Monographic Section

Street-Level Workers' Discretion in the Changing Welfare

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Abstract. A crisis and deep re-organisation of European welfare systems started in the 1970s. Both the demand for and supply of welfare intervention are involved in relevant transformations, and the street-level workers are placed right at the crucial point where which they meet. They have to accomplish their complex mandate in a changing context and cope with multiple pressures. In order to carry out this task, they manage a certain degree of discretion (Lipsky 1980) that is shaped by the legal, organisational, cultural, social and economic context in which they are embedded. These conditions' change tends to modify the "spaces" and the use of discretion. Usually, the street-level perspective studies the effects of discretion on policy implementation, services and users. This article focuses on how discretion produces feedback on the same street-level workers, modifying their role, work conditions and risks.

Keywords. Street-level bureaucracy; social workers; welfare crisis; discretion; professional risk.

1. THE TOPIC AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The street-level perspective assigns a key role in the complicated process of policy implementation to professionals who interact directly with citizens and take relevant decisions about their requests or conditions on the basis of a public mandate but through a certain degree of discretion. They represent their organisations' interface with citizens. They are teachers, police officers, judges, welfare workers and other professionals who hold a relevant discretional power «in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies» (Lipsky 1980: 13). As professionals, their essential task is to apply general indications and abstract knowledge to concrete cases, by adapting their decisions to specific characteristics and contextual conditions. This makes their mandate complex and the results of their decisions (at least partially) characterised by

an irreducible uncertainty: Champy (2018b: lines 58-60) defines «the very reasoning required to act in situations of irreducible uncertainty» as "prudential professionalism" or "prudentiality". He also describes the development of appropriate evaluations and solutions in relation to complex tasks and contexts as "practical wisdom" (Champy 2018a; 2018b).

In order to cope with complexity, these figures manage a "space" of discretion shaped by formal and informal indications and boundaries. It is variable but unavoidable, as it is essential to carry out their tasks (Lipsky 1980; Evans, Harris 2004). In effects, whenever a task is delegated, part of the control is lost in favour of the delegated agency or person (Ham, Hill 1986).

These professionals can be employed in the public administration[1], but they also belong to external agencies that provide benefits and sanctions on behalf of the public administration and contribute to making policies concrete. Taking both into account, this article uses the expression street-level workers (SLWs hereafter). The same agencies may involve a set of professionals with different qualifications. For example, in the welfare policy sector (which will be analysed in the following paragraphs), they may include social workers, caseworkers, educators, psychologists, mediators and so on. All of these figures interact directly with citizens to provide benefits and apply sanctions on the basis of a public mandate and manage a variable "space" of discretion.

In almost forty years, the street-level perspective has produced interesting studies[2] in various policy fields that focus on policies and their implementation and outcomes. How the "spaces" of discretion are shaped, controlled and used in SLWs' decisions are analysed to investigate the complex process of implementation, to grasp not only the micro-dynamics, conditions and products but also the consequences of a long "chain" of upper choices and meso-macro-factors that influence policy practices (Saruis 2015).

This perspective helps to overcome the underestimation of discretion due to an unrealistic vision of SLWs as being relegated to executive roles and tasks (Ham, Hill 1986). Discretion should be considered both a professional "tool" with which to accomplish the assigned tasks and take complex decisions and for its negative potential due to its excessive increasing or decreasing or misuse. The "spaces" and the use of discretion are influenced by the legal, organisational, cultural, social and economic context in which SLWs are embedded. Changing conditions can introduce new pressures and implicit and not immediately evident modifications and produce unattended risks and opportunities for both citizens accessing services and SLWs. For this reason, a better awareness of and capacity to observe discretion and its effects are advisable.

This article moves the focus from the effects of discretion regarding policy implementation, outcomes, applicants and users to the effects it produces on SLWs. The aim is to show how this key concept can be relevant not only for the policy analysis to which it is usually applied but also in the study of professionals and workers. It aims to contribute to the debate between occupational and organisational professionalism about the transformations of professions and the professionals who deal with complex contexts and tasks, new work conditions and risks (Champy 2018b).

In order to conduct this reflection, the concept of discretion and its different declinations are presented in the first paragraph, as emerged from the literature. This paragraph also problematizes the effects of discretion on SLWs. The second paragraph summarises the characteristics of discretion in welfare policies and services, highlighting the reasons why this is a particularly interesting field in which to study discretion. The third paragraph applies the concept of discretion on the study of SLWs in the welfare field. A literature review about the trends in welfare crisis and transformation is aimed at describing how these may affect SLWs' work conditions, changing—formally or informally—their "spaces" of discretion. This analysis highlights how the concept of discretion can help to identify overlooked aspects about these figures, offering a framework for empirical studies and opening up research issues.

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[1] These are the street-level bureaucrats, as adequately defined by Lipsky in 1980 and, recently, by Hupe *et alii* in 2015.
[2] Many studies about the effects of street-level bureaucrats' discretion on the welfare policy implementation processes and outcomes will be presented later into this article. Some examples among the most recent and relevant publications about this topic are: Van Berkel *et alii* 2018; Hupe *et alii* 2015; Brodkin, Martson 2013; Brodkin 2011.

The research questions that drive the reflection are as follows: How can the concept of discretion support the study of SLWs? What kinds of consequences could discretion have on them as workers? What are discretion's characteristics in the welfare field? How can the crisis and transformation of welfare modify SLWs' discretion? What consequences can this transformation have on their role, responsibilities, work conditions, risks and guarantees?

Finally, a short conclusion summarises the main aspects that emerge from the article about the use of discretion in analyses of SLWs.

2. DISCRETION AS A KEY CONCEPT TO STUDY STREET-LEVEL WORKERS

Discretion is generally defined through a three-type declination (Dworkin 1978; Ham, Hill 1986; Evans, Harris 2004; Kazepov, Barberis 2012). a) Discretion *within* the laws and procedures, which is assigned to SLWs because it is necessary to adapt general legislation to variable concrete situations. b) Discretion *among* laws and procedures. This plays out in the interstices of the norms (contradictions, inconsistencies or lack of legislation), which allow decisions based on the selection, interpretation or construction of the missing references to cope with specific or unexpected situations. c) Discretion *out of* laws and procedures. This constitutes violations, whose purpose could favour or penalise citizens and whose effects can only be evaluated in specific cases (Evans, Harris 2004).

Laws do not only define the "space" and influence the use of discretion by SLWs. Formal and informal factors contribute to shaping them, which can be classified as: a) indications and boundaries established by laws, policy programs and other formal rules; b) organisational assets, rules, roles, relationships, and mechanisms of accountability; c) professional and personal cultures and ideas, as their values, perceptions and convictions contribute to shaping SLWs' decisions; and d) the external pressures and conditions in which their agencies are placed, *in primis* the pressure of demand for intervention (Hill 2003; Saruis 2015). For this reason, they are often represented as being at the centre of a sphere of influence, pointed to by arrows that represent the pressures exerted on their decisions.

Managing discretion somehow represents the essence of SLWs' mandate, in the sense that their professional task is exactly to reconcile, as best as possible, all of these pressures in accomplishing their tasks. For this reason, too, they usually must undertake long and demanding training and selection courses, which should prepare them adequately for this function (Brodkin, Martson 2013).

The contribution of the street level in shaping agencies' and services' procedures has a significant and not always predictable impact on policy outputs and outcomes. That is why they have often been considered co-policy makers and holders of a crucial dimension of citizenship (for example, in Maynard Moody, Musheno 2003).

The literature based on the street-level perspective usually looks at policies, services, outcomes and users. Scholars have only rarely highlighted the effects of discretion on SLWs, mainly individuating defensive or shirking strategies to carry out their tasks and cope with multiple pressures and frustrations (Maynard-Moody, Musheno 2003; Satyamurti 1981; Lipsky 1980). If these aspects emerge, they are usually considered minor aspects or details of more important findings, functioning to underline more relevant consequences on policy processes, services, practices and users.

The street-level perspective helps to overcome the idea of discretion as violation and arbitrariness, linked to a vision of the street level as purely executive, particularly in the public sector (Ham, Hill 1986). It underlines the unavoidability (Lipsky 1980; Evans, Harris 2004), but also the usefulness and even "desirability" of discretion, especially in complex situations, as it makes implementation work and adapts to contingencies (Brodkin 2008).

At the same time, the problematic potential of discretion remains in the possibility to control policy implementation and outcomes but also to guarantee citizens' rights and their equal and fair treatment, which depends, at least partially, on street-level decisions.

The overall idea of discretion, in these different declinations, emerges as sort of "hidden" and "mysterious" power that SLWs can use in the best of cases to accomplish their mandate and, in the worst, to impose self-centred and unjust decisions (Brehm, Gates 1997).

Moving the focus to the effects of discretion on SLWs complements this idea. On the one hand, it reinforces the consideration of discretion as a "space" for personal and professional creativity to deal with complexity. On the other hand, it makes the "weight" of discretion emerge, as a responsibility to take "fair" decisions that may respect the rules, interpret and readapt them to contingencies, construct them in un-ruled situations or go beyond them (Kelly 1994; Paraciani, Saruis 2018). Finally, the defensive strategies re-emerge as passive or active attitudes aimed at avoiding or neglecting the assigned role and tasks.

In this regard, Lipsky (1980) argues that the daily effort to make continuous decisions produces a sense of overload among SLWs. This leads them to develop routine strategies and standardised practices to reduce the tensions and stress.

Champy (2018a: 2) argues «autonomy is an unambiguous issue only for professionals». This suggestion implies that, on the one hand, SLWs should be aware of managing discretional power, but on the other hand, their managers and policymakers, who take decisions about their tasks and the work context, probably do not or not always. They often see SLBs as executors of higher decisions and technical protocols. Both of these conditions should be proved case by case. However, the awareness of discretion would help SLWs to apply their "practical wisdom" (ibid.) consciously, and help policy makers and managers to take into account the potential positive and negative effects of discretion in their decisions and better control the implementation process. A weak recognition of discretion as an essential aspect of street-level work has relevant consequences, both on policy implementation and outcomes and on SLWs' possibilities to manage it properly and legitimately (Vinzant *et alii* 1998).

3. STREET-LEVEL WORKERS IN THE SOCIAL WELFARE FIELD

Scholars' interest for the street-level perspective within welfare studies is probably because the conditions which make discretion problematic in this policy field, listed below, are particularly evident.

First, in this policy sector, the available resources are often inadequate to satisfy the demand for intervention. Lipsky (1980) has dedicated special attention to the resources issue, connecting their shortage with growing discretion. This statement has different declinations in more or less generous welfare contexts. However, the resources are limited, and partial control over them is delegated to SLWs who take decisions about evaluating applicants' demands and assigning measures. They perform a fundamental function of welfare systems: redistribution. They decide on citizens' possibilities to access social rights, contribute to the quality of services and provisions, shape routines and practices of the agencies in which they work and finally influence the policy output and outcomes. In recent decades, many efforts have been made to control SLWs' use of discretion in managing resources, but these efforts have obtained only partial results (see, for example, Evans, Harris 2004; Ellis 2007; Brodkin 2008).

Secondly, discretion increases in contexts in which the aims to be pursued are ambiguous and undefined. Lipsky (1980) explains that this ambiguity is implicit to the very essence of welfare services, in which the tension between the human care of the most "fragile" parts of the population and the treatment's impartiality (especially within public services) creates a more or less implicit conflict that SLWs have to cope with. This is a challenge they should face as individuals, with their own ideas of fairness and social justice (Kelly 1994; Paraciani, Saruis 2018); as professionals trained to apply models and methods to pursue ideal and concrete aims; and as parts of organisations with specific combinations of opportunities, boundaries and limits (Brodkin, Majmundar 2008).

Thirdly, still according to Lipsky, the results and effects of welfare policies and services are difficult to measure and, consequently, to control with accountability tools. This condition is directly linked to the abovementioned ambiguity of welfare aims, as if they cannot be univocally and clearly defined, their assessment also will be difficult or partial. This is also connected with the complexity of the social intervention design, which often includes different and potentially conflicting aims such as social assistance and autonomy and/or attempts to integrate social, health and work measures. The need for personalisation and the complexity of social intervention often need "open" laws and regulations and thus a large "space" for SLWs' decisions. This makes it difficult to standardise and

evaluate the results of their choices and strategies to elude control or to control the information provided for the assessment (Brodkin 1997; 2008).

Furthermore, Lipsky highlights the asymmetry of information between SLWs' and citizens (in particular between bureaucrats and service' users), as a condition increasing discretion. This condition has a special declination in the field of welfare services: here, the applicants are often "fragile" people in difficult conditions and with reduced negotiation capacity. This asymmetry is not only informative but also relative to power, cultural resources, relational capacities, linguistic competencies, and so on.

The last condition that makes discretion problematic in this policy field is linked to SLWs' professional status. The Welfare State development in Europe has implied a process of professionalisation (Weiss-Gal, Welbourne 2008), as in other work sectors, that has had different results, timing and contexts variations.

Reconstructing this process and the correlated debate between occupational and organisational professionalism, Champy (2018b) underlines that social professions' requests for formalisation and protection have hesitated between the claim of scientific knowledge and technical objectivity and (differently for example from the medical professions) the awareness of their tasks' irreducible complexity and uncertainty. The consequence is that, at least partially, «social work failed in its attempt to be regarded as a profession» (ibid. lines 395-396).

This process has produced various declinations of social professions (social workers, social assistants, educators, mediators, and so on) and education and training for specialised profiles, roles and tasks have been gradually instituted. These figures have assumed key roles in the welfare services, often in the public sector, with the task of translating policies into concrete social rights. These figures have assumed key roles in the welfare services, often in the public sector, with the task of translating policies into concrete social rights. However, their profiles are characterised by a variably balanced dichotomy between the need for professional discretion and "practical wisdom" to deal with the complexity and contingency of human problems and care, on the one hand, and the necessary systematisation of professional knowledge and the creation of formal protocols and rules to be included within a policy and legal system, on the other.

This specificity helps them to carry out their tasks, but weakens their status, leaving them partially unprotected from work risks and blamed for decisions that cannot be based on strict criteria and defined protocols. Furthermore, as the following paragraph will explain, this status exposes them to the current criticism of public spending and to the calls for standardisation aimed to reduce welfare costs and increase efficiency and effectiveness. These trends are requesting new balances between SLWs' professional discretion and their bureaucratic mandate.

Starting from these assumptions, the following paragraph analyses the influence of changing welfare contexts on the conditions in which SLWs make decisions. It describes how their "spaces" of discretion are modified and what the effects on these figures can be.

4. STREET-LEVEL WORKERS' DISCRETION IN THE CHANGING WELFARE

Since the 1970s, European welfare systems entered a crisis and started a long process of transformation. Similar trends of reform have concerned all European countries (Esping-Andersen 1994; 1996; Esping-Andersen *et alii* 2002), even with variations linked to timing, national models and local specificities (Barbier 2008; Kazepov 2010). In general, the complex and structural reconfiguration of welfare systems has been aimed, at the same time, at meeting the new demands of interventions created by changing risk profiles (Ranci 2010), containing public expenditures and increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of policies' and services' supply (Gilbert 2004; Jenson 2004).

The street level constitutes exactly the cross-point at which the demand and supply of welfare interventions meet. Here, the consequences of these transformations tend to converge: at this point, all of the uncertainties, misalignments, open issues and unresolved problems must finally come to some solution. The street-level workers have to manage their everyday tasks and simultaneously 'absorb' these changes, in a complex process that affects learning and practice.

The transformation of welfare systems is analysed here in detail, to highlight how it challenges the street level and modifies discretion and consequently SLWs' role, responsibility, risks and work conditions.

1) Individualisation of the demand for welfare and the increase of SLWs' discretion

In the mid-1960s, the so-called "second demographic transition" began in Europe, which was related to changing family patterns and social behaviours (Lesthaeghe 2010; Golini *et alii* 1991). The declining marriage' rates and the increasing numbers of divorces and cohabitations indicate the diffusion of less stable and plural family ties, less rigid than traditional models but also more fragile. Social and relatives' networks have become less extensive than in the past and are not always able to support the weakest members. In addition, women—traditionally delegated to free family care—started to take part in paid work. This has always led to a redistribution of workloads within the family or adequate support from institutions, depending on the different welfare contexts (Lewis 2001).

These new social conditions also increase the demand for childcare services, especially for preschool-age groups, but also for assistance to elderly and disabled people (Bambra 2007; Fargion 2000; Rostgaard 2002). Thanks to progress in medical science and improved living conditions, the average age has increased. Therefore, the demand for social provisions (especially in terms of retirement and pensions), and healthcare services has grown. At the same time, especially in some countries, the fertility rates tend to decrease and only the contribution of immigration helps to balance the workers financing public expenditures and the welfare-supported group. But the integration processes require proper investments (Melotti 2004).

Furthermore, the global market trends are inspiring reforms aimed at flexibility and lowering labour costs. Consequently, participation in the labour market no longer guarantees protection from poverty. The need is growing for measures aimed at readapting welfare provisions to new vulnerabilities, strengthening empowerment and activation policies and facilitating entry and re-entry into the labour market (Kluve *et alii* 2007).

In short, the protections that were once secured by stable jobs and by wide and solid family and social networks have weakened in favour of a less regulated labour market, unpredictable guarantees, territorial mobility, less close relationships and less mutual help at difficult moments. These conditions are producing a process of individualisation of biographies and job careers, characterised by complex, variable and specific mixes of individual potentials and needs. This social change reflects the (expressed or unspoken) demand for welfare intervention.

The applicants' "profiles" are becoming less standardised and more specific, complex and unpredictable; furthermore, the segment of the population exposed to vulnerability is expanding (Ranci 2007; 2010; Saraceno, Negri 2003). Thus, the demand for welfare intervention is not only tending to grow but also to diversify, requiring more adaptable measures to social diversification. Therefore, policies should respond to the request of "tailored" provisions. These conditions question the previous balances between equity (different treatment for different citizens) and equality (same treatment for all citizens) underpinning welfare policies.

Welfare interventions for individual cases should reconcile multiple aims, such as social support, economic sustenance, psychological help, attention to healthcare and activation in the labour market, depending on applicants' needs and resources. In the last thirty years, activation has become a priority in this policy mix, in all European countries, although with different strengths (Jenson 2006; Serrano Pascual, Magnusson 2007). The literature has shown that if this aim is not part of multidimensional support which considers all aspects of applicants' fragility (and resources), it will probably fail (Thorén 2008; Brodkin, Martson 2013). The labour market and social context's potential for inclusion is important, but adequate individual projects and support are essential for the success of these pathways.

In relation to the street level, all of these complicated requests tend to widen the "spaces" of discretion, to increase the possibility of interpreting, adapting and applying general provisions to concrete cases' specificities. The conversion process for the formal general rights in substantial support and opportunities becomes crucial. Considering the changed conditions, a redefinition of the balance between equality, as impartiality in citizens' treatment, and equity, as interventions targeted at individual specificities, is unavoidable. This redefinition can be formal and

explicit or informal and implicit, in the sense that the welfare system will adapt to social change with or without political decisions and reforms. If the demand for intervention changes, then the street level will use uncertainties, inconsistencies and voids in the laws, rules and standards to build and motivate new answers. Lowi (1979) argues that politicians can be more interested in gaining consensus than in finding real solutions to difficult situations; thus, they tend to move the conflicts towards other decisional arenas «as far down the line as possible» (ibid.: 55). This means the unresolved (for many reasons) political or social conflicts at the political level can be postponed towards the street level. Here, decisions about the access, priorities and quality of provisions must be unavoidably taken to respond to citizens' requests. In this sense, the failure of welfare systems to formally adapt to social change ends up increasing the "spaces" of discretion, the responsibility assigned to street-level workers and also, as we will see more deeply in the following section, the risk of blame on them.

2) Control over public expenditures and the uncertain effects on SLWs' discretion

If the goal of sustainability of public expenditures is widely accepted, on the contrary, it will be more difficult to achieve, within the political arena, balanced agreements on the selection of priorities and clear definitions of included and excluded target groups regarding access to services and measures. This difficulty may create political and social conflicts and curb the development of clear reforms. In fact, as told just some lines above, postponing responsibility can be a strategy aimed at suspending political and social conflicts. This strategy has two additional advantages:

> First, when an issue blows up in a major way, and it's established that there has been a departure from procedures, blame can be allocated at the street-level. Second, it can be in senior managers' and politicians' interest to leave individual decision about resource allocation to professionals, distancing themselves from the awkward day-to-day consequences of their strategic goals. (Evans, Harris 2004: 887)

The blame-avoiding strategy by the political levels moves the risk linked to important choices about reducing funding to the implementation phase and to those who take decisions at this level.

In recent decades, relevant reforms have been introduced in a context of economic crisis and budgetary constraints that are not particularly favourable to redistribution, equality and social citizenship. Vested interests and strong lobbies' reactions are often aimed not only at resisting the retrenchment logics, but also at influencing the reallocation of the available resources. This makes the welfare reforms "viscous" and difficult to re-adapt to changing and complex needs (Bonoli 2001; 2007).

The availability of resources should be intended not only in terms of monetary or in-kind benefits to be distributed to the applicants, but also in relation to the "human" resources: the available professionals, their competencies and skills, their workloads, the availability of their time to process their decisions and so on. Labour costs usually represent a major expenditure on welfare services. Attempts to reduce the costs have induced the conversion of social work tasks into definite aims and standardised measures to, first, control and evaluate the distribution of benefits and reduce the time needed for procedures and, second, make it possible for them to be managed by less-skilled, lower-cost workers (Folgheraiter 2007).

As we will see below (in more detail), this strategy has introduced two contradictions in services that affect discretion: on the one hand, the definition of rigid standards contradicts the already explained need to adapt welfare interventions to the increasing complexity and individualisation of the demand; on the other hand, the literature has highlighted that weak professional competencies make street-level workers' decisions more likely to be guided by their own perceptions, judgments, beliefs and personal values (Thorén 2008; Carrington 2005). The combination of these conditions risks SLWs' discretion being underestimated and its management being assigned to unprepared street-level workers. The management of great discretion usually leads SLWs to elaborate routines and informal practices (Lipsky 1980), individually or to share the heavy responsibility with peers within the service. But a big difficulty of managing great discretion can also create frustration and stress among street-level work-

ers, which risk triggering self-protection mechanisms, such as rigid conformism and attachment to the rules or discouragement of citizens' access demands, and/or lead to burnout.

3) The managerialisation of public institutions and the risk of underestimating street-level discretion

The introduction of managerial logics inspired by the private sector has brought relevant organisational changes to public institutions. New Public Management (NPM) especially contributed to re-drawing public administration to increase its efficiency and effectiveness through standardisation and de-bureaucratisation. These have been common trends in Europe, starting from the 1980s, and have even produced variable effects in transforming the different welfare contexts.

On the one hand, NPM reforms aim to standardise criteria, measures and practices in order to contain the services cost through the control of decision-making processes and their outputs. It has been already highlighted the incoherence created by the attempt to standardising interventions and the increasing individualisation and multidimensionality of welfare demand. According to Champy (2018b), if an "unreachable objectivity" is imposed (through rigid protocols, sectoriality and technicality) on prudential professionals' decision-making processes, they will be more exposed to work risks and blame.

On the other hand, NPM has a de-professionalising agenda (Guidi 2012) in relation to welfare services: it has inspired reforms that problematize the roles of SLWs (especially their discretion) in public administration. In order to control the implementation process, NPM tries to move discretion from the front-line to the managers and (as mentioned above) to convert SLWs to "executors" of policy aims, converted to standardised measures and procedures (Brodkin 2008). In this sense, they do not need to be expert professionals trained to manage the autonomy recognised for professional practitioners (Pollitt 1990; Cataldi 2013).

The result is a fragmentation of their professional functions: on the one hand, managers' roles are strengthened to provide strong control over respect for policy aims and defined standards; on the other, hand the (apparently) most "executive" tasks in social intervention are externalised to private (profit or non-profit) organisations. Within this organisational design, discretion should move to the managers, while the public professionals, SLWs included, should be especially engaged in planning, coordinating and networking tasks, guided by policy aims and standards rather than professional orientations (Baines 2004; Kirkpatrick 2006; Guidi 2012; Castro 2014).

According to the investigations about this topic, the reforms inspired by NPM have encouraged an interesting reflection on SLWs' discretion, but the attempts to eliminate it do not seem to have achieved the desired results (see, for example, Evans, Harris 2004; Brodkin 2008; 2011). An exclusive orientation towards the policy aims and rigid standards tends to lead SLWs to distort the procedures to improve their own performance and protect themselves from negative evaluations or sanctions, even worsening the services' efficiency and effectiveness (Brodkin 2011; Soss *et alii* 2011). So-called "creaming" strategies for the achievements, standards and clients remain at least partially under their control (Lipsky 1980). For example, SLWs may tend to discourage access to services for complex cases, which should be dealt with for longer and with a greater commitment of resources (Brodkin 2008). Or they could select among the aims and targets, abandoning those they consider impossible to reach (Brodkin 2011; Soss *et alii* 2011). Moreover, the general conviction of having overcome the "problem" of discretion may lead to this issue being underestimated and consequently increase the available "spaces" for autonomy: «the discrepancy between discourses valorising objectivity and the actual tasks for which objectivity cannot be reached exposes professionals to some degree of risk. They make promises they cannot keep» (Champy 2018b: lines 568-570). Ellis (2007) suggests that reforms inspired by managerialisation have simply changed SLWs' dilemmas, given the modified conditions of services.

Furthermore, as we will see below, the externalisation processes of "executive" tasks, once belonging to public institutions, has moved part of discretion to non-public bodies, transforming the composition of welfare SLWs.

4) Vertical and horizontal subsidiarisation and the rescaling and externalisation of SL discretion

In the last forty years, public institutional competencies have been rescaled concerning welfare systems (as with other public sectors) (Jessop 2002; Swyngedouw 2009; Kazepov 2010). With national and local specificities, this process has increased the complexity of welfare systems. The public competencies regarding policies and the responsibility for their implementation are split up in complicated and multilevel systems. Within this organisation, the local contexts represent the best dimension to both meet citizens' needs and mobilise awareness, networks and resources to face problems (Kazepov 2010; Andreotti *et alii* 2011). The central layers maintain more or less strong functions of providing common legal frameworks, coordination and equalisation.

Within this complexity, the coherence of the implementation process appears more difficult to control and govern. The decisional "chains" become longer, including new intermediaries and consequently new "spaces" of discretion. The further the legal "source" of the policy aims and programs is from the street-level, the more difficult it will be to control the implementation process and to obtain coherence in the concrete outcomes. This vertical complexity increases the interstices in which discretion takes place (Winter *et alii* 2008).

Furthermore, as it is well-known, the externalisation processes foresee the inclusion of private for-profit or non-profit organisations in designing, planning and implementing welfare measures and interventions. This strategy is aimed at increasing the effectiveness, efficiency, flexibility and transparency of welfare policy and is considered one of the key solutions to the welfare crisis. The involvement of private organisations in the implementation process is aimed at diversifying and expanding the supply of provisions, to contain costs in a period of budget reduction. In fact, complementary public-private networks are supposed to better meet the complexity of individual needs by combining competencies and resources in more flexible, diversified and specific arrangements (Ascoli, Ranci 2003).

Increasingly, the task of delivering has been at least partially moved from public to private organisations. This means that the crucial relationship and interaction between welfare services and citizens transfer to the latter. The outsourcing logics open up a "space" in which the public responsibility in terms of policy aims and outcomes is shared with private organisations (Goodin 2003; Guidi 2012).

The street-level perspective is usually applied to the study of public agencies (Lipsky 1980; Hupe *et alii* 2015). However, parts of the street-level tasks traditionally assigned to welfare bureaucrats are actually carried out within private organisations. This makes the former's characteristics easily applicable to the latter, as both act on behalf of public institutions and thus take decisions based on a public mandate, interact directly with citizens and have discretion in carrying out their tasks. They contribute to shaping the quality and connotations of welfare provisions and practices and to influencing policy outcomes. Including them in a broad definition of the street-level helps to build a more complete map of the redistribution of discretion among SLWs who are in different positions and conditions within the labour market (Härenstam *et alii* 2004).

The private SLWs, first, have to take in account not only their professional mandate and the public aims they are required to reach, but also the corporate mission and the requests of the organisation to which they belong. These overlapping pressures may not coincide or, at least, be consistent with one another. For example, a private organisation charged with "activating" the unemployed could apply creaming processes to achieve better results and thus exclude the most vulnerable people, who should be privileged targets for public institutions. The more complicated and contradictory the context becomes, the more discretion will increase, due to the possibility that SLWs will select priorities, interpret conflicting aims and indications and create boundaries and limits to cope with complexity (Lipsky 1980; Hupe *et alii* 2015). Second, private workers usually have less guaranteed job conditions compared to the civil servants. This means that if their discretion increases, they will be vulnerable and exposed to suffering personal consequences for their decisions. Furthermore, they should respond to a dual mechanism of accountability and evaluation, by both public and private organisations' supervisors (Goodin 2003). In order to reduce the risks connected with high complexity, they could tend to conformism and risk-avoiding strategies. The effect would be weakened service flexibility and reduced access and available opportunities for applicants and users. In any case, a multilevel and complicated organisation with overlapping and/or contradictory indications and limits in which to "play" their discretion will be easier to be deceived, exploited and re-shaped through SLWs' decisions.

5. A VERY BRIEF CONCLUSION

To summarise, European welfare systems are facing relevant mutations that, with national and local variations, are influencing the SLWs' conditions, producing multiple and maybe incoherent pressures on discretion. On the one hand, the complexification and individualisation of the demand for social intervention need increasingly flexible and interconnected services; on the other hand, the attempt to control resources tends to introduce standardised measures and protocols, sectorialisation and rigid accountability systems. These changes are introducing both formal and explicit policy reforms and implicit and not immediately evident adaptations, which produce new pressures on the street-level.

SLWs have to go on accomplishing their complex mandate in a transforming context, managing their everyday tasks while re-adapting to changing conditions and social needs at the same time. In a similar situation, a solid professional awareness is crucial to managing discretion as a "tool" to cope with complexity and the "weight" of responsibility.

The analysis conducted on welfare studies was aimed, on the one hand, at providing a framework for empirical research and, on the other hand, at showing how the street-level perspective and the concept of discretion could help the study of professions and professionalism, taking into account complex and changing conditions and contexts.

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