g. Harrits and Møller 2014).

Recent studies have begun to push the policy domain boundaries outward and into new venues; some examples include studies of Dutch tax officials (e.g. Raaphorst 2018), Dutch food safety inspectors (e.g. de Boer, Eshuis, and Klijn 2018), Swiss veterinary inspectors (e.g. Sager et al. 2014), and caseworkers in the Flemish public employment service (e.g. Van Parys and Struyven 2018). We note that some common policy domains have not been a focal point of research, such as postal services. The U.S. Postal Service employed some of the first street-level bureaucrats in the U.S. and it has one of the largest, most decentralized workforces in the country. Another neglected policy arena includes the burgeoning domain of homeland security and emergency preparedness. These and other understudied policy domains would be welcome additions to the street-level bureaucracy literature in public administration.

The most cited and influential articles

The next step is to identify the most cited and influential articles in the street-level bureaucracy literature in public administration. We retrieved the number of citations for each article from the Web of Science's core collection on public administration, which ensures consistency with other metrics reported in the study.[6] Then, we analysed the referencing network of articles in our sample. This analytic technique has been used in social network analysis and in other comprehensive literature reviews (Ritz, Brewer, and Neumann 2016). The technique involves calculating the centrality of individual articles within a larger sample. In this study, in-degree centrality is measured by calculating the ratio of the number of times an article was cited by other articles in the dataset to the total number of publications in the dataset minus 1. An adjusted in-degree centrality measure is also computed to account for the fact that older articles may have more citations because of their age alone. This adjusted score is calculated based upon the number of articles published in the same year or later rather than the total number of articles in the sample.

Table 7 shows that Hupe and Hill's (2007) study is the most-cited article in the sample. Table 8 further reports in-degree centrality and adjusted scores in the research network. Comparing the rankings in Tables 7 and 8 reveals that the ordering of the most highly cited articles and their in-degree centrality scores are similar, but the adjusted ranks are different because some newer articles had more relative impact than some older ones. Yet all of these articles are prominent in the network of studies on street-level bureaucracy, so they deserve careful attention.

There are several important takeaways from this analysis. First, within the more narrowly defined research network, as compared to the general public administration literature, we find more diversity in terms of authorship and a sharper focus on the dynamics of street-level bureaucracy. Second, there are several tie-scores within the research network rankings suggesting a crowded field overall and shades of difference in influence. Yet the adjusted scores sort this out more clearly. Overall, this set of articles indicates what other scholars in the network see as the most important and enduring themes for research on street-level bureaucracy in public administration,

Table 7. Most cited articles on street-level bureaucracy in the web of science.

Author(s) (year)	Descriptions	Times Cited	Rank
Hupe and Hill (2007)	This study explores the characteristics of the contexts in which street-level bureaucrats deliver public service and specifies the consequences of these characteristics for the way professionals are held accountable in the public sector.	224	1
Bouchard and Carroll (2002)	In the context of the constitutional state, this study focuses on the transformation of street-level bureaucracy to system-level bureaucracy due to a growing use of information and communication technology.	188	2
May and Winter (2009)	This study focuses on how politicians, managers, and the dispositions of street-level bureaucrats shape street-level bureaucrats' actions when they implement a policy.	176	3
Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006)	This study examines the relationship between female police officers and sexual assault reports and arrests in the theoretical context of representative bureaucracy.	167	4
Brodkin (2011)	This study discusses an analytic framework for street-level bureaucrats' choice and constraints under new managerialism by focusing on welfare reform.	157	5
Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard (1999)	This study investigates the relationship between organizational outcomes for minorities and non-minorities and representative bureaucracy which is measured at the street-level in 350 school districts over six years.	151	6
Bohte and Meier (2000)	This study raises the issues of goal displacement and organizational cheating in Texas public schools and suggests a theory for when and why organizations are likely to cheat.	129	7
O'Toole and Meier (2003)	This study shows the impact of both stability and managerial quality on school-district performance by using data from Texas school districts for five years.	115	8
Tummers et al. (2015)	This study examines street-level bureaucrats' coping behaviour during public service delivery and develops a theoretical framework of two major effects of their discretion: client meaningfulness and willingness to implement.	108	9
Wilkins and Williams (2008)	This study shows that organizational socialization of black police officers may hinder the transformation of their passive representation into active representation in policing.	98	10

Note: Citations were searched on 28 June 2020.

whether defined broadly as the entire field or narrowly as the research network. As mentioned above, some articles achieved high ranks in the broad field because they utilized the context of street-level bureaucracy as a stepping stone to study other popular topics in the field. These studies clearly benefitted from the popularity of their main topics of interests, but they also provided valuable evidence on street-level bureaucracy. This does, however, raise questions about whether street-level bureaucracy should be thought of as an organizational context for studying popular public administration topics or whether it should be considered a substantive research topic in its own right. Our inclination is to say both, partly because they are complementary approaches.

Underlying structure of the literature

Systematic literature reviews provide insight on the underlying structure of the literature, including interpretations of why the literature has developed in a particular way, how scholars' thinking has evolved over time, and the specific shortcomings that need

Table 8. Most influential articles on street-level bureaucracy in the research network.

Authors (year)	Descriptions	Times Cited	In-Degree Centrality	Rank	Adjusted Centrality	Rank
Hupe and Hill (2007)	This study explores the characteristics of the contexts in which street-level bureaucrats deliver public service and specifies the consequences of these characteristics for the way professionals are held accountable in the public sector.	18	.0659	1	.0507	2
May and Winter (2009)	This study focuses on how politicians, managers, and the dispositions of street-level bureaucrats shape street-level bureaucrats' actions when they implement a policy.	15	.0549	2	.0446	4
Tummers et al. (2015)	This study examines street-level bureaucrats' coping behaviour during public service delivery and develops a theoretical framework of two major effects of their discretion: client meaningfulness and willingness to implement.	14	.0513	3	.0741	1
Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011)	This study examines the organization of discipline in the Florida Welfare Transition program. Performance management shows the limits of discretion in the work of local program managers as well as street-level bureaucrats.	14	.0513	3	.0478	3
Meier and Nicholson-Crotty (2006)	This study examines the relationship between female police officers and sexual assault reports and arrests in the theoretical context of representative bureaucracy.	8	.0293	5	.0212	6
Tummers and Bekkers (2014)	This study develops a theoretical framework of two major effects of street-level bureaucrats' discretion: client meaningfulness and willingness to implement.	8	.0293	5	.0369	5
Riccucci (2005)	This study analyzes how street-level bureaucrats influence the implementation of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families policies in the state of Michigan.	7	.0256	7	.0182	8
Wilkins and Williams (2008)	This study tests whether the police socialization of black police officers is related to an increase in racial profiling.	7	.0256	7	.0204	7
Meier, Wrinkle, and Polinard (1999)	This study investigates the relationship between organizational outcomes for minorities and non-minorities and representative bureaucracy which is measured at the street-level by using 350 school districts over six years.	6	.0220	9	.0136	9
Keiser and Soss (1998)	This study contributes to theories of discretion, particularly focusing on social welfare bureaucracies.	6	.0220	9	.0135	10

Note: Citations were searched on 25 June 2020.

to be addressed in future research. Research questions can be pursued through different theoretical frameworks, but the choice of framework shapes the lines of inquiry and shades the interpretation of findings. Some narrowly conceived frameworks can cause tunnel vision and create blind spots that obscure important insights and prevent researchers from seeing the broader relevance of their work.

The public administration literature on street-level bureaucracy has developed along two major and somewhat parallel tracks – one reflecting a political science perspective and another that closely hews to a policy perspective. The former approach has focused on the relationship between elected officials, bureaucrats, and citizens as voters; while the latter has envisioned street-level bureaucrats as policy implementers, and sometimes as policy (re)formulators. There are fundamental differences in how these two perspectives view issues related to street-level bureaucracy, including their conceptions of discretion and accountability. Studies from a political science perspective often emphasize the potential negative implications of bureaucratic discretion while studies from a policy studies perspective tend to view discretion more positively and optimistically.

Despite these differences, research on street-level bureaucracy has benefitted from the contributions of political scientists and policy scholars. Scholars from these perspectives have pursued slightly different research agendas on street-level bureaucracy. The subset of studies emerging from political science has focused on traditional concerns of that perspective, including bureaucratic control, discretion seen as slippage, and accountability through compliance-based mechanisms or demographic representation. In contrast, the policy perspective has emphasized how street-level bureaucrats blur stage-based models of the policy process and how they influence policy outcomes from downstream in that process. These scholars tend to replace top-down assumptions with bottom-up realities, and they are comfortable with street-level bureaucrats mediating the clashing interests of government elites and citizens. Some are even more optimistic, suggesting that street-level bureaucrats use their professional expertise to formulate and implement public policy on the spot, correcting policy failures, political miscalculations, and other shortcomings of the system.

Importantly, research from these perspectives has converged on several concerns that are central to street-level bureaucracy, including accountability, discretion, and responsiveness, albeit in different ways. For example, Hupe and Hill (2007) address the question of accountability in multi-level governance while Bohte and Meier (2000) speak to accountability regarding organizational cheating as a form of bureaucratic (mis)behaviour. These are two sides of the same coin: discretion can be seen in a positive or negative light, and it can lead to both positive and negative consequences. This fuller understanding of discretion is highly useful.

While we have documented several positive developments in the street-level bureaucracy literature in recent years, one relatively understudied aspect is, ironically, core studies on the substantive aspects of street-level bureaucracy from a public management perspective. What is that perspective? While some scholars focus on the who, what, when, where and why of government, public management scholars tend to concentrate on how to achieve public purposes. Their inherently practical orientation comports with the classical portrayal of street-level bureaucrats as pragmatic problem-solvers who operate in a suboptimal environment.

We believe more intensive studies of street-level bureaucracy are needed from a public management perspective. Researchers should focus on public management-based concerns that include studies of street-level bureaucrats in their organizational environments, analysing their interactions with citizens, and documenting their responses to job-related challenges and opportunities. Some studies are already doing these things, but we suggest some questions: Do social workers broker public services differently from inspectors and regulators, and do elected officials confer more

autonomy and political support on certain agencies and street-level bureaucracies than others? Are elements of street-level bureaucracy, including its relationship to clients and the type of services rendered, shaping the political and administrative process rather than vice-versa? (Certainly, Congressional committees tend to mirror bureaucratic structure in the federal government.)

While street-level bureaucracy research has centred on several major policy domains related to the disciplinary perspectives of political science and policy studies, other dimensions of street-level bureaucracy studies have been discovered or expanded. For example, street-level bureaucrats are likely to perceive their work in terms of 'relationships' rather than adherence to 'rules or policies' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). This allows street-level practitioners to protect them from being criticized by untrained observers or needy clients. In addition to such individual-level characteristics, Foldy and Buckley (2010) further add a new level to the literature on street-level bureaucrats' discretion by considering group-level characteristics, such as clear direction and capacity for reflection, in their discussion on street-level bureaucrats' learning and work practice.

Furthermore, scholars have proposed several theoretical frameworks for analysing street-level bureaucrats' discretion. For example, Vinzant and Crothers 1997) suggest four type of situations that involve different challenges and opportunities when street-level bureaucrats exercise their leadership. Similarly, Gofen (2014) uses three dimensions – motivation, transparency, and collectivity – to understand street-level bureaucrats' divergence from policy intentions and align it with policy changes. Such scholarly efforts not only expand Lipsky's concept of street-level bureaucracy but also provide a more nuanced understanding of street-level bureaucrats' discretionary choices and how their divergence from policy intentions can trigger policy change.

Discussion

Several notable implications can be drawn from our systematic literature reviews. First, street-level bureaucracy is a prominent but not a driving force in public administration research. It is a familiar topic to scholars of different persuasions, but it seldom provides the sole impetus for scholarly inquiry. The topic is more often used as a lens for scholarly inquiry – that is, as a setting or context for public administration research into other topics – rather than as a signature theme. This is surprising because public administration scholars have studied public managers and other high-level officials so intensively, while the vast majority of public employees have been street-level bureaucrats.

Second, more articles on street-level bureaucracy have originated in the U.S. and Europe than any other region of the world. In fact, all articles in our top-ten lists (Tables 7 and 8) were authored by American and Western European authors working in those regions. Street-level bureaucrats are important political and administrative actors in all over the world, so more research is needed in more places. Third, while scholars often used multiple methods to validate their findings, the overall impression is that many studies have relied on survey research from readily available datasets. Nonetheless, we also detected some research utilizing a broader array of qualitative and quantitative research techniques, including field research, controlled experiments, and ethnographic studies. Increased use of multi-level analysis will allow researchers to

study different levels of governance simultaneously while isolating the unique contributions of street-level bureaucrats. Future studies will likely capitalize on this opportunity.

Another implication is that many articles in the sample (50.7%) examined discretion as a core mechanism of street-level bureaucracy, particularly in implementing public policy (43.3%). While the discretion of street-level bureaucrats is a focal point in the policy implementation literature, other factors likely affect bureaucratic decision-making and behaviour on the frontlines. For example, scholars have considered street-level bureaucrats' personal preferences and their organizational affiliations as factors that can affect their discretionary choice (Brodkin 2011; Cohen 2018). A recent study further shows that trust influences how street-level bureaucrats evaluate and deal with their clients (Davidovitz and Cohen 2020). Yet relatively few studies in our sample probe the dark side of bureaucratic discretion, even though fears of administrative overreach have contributed to negative bureaucratic stereotypes. More intensive research could provide critical guidelines for structuring or regulating discretion and help dispel negative bureaucratic stereotypes.

Moreover, past studies have focused on a few critical issues in street-level bureaucracy such as discretion and representation, but these issues have been studied mostly in social service, law enforcement, or education. While such studies have produced useful knowledge, much more remains unknown. Increased research on how street-level bureaucrats deliver public services could help synthesize and consolidate existing knowledge. For example, DiIulio (1994) explains how retired federal prison guards often mobilize and stand vigil during violent prison takeovers, causing us to rethink what is meant by bureaucratic coping, discretion, and accountability in that unique institutional context. A recent study also shows that correctional officers share many characteristics of street-level bureaucrats (e.g. Paanakker 2019). Prison professionals' work in the cellblock rather than on the street raises provocative questions about how frontline actors enforce rules, interact with, and ultimately serve wards of the state rather than citizens.

We observed a growing interest in several sub-topics of street-level bureaucracy, such as coping and accountability. The prospect of better understanding the chain of discretion-coping-serving-accountability could resolve many conundrums of street-level bureaucracy. Future research should investigate how the dynamics of this behavioural process affect street-level bureaucrats' style of public service delivery in their repetitive encounters with citizens, which could lead to a degree of routinization and standardization that minimizes discretion. Furthermore, public policy is increasingly delivered not only by public bureaucracies but also by nongovernmental entities, voluntary organizations, and through co-production. Given the complex settings and multiple stakeholders in modern-day public administration, understanding street-level condition may be a prerequisite for understanding the coping mechanisms of street-level bureaucrats when delivering public services. A governance perspective with emphasis on implementation networks, cross-sector collaboration, and active citizenship can be promising.

Conclusion

Lipsky's (1980, 2010) book on street-level bureaucracy seemingly captured the imagination of social scientists, but it also sparked some controversies. Some political scientists are concerned about the negative implications of bureaucratic discretion, while some

social welfare and human service researchers saw the opportunity for street-level bureaucrats to remove barriers and correct social inequities (Musil et al. 2004). Such generalizations do not, however, account for the contextual variation and cultural specificity that shape street-level bureaucrats' behaviour. We believe Lipsky's influential perspective on street-level bureaucracy should be considered a tentative rather than a fixed framework. His portrait of street-level bureaucracy is embedded in the general context of complex policies, needful clients, and scarce resources. More in-depth analysis in other contexts would provide a fuller understanding of bureaucratic behaviour.

Many studies have concentrated on the discretionary power of street-level bureaucrats, while focusing less attention on the conditions and structures that they inhabit or confront. In practice, street-level bureaucrats not only interact with citizens, but also with managers, politicians, and other stakeholders who may have conflicting preferences. Scholars also need to explore how elected officials and public managers can support the legitimate aims of street-level bureaucrats. Lipsky (1980, 2010) implied that managers and street-level bureaucrats have intrinsically conflictual relationships, but our sense is that austerity can trigger innovation, harmony may be possible, and public service is a powerful unifying purpose. For future study, increased attention should be placed on studying these relationships.

Despite the richness of this study, some caveats should be noted. First, our sample comes from the Web of Science's SSCI database. This source provides a representative sample of the relevant literature that consists of high quality, peer-reviewed articles on street-level bureaucracy in the field of public administration. However, it does not cover the full range of publications on street-level bureaucracy. Future studies can consider adding other publication databases to enlarge the sample. We also expect that including relevant books to the sample would provide a more comprehensive overview on street-level bureaucracy studies. Another caveat is that many studies doubtless include street-level bureaucrats in larger samples of government employees, which may give the false impression that street-level bureaucracy has been thoroughly studied, but those studies often conflate street-level bureaucracy with other organizational echelons or other cohorts such as staff experts or higher-level managers. One problem with commingled samples is that findings pertaining to street-level bureaucrats can be masked by findings specific to other groups. Therefore, these studies are of limited usefulness for understanding street-level bureaucracy.

Researchers should bore deeper and study street-level bureaucrats performing different tasks and serving various clienteles, with an emphasis on how they do what they do. Much of what we know is derived from formal documents such as organizational rules and standard operating procedures; little is known about the unwritten craft knowledge that public administrators develop and pass on to their successors over time. This knowledge of what works and what doesn't constitutes the agency's expertise in carrying out its mission. Learning more about this uncodified and largely invisible craft knowledge would likely broaden the conceptual framework of street-level bureaucracy and augment our understanding of bureaucratic behaviour.

Persistent concerns about bureaucratic accountability also underscore the need for our comprehensive understanding of how multiple policy actors working together on the frontlines of government can achieve accountability. One large-scale study of bureaucratic encounters found that citizens trust street-level bureaucrats more than other, more distant officials (Katz et al. 1975). These frontline workers are more visible

in their communities and interact more frequently with citizens. At the same time, public service delivery has become more complex with the growth of interorganizational networks and collaborative governance. Traditional government-centred service delivery is giving way to these more plural arrangements, which include citizen co-production of public service. In an age of government by proxy, ensuring the accountability of street-level bureaucrats is more important than ever before. Researchers need to explore how elected officials and public managers can support the legitimate aims of street-level bureaucrats without encouraging unlawful activities. Researchers may also need to expand their understanding of accountability to encompass the reality of street-level discretion.

The proper role of street-level bureaucrats in democratic governance is a lasting concern. When the pandemic outbreak disrupted public service delivery, street-level bureaucrats often stepped up and filled in the gaps. Their face-to-face encounters with clients create feelings of reciprocity, dispel fears of distant, and smug government officials lording over citizens. Street-level bureaucrats are seen as more down-to-earth than other higher-level officials in the eyes of citizens. Street-level bureaucracy is thus a source of legitimacy for the administrative state and an effective means for delivering public services. These are important virtues since non-elected administrators exercise considerable discretion in modern society; they work in hidebound civil service systems that can partially shield them from political oversight and the wrath of public opinion. While there is no fail-safe mechanism to ensure that public administrators will be faithful, accountable, and responsive to the people, street-level bureaucrats provide enough daily lubrication to make the system work.

Overall, this study provides a panorama of past research on street-level bureaucracy and it offers a roadmap for future study. We wonder what will be lost if these public employees are replaced by robots and on-the-spot decisions are rendered by artificial intelligence and machine-based technologies. One thought is that discretion, compassion, and moral judgment might be lost, even though public services could be delivered more punctually and cost-effectively by machines without a conscience. This spectre of change is nonetheless unsettling given our paltry knowledge about street-level bureaucracy. We live in an era when some pundits perceive a 'deep state' while others view bureaucratic discretion as our final hope for preventing political failure and saving the republic. Hence, we close by reiterating our call for more research on street-level bureaucracy. Scholars need to double-down on this important topic.

Notes

1. Lipsky introduced the term street-level bureaucracy in 1969, but it did not attract much attention until his book was published in 1980.
2. Some researchers published literature reviews on specific issues related to street-level bureaucracy. For example, Tummers et al. (2015) overviewed studies on street-level bureaucrats' coping behaviour. Nevertheless, no one has published a broader and comprehensive review of street-level bureaucracy studies in public administration.
3. When describing an ideal type of bureaucracy, Weber (1968 [1921], 973) stated: 'precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration.' He thus emphasized the technocratic nature of bureaucrats.

4. Public administration scholars have noted the tension between bureaucracy and democracy. The rise of the administrative state fuelled fears that increasing bureaucratic autonomy, expertise and professionalism could undermine popular rule (Waldo 1982). In recent years, populist political leaders have echoed this concern, referring to government bureaucracies as the 'deep state' and promising to 'drain the swamp.'

5. Lipsky wrote about street-level bureaucracy before his book went press (e.g. Lipsky 1969), but it has become the cornerstone of research on street-level bureaucracy.

6. Google scholar citations produce similar results and rankings, but the number of citations is of course greater.

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