# Equity and equality in street-level public service delivery

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## Abstract

Street-level workers are crucial to promoting equity and equality in public service delivery. Their discretionary decisions can either perpetuate biases and stereotypes or enhance equity by acknowledging citizen-clients' diverse social backgrounds. While current research often focuses on the micro-level behaviors of street-level bureaucrats, there is limited exploration of how societal structures, historical patterns, and cultural beliefs shape these decisions. This Roundtable article argues for incorporating sociological imagination into the study of equity in public service delivery. Three key areas are proposed: (1) societal structures and dynamics—examining how social stratification and political conditions influence equity and equality in service delivery; (2) historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and the long-term effects of inequity and inequality on citizen-clients' attitudes and behaviors; and (3) cultural beliefs about (in)equality and (in)equity—exploring perceptions of just inequalities and inequities among workers and the public. Together, these dimensions provide a richer understanding of equity and equality in public service delivery that can advance the public administration and public management knowledge base.

**Key words**: equity, equality, street-level bureaucracy, public service delivery, sociology.

## Sociological imagination to understand equity and equality in public service delivery

*Nadine Raaphorst*

Street-level workers such as social workers, teachers, and inspectors play a pivotal role in the promotion of equity and equality in public service delivery. At the micro-level of street-level decision making, equality refers to the notion of treating like cases alike and the absence of discrimination on arbitrary grounds, while equity refers to treating dissimilar cases differently to achieve equal outcomes (Raaphorst 2021). Street-level bureaucrats' discretion, here, is often associated with either the risk of unequal treatment of similar cases due to biases and stereotypes, or with the potential for enhancing equity by recognizing how citizen-clients' social backgrounds might have affected their constraints and opportunities in life, justifying a different treatment (Frederickson 2015; Gooden and Portillo 2011). A focal area of street-level bureaucracy research, hence, studies how workers differentiate – for the good and for the bad – between citizen-clients in the distribution of public services (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2022). There is a plethora of insights into the micro-foundations of street-level discrimination, equity behaviors, and active representation and how this connects to organizational-level conditions and outcomes. Such studies highlight characteristics of street-level work and organizations that are often seen as universal across societies: the fundamental role of limited resources, conflicting demands, and behavioral coping mechanisms in explaining fairness in street-level workers' decision-making (Lipsky 2010; Tummers et al. 2015). Society-level characteristics are typically treated as constants, yet they shape studies of discrimination and representation by street-level bureaucrats in distinct ways, as minority and majority statuses are defined differently across societies.

Street-level workers do not operate in a vacuum, but are part and parcel of larger societies, with different structures, cultures, and distinct patterns of social change over time. To fully understand equity and equality in public service delivery, we need to zoom out and examine how street-level decision-making is affected by and affects societal conditions and outcomes. The core premise of this Roundtable article is that this field of study could benefit from some sociological imagination (Mills 2000), referring to the ability to see connections between personal and individual experiences and larger social forces. Here, we use it as a tool to grasp how micro-level decision-making by street-level workers can be understood in its broader organizational and societal context. How can we, then, effectively integrate such contexts into our research on equality and

equity in public service delivery? We introduce three different areas of focus that should be more thoroughly incorporated in this field of research: (1) societal structures and dynamics; (2) history and time; (3) cultural beliefs and values. The inclusion of these focal points helps us move away from a rather isolated view on street-level workers and their decision-making. Together, they allow for seeing the relevance of societal structures, history, and cultures in the production of (in)equality and (in)equity in public service delivery.

The first area of focus brings our attention to how differences and changes in the structures of societies affect street-level organizations and consequently the conditions of street-level work. Societies have different political regimes, social stratification systems, levels of social inequality and social cohesion, and social welfare state policies. What do these differences imply for how street-level organizations and workers fulfill their role in the reduction of such social inequalities? How do social status and class differences play a role among street-level workers, and in citizen-state interactions? How do different political regimes, democratic backsliding, and populism affect equality and equity in public service delivery? By explicitly connecting macro-level structures and dynamics to the demands placed on and behaviors of street-level workers, we can study how the production of (in)equities and (in)equalities in public service delivery is shaped by society at large.

The second area of focus leads us to look at the relevance of time to understand how (in)equity and (in)equality in street-level decision-making is shaped by historical patterns of discrimination and inclusion and exclusion, and how it shapes the attitudes and behaviors of citizen-clients. This calls for including history and time in our theorizing and research designs on this topic. This, for example, involves examining how in countries with a colonial history, a racialized distribution of burdens is legitimized (Ray et al., 2023). More broadly, it encourages us to study mechanisms through which street-level bureaucracies contribute to structural inequalities, referring to the role of structures, such as laws, policies, and norms in race-based (e.g., Epp et al. 2014) and gender-based (Herd and Moynihan 2025) discrimination. It asks scholars to include citizen-clients as central units of analysis to understand the long-term effects of inequity and inequality in street-level decision-making on their attitudes and behaviors. Following the policy feedback literature in public administration (Moynihan and Soss 2014), this includes a longitudinal perspective on the effects of (in)equity and (in)equality in street-level decision-making on citizen-clients' attitudes

and civic behaviors, which in turn affect future policy-making possibilities and street-level conditions.

The third area of focus asks scholars to go beyond their own normative starting points and definitions of equity and equality in public service delivery to examine people's – including both street-level workers and citizen-clients – own equity and equality perceptions and beliefs. This entails people's perceptions of the nature, extent, and desirability of current inequalities and their cultural beliefs about just inequalities referring to ideas on how inequalities should be (Janmaat 2013). It is important to consider perceptions about inequalities for various reasons. First, street-level workers' beliefs can be consequential for how they see their role in reducing inequalities, which may in turn affect their decision-making behaviors. For example, existing research has indicated that how people explain societal inequalities is consequential for their civic values and policy preferences (Mijs 2018). We do not know yet how street-level workers make causal attributions of societal inequalities and how this affects their decision-making about individual citizen-clients and their efforts to enhance equity for groups of citizen-clients. Second, citizen-clients' ideas about just inequalities may affect their expectations regarding the nature and extent of inequalities in public service delivery, raising normative questions about its legitimacy.

By incorporating structure, culture, history, and time, the collection of essays in this Roundtable not only offers a way to study how macro-level societal processes affect street-level organizations (meso) and bureaucrats' beliefs, values, and decision-making (micro), but also highlights the interconnection of actors in producing (in)equity and (in)equality in public service delivery. From a classical top-down perspective on policy implementation, street-level bureaucrats' working conditions are shaped by political actors and policymakers, which in turn affect equity and equality in service delivery. We know how certain policies could institutionalize practices of discrimination and impose racialized and gendered administrative burdens, or, conversely, promote the representation of minority interests. However, we know less about how equity and equality in street-level decision-making are directly and indirectly influenced by citizen-clients, organized collectives, activists, and NGOs. This gap calls for scholars to examine more complex causal relationships, where equity and equality in street-level decision-making are not only the dependent variables, but also independent variables affecting citizen-clients and other societal actors in

various ways. These societal actors, in turn, could directly attempt to change street-level conditions or pursue policy change through political participation.

## From politics to policy implementation: how populism and polarization affect equity and equality at the street level

*Gabriela Lotta*

In recent years, many countries have faced new threats from rising illiberal populism, polarization, and the politicization of policy issues. Research has shown that these dynamics impact the civil service and broader bureaucracy (e.g., Bauer et al. 2021), with studies focusing on street-level bureaucrats (SLB) highlighting how populism and polarization affect their work, create new pressures, and undermine expertise (Lotta, Piotrowska, and Raaphorst 2024). Aligned with the introduction of this Roundtable, we depart from the idea that SLBs do not act in a vacuum but are embedded in structures, cultures, and values in which issues such as populism and polarization may be crucial to understand social dynamics. Therefore, by benefiting from a sociological imagination (Mills 2000), the question to be addressed is how these contextual elements may affect SLBs behavior towards equity and equality. This is relevant because, while street-level bureaucrats can either align with or resist new polarized and populist agendas (Gofen 2024), the impact of these challenges on equity and equality at the street level remains largely unexplored, despite the importance for liberal democracy. This issue is critical for two reasons related to street-level work and to populism.

First, street-level work by its nature relates to equity and equality. Many policies implemented by street-level bureaucrats ideally aim to reduce inequalities or promote fairness. However, research shows that the coping strategies and allocation decisions made by street-level bureaucrats can lead to the opposite, affecting access to services and contributing to inequalities (Lotta and Pires 2019), through biases and deservingness judgments (Jilke and Tummers 2018). Second, certain characteristics of the populist and polarized context can further exacerbate these inequalities. Populism is based on a worldview in which society is split into two groups: the "pure people" and the "corrupt elites." Populist leaders tend to govern exclusively for the "people," while treating the

rest as enemies, leading to a polarized social environment in which these groups are cast as opponents. This division can take on an emotional dimension, creating affective polarization in which the two sides develop strong, often negative, feelings toward each other.

Although polarization is part of a macro social dynamic, it can materialize in micro processes, during the direct encounters between street-level bureaucrats and citizen-clients. Street-level bureaucrats may be portrayed as adversaries, leading to hostile attitudes from citizen-clients and heightened conflict, sometimes escalating to violence in public service settings. Groups of citizen-clients may be portrayed as enemies, and street-level bureaucrats might be pressured—or even co-opted—into acting against them. Since street-level bureaucrats are not immune to social dynamics, they may internalize and reproduce the notion of "supporters" versus "enemies" when interacting with citizen-clients and, in this way, implement inequalities. Examining the relationship between this adversarial social narrative and streel-level workers can open new research directions on inequity and inequality in street-level bureaucracy.

One research direction relates to how street-level bureaucrats are affected by political directives and social constructions. When these foster division, this may create or reinforce social inequalities through distinguishing deserving from undeserving citizen-clients. For example, in Brazil, police officers reportedly felt encouraged by Bolsonaro to act violently toward certain social groups labeled as adversaries, including teachers, Black individuals, and social activists. Similarly, LGBTQIA+[1] individuals have been excluded from certain policies or mistreated by police officers, reflecting this adversarial social narrative. Street-level bureaucrats can inadvertently or deliberately reinforce existing social inequalities—such as disparities in access to welfare, healthcare, or justice—by implementing policies in a way that stigmatizes or marginalizes certain groups.

In a polarized and populist environment, bureaucrats may also contribute to the creation of *new* inequalities. For instance, policies designed to limit benefits or resources for "undeserving" groups may not only affect those directly targeted but also undermine broader systems of equity, such as

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[1] LGBTQIA+ is an acronym representing different forms of sextual orientations and gender identities, such as Lesbian, Gay, Bissexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual. The symbol + is related to other types that are not cited directly in the acronym.

access to public services or social safety nets for other vulnerable populations. In this situation, to avoid distributing services to specific targeted groups classified as underserving ones, the system may create additional requirements and burdens that may affect other groups of citizens, creating a spill-over effect on broader systems of equity. This dynamic can lead to a cycle where already disadvantaged groups face compounded challenges, while new groups may emerge as targets of exclusion, especially those targeted as "enemies" under populism, thereby deepening social divisions. The consequences may be particularly stark in areas like immigration and social welfare where bureaucrats' decisions have the highest possible stakes for citizens. We need a more nuanced analysis of how the implementation of policies at the ground level may perpetuate existing and create new societal inequalities, especially in contexts of political polarization and populism.

A second research direction relates to the role of identity, especially political affiliation, in polarized settings. Research on representation by street-level bureaucrats has largely explored how social categories – as gender, ethnicity, and social class – affect active and symbolic representation. However, we still miss an understanding of how political affiliation can also work as an identity marker affecting bureaucratic representation. Emerging studies indicate that political affiliation may become a salient identity marker between street-level bureaucrats and citizen-clients in highly polarized contexts, influencing how trust, competence, and representation are perceived (Petherick et al. 2024). This suggests that understanding how political identity plays a role in citizen-state interactions could reveal significant insights into bureaucratic responsiveness and fairness in public services. Political affiliation and identity should be recognized as factors that may influence bureaucratic representativeness and should be studied as such.

Third, populism and polarization may alter and increase status differences, creating a widening social distance between street-level bureaucrats and certain citizen groups. There is still a lack of understanding of how status differences between bureaucrats and citizens affect quality of interactions and access to services for marginalized groups (Groeneveld and Meier 2022; Harrits and Møller 2014). This phenomenon could be particularly relevant in understanding how populist narratives that label some groups as "enemies" affect inclusiveness of street-level service provision.

These three research directions offer concrete pathways to study how populism and polarization, constituting macro-level structural dynamics, are shaping street-level bureaucrats' role in fostering or undermining equity and equality in society.

## Bridging or widening gaps? The multiple effects of street-level informal resources on public service equity

*Einat Lavee*

Understanding equity and equality in public service delivery requires connecting micro-level interactions with broader societal structures, histories, and values. This essay contributes to such a sociological imagination by examining how informal practices at the street level - specifically, the provision of informal personal resources by street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) - mediate equity outcomes in public service delivery.

Social equity, a core value in public administration, refers to the fair and just distribution of public services and opportunities, with an emphasis on addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups. While much of the existing literature emphasizes active representation and policy design as mechanisms for advancing equity, its enactment at the street level continues to demand attention. SLBs, who implement policies in direct contact with clients, often work within constrained environments where formal organizational resources are insufficient to address clients' needs. In such contexts, SLBs frequently go beyond their formal duties to provide informal resources - material, emotional, or instrumental - drawing on their personal capital. Studies indicate this phenomenon is widespread among SLBs across various professions and geographic locations (Tummers et al. 2015).

However, the provision of informal resources by SLBs has significant implications for social equity. The provision of these informal resources can have dual effects: bridging immediate inequities while potentially reinforcing systemic disparities. As public administration scholarship has shown, SLBs' discretionary decisions, shaped by systemic inequalities and social norms, can either mitigate or reproduce inequities (e.g., Lotta and Pires 2019). Examining informal service provision is critical to understanding the broader reproduction of social inequalities.

Informal resources are distinct from the discretionary practices commonly associated with SLBs' formal responsibilities. Informal personal resources are those provided by SLBs to clients that go beyond formal job requirements or organizational duties, or formal resources provided in informal ways (e.g., after hours, off duty) (Lavee 2021). These resources are not formally provided by the organization but instead come from workers' own capital. This capital can be understood through core forms: economic capital (financial assets and resources), social capital (networks and connections), cultural capital (skills, knowledge, and cultural competence), and human capital (education and professional expertise). These forms of capital shape SLBs' capacity to provide informal resources and influence the ways they navigate gaps in formal service provision.

The informal resources provided by SLBs, influenced by their personal capital, can be categorized into three main types: 1) Material resources, such as financial aid, food, clothing, or other items directly purchased or provided by the SLB; 2) Instrumental resources, such as assistance with bureaucratic processes, filling out administrative forms, making calls, or leveraging personal networks to help clients access services; 3) Emotional resources, such as providing psychological or emotional support that extends beyond professional boundaries. All these involve massive time investment, often requiring SLBs to work outside of scheduled hours, or dedicate extra effort beyond formal expectations (Lavee 2022).

To clarify the distinction between what is formally part of the job and what constitutes informal resources, these informal resources are actions that fall outside the explicit recognition of organizational rules, guidelines, or job descriptions. For example, while providing emotional support might align with professional norms, these are situations where this support exceeds formal expectations, such as offering sustained personal counseling outside official hours. Similarly, instrumental assistance may include guiding clients through bureaucratic procedures, but it becomes informal when it involves personal time, external networks, or efforts beyond prescribed duties. Most importantly, unlike formal resources, informal resources are not governed by standardized criteria, and their provision depends entirely on the individual worker's judgment and circumstances.

The provision of informal resources might have both positive and negative implications for equity in public services delivery, creating a dual dynamic. On one side, informal resources can address

immediate needs often unmet by formal organizational resources, which are frequently constrained by increasing complexity, multiple demands, and systemic pressures characteristic of contemporary service provision (Thomann et al. 2018). For example, SLBs may use personal monetary resources to purchase essential items for clients, such as school supplies or home necessities, enabling clients to meet basic needs that the formal system overlooks. Additionally, SLBs might guide clients through complex bureaucratic processes, such as navigating applications for housing assistance or disability benefits, when such support is provided informally, outside their official duties. By stepping beyond their formal responsibilities, these resources allow clients to overcome obstacles that perpetuate inequalities and provide immediate relief in critical moments.

At the same time, the selective and discretionary nature of informal resource provision raises substantial equity concerns. Even within formal policy implementation, decisions about who receives support rely on SLBs' subjective assessments, which are often relational and situational (Raaphorst and Loyens 2020). These assessments are frequently shaped by perceptions of clients' "worthiness," influenced by factors such as personal biases, cultural norms, and stereotypes. While worthiness judgments also influence the distribution of formal resources, informal resources extend this dynamic further, as they lack any organizational criteria or oversight. This unregulated decision-making might enlarge inequalities, as clients perceived as "undeserving" due to individual judgments (mainly due to being 'dependent'), are often excluded. Such practices risk reinforcing systemic disparities by favoring those deemed "stronger" or more self-sufficient. Additionally, the reliance on informal resources underscores a broader structural issue: the failure of formal systems to meet the needs of all clients. While SLBs' informal practices may temporarily bridge gaps, they can also mask systemic shortcomings, allowing organizations to avoid addressing the root causes of inequities. As a result, informal resource provision becomes both a remedy and a symptom of deeper institutional failures.

The provision of informal resources has implications not only for client equity, but also for inequalities within the public service itself. The reliance on SLBs' personal capital - economic, social, cultural, and human - exacerbates disparities among workers. SLBs with greater economic means may provide more material resources, while those with extensive networks or cultural competence are better positioned to offer instrumental and emotional support. However, as studies

show, those in lower organizational positions or with fewer resources may still provide substantial informal support, driven by personal dedication or ethical commitment. This dynamic is further shaped by gender considerations, as women—who are overrepresented in caring professions—are often expected to provide more informal support, reflecting societal norms that view them as natural "givers."

SLBs who frequently provide informal resources often shoulder additional emotional and financial burdens, which can impact their well-being and career progression. Conversely, those who do not engage in such practices may face perceptions of being less committed or empathetic, potentially harming their professional reputation. This reliance on informal resources raises critical questions about organizational equity, as it places unequal pressures on individual workers and reflects broader systemic inequalities within the public service. Moreover, societal status differences, shaped by the possession of various forms of capital, may further influence how workers are recognized and rewarded within street-level organizations.

Concluding from the above, the provision of informal resources by SLBs reveals the complexities of achieving social equity in public service delivery. While these practices allow SLBs to address gaps left by formal systems and assist clients otherwise excluded, their unregulated and discretionary nature introduces inconsistencies that may deepen inequities. These dynamics are especially important in the context of austerity, where systemic resource shortages increasingly push SLBs to bridge service gaps through personal capital. Therefore, ensuring equitable service delivery requires reducing dependence on SLBs' informal personal resources and developing formal mechanisms that promote consistent and fair access to services. However, to complement such efforts, it is also essential to make informal practices more visible - through research and documentation. This will allow us to better understand citizen–state interactions and critically engage with the normative implications.

# Beyond colonial amnesia: A socio-linguistic approach to the study of bureaucratic discrimination

*Ingrid Espinoza*

Face-to-face interactions between civil servants and their clients are crucial for understanding the reproduction of inequality at the street level of public policy implementation. It is in this arena that the social dynamics characteristic of intergroup relations, such as struggles for power and dominance, become tangible. These dynamics are deeply embedded in historical patterns of discrimination, inclusion, and exclusion. Moreover, street-level interactions depict a situation of structural dependence, where social roles are continuously being constructed and renegotiated, but where government officials are in a position of power since they are the ones gatekeeping access to public services (Lotta & Pires, 2019). The misuse of this power asymmetry, often in the form of preferential treatment toward historically privileged groups, goes hand in hand with the discriminatory treatment of historically minoritized and marginalized social groups.

Studies focusing on explaining when and how bureaucratic discrimination unfolds have a strong transactional focus on allocative exclusion – a discretionary administrative choice to allocate public resources differentially across groups (Olsen et al., 2022). This kind of study greatly contributes to understanding exclusive practices happening during these encounters. Nonetheless, besides a few studies looking at bureaucratic discrimination through an interactional lens, what actually happens during public service encounters and how epistemic injustice is constructed and reproduced in these encounters remains mainly in a black box.

Furthermore, after mining the existing research landscape on bureaucratic discrimination, a lack of engagement with the historical mechanisms and structural factors leading to discrimination becomes evident, making it seem as if discrimination occurs in a historical vacuum. The mainstream explaining mechanisms for bureaucratic discrimination, such as misusing discriminatory power as a coping strategy or discriminatory assessments of deservingness, suffer from 'colonial amnesia,' rarely taking colonial path dependencies that shape the construction of inequality in street-level bureaucracy into account.

Bureaucratic discrimination is tightly entangled with the history of European colonialism. Colonialism was characterized by conquest, exploitation, and domination, and its legacies continue to be structuring axes of inequality to this day. One of the core injustices of colonialism lies in establishing and maintaining a political system that does not provide its members with equal and mutually beneficial opportunities for collaboration but was structurally designed to exploit colonized peoples for the benefit of colonizers (Achiume, 2019). This dynamic continues to shape bureaucratic discrimination, where historically racialized and minoritized groups are more likely to end up in a disadvantageous position when interacting with public agencies.

To improve our understanding of how inequality is constructed in street-level interactions, taking colonial legacies into account and making space for epistemological diversity, we need to consider alternative approaches to the mainstream ways of studying bureaucratic discrimination. Using language as an indicator of discriminating behavior is a fruitful way to go. Language is known to reflect and also give form to social hierarchies and power relations (Fairclough, 2013), and sociolinguistic conventions – e.g., the way we address someone based on common assumptions of their social class or status – can incorporate and strengthen power differences into a social interaction.

Linguistic expressions of dominance in an interaction range from interruptions to the use of informal forms of address to topic control through different questioning styles. Different forms of derogatory treatment, such as disrespectful or dismissive treatment, condescending talk, microaggressions, and so on, can be measured using such linguistic cues to operationalize different manifestations of power. The main idea is simple: to use different linguistic features to operationalize and measure direct behavioral cues in street-level interactions and then look at the distribution of these cues to understand how discriminatory behaviors are constructed during interactions and who is being affected by them.

One approach that connects the linguistic interactional micro-level with macro-level factors causing discrimination, such as colonial legacies, is Corpus-Assisted Critical Discourse Studies (CADS). This approach is a combination of the quantitative power of Computational Linguistics (CL) with the qualitative depth for contextual understanding of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS). CL provides the tools to analyze large amounts of text-as-data and identify linguistic patterns and

structures, while CDS offers theoretical frameworks and critical perspectives to qualitatively interpret and contextualize those patterns, opening space for the consideration of colonial legacies shaping bureaucratic discrimination. CDS aims to uncover how language is used to uncover power relations, hidden ideologies, and social inequalities embedded in discourse, recognizing that discourse is not neutral but rather shaped by social, political, and cultural contexts (see Baker et al., 2008 for a detailed example). More than being just a practical methodological approach, CADS connects both perspectives essential for sociological imagination – micro-level behavior and decision-making and its embeddedness in a broader organizational and societal context at the meso and macro level.

One of the main challenges of this approach is that it depends on many different types of data that are not always easy to access. For a micro-level analysis of the construction of inequality, interactional data between street-level bureaucrats and citizen-clients is needed for the linguistic examination of power structures in these encounters. Contextual data regarding the historical background relevant to a certain public service interaction (e.g., in welfare offices), such as policy documents, historical records, and media reports on the social discourse surrounding a given public service, are necessary for the critical analysis of how institutional practices and policies in public services are discursively constructed and how they interact with broader socio-political discourses. Despite it being a time- and resource-intensive approach, it is worth the effort to gain a more holistic perspective on the construction of inequality at the frontline of public service delivery.

'The price is high, the reward is great.' CADS can help advance how we study and understand inequality at the street level in different ways. First, it opens the possibility of measuring the construction of inequality at the micro level of language in use. Through the linguistic analysis of the dynamics taking place in face-to-face encounters, we can gain a more granular understanding of how notions of deservingness are enacted in public service encounters. We can also gain a more nuanced understanding of when, how, and for whom the (mis)use of discriminatory power represents a disadvantage. Second, it creates the possibility of incorporating a more contextualized critical macro-perspective into the research field of bureaucratic discrimination, avoiding what Mayblin & Turner (2021) call presentism – an analysis of discrimination issues in a setting where it seems as if the present is always new or unprecedented. Furthermore, it can be a step towards creating the necessary space for a discussion around the role of colonial legacies in shaping the

societal hierarchies that are reproduced in street-level encounters. Lastly, it integrates an interactional perspective to the construction of inequality in face-to-face encounters with the larger historical context in which this interactional level is embedded, which is a key step towards exiting the historical vacuum that dominates bureaucratic discrimination research.

## Disrupting administrative inequality: citizen-clients' "voice" and "loyalty"

*Eva Thomann and Steffen Eckhard*

A growing body of research on social equity in public services, administrative burden, bureaucratic discrimination, and representative bureaucracy focuses on administrative behaviors that create and sustain social and political inequalities for citizen-clients. It is precisely their inequality implications that makes researching these phenomena so important. Accordingly, we refer to them jointly as "administrative inequality." This perspective allows for embedding micro-level citizen-state interactions within broader societal and democratic macro structures, and for understanding how the two interact.

It is crucial to understand the broader implications of administrative inequality for society and democracy. Particularly, we should ask how administrative inequality shapes future citizen-state interactions—these interactions have long term consequences of how people connect to government. Citizen-state interactions "serve as occasions of political learning that shape political consciousness and behavior" (Bruch and Soss 2018, 37). The experience of administrative inequality has profound impacts on citizen-clients' attitudes toward government. However, it is difficult to predict how individuals will respond to administrative inequality in their behaviors toward the state, depending on many factors.

Hirschman's (1970) "Exit, Voice, Loyalty and Neglect" model posits that citizen-clients cope actively by expressing complaints (voice), escaping the system in exchange for alternative channels of service provision (exit), or "gaming" the system (Peeters et al. 2020, 828). For example, citizen-clients exercise *voice* through political participation, filing complaints, or participating in protests (Gilad and Assouline 2024). *Gaming* means to strategically exploit, manipulate, or work around the current rules and arrangements, such as through bribes (Peeters et

al. 2020). *Exit* can entail forming neighborhood watches instead of relying on the police, or alternative provision of marriage services. Citizen-clients may also react to administrative inequality "passively" by believing in service improvement and working toward it within current arrangements, such as attempting to improve the situation through participation or co-production (*loyalty*), or by retreating from state encounters through mechanisms like non-take up or vote abstention (*neglect*).

Citizen-clients' behavioral responses to administrative inequality feed back into the political system as its "enduring effects on the political orientation and participation patterns of target populations" (Pierce et al. 2014, 5; Bell et al. 2024). But how? Policy feedback theory (Béland et al. 2022) tells us that some responses may perpetuate or reinforce the patterns and enablers of administrative inequality ("positive" feedback). Specifically neglect and exit imply that citizens do not believe "in the ability of the organization to provide a satisfactory delivery of the service" (Peeters et al. 2020, 828). Existing research stresses the "positive" feedback loop that perpetuates administrative inequality through voluntary or forced exit and neglect, such as reduced political engagement, program non-participation or non-take up.

By contrast, other behavioral responses have the potential to disrupt or undermine the administrative inequality that caused them ("negative feedback"). Particularly loyalty and voice represent constructive behavior that "reinforces anticipation for, and a belief in, possible improvement in the service provision" (Peeters et al. 2020: 828)—for example, by choosing to voluntarily work in government (loyalty). More research is needed on how citizen-clients' agency potentially disrupts and rectifies existing administrative inequalities through "negative" feedback in the policy loop. Producing such knowledge can potentially empower those who suffer most from administrative inequality and contribute to positive change.

Citizen-clients' voice and loyalty are arguably crucial mechanisms to achieve such disruptive change. Voice for instance can be a powerful pathway to change. Take the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) as an example. The movement emerged as a collective voice response to systemic inequalities and administrative behaviors that disproportionately harm Black communities, particularly through police brutality and inequities in the justice system. By mobilizing millions of people globally, BLM has shed light on the structural and administrative

biases embedded in public institutions, effectively challenging the status quo. BLM has pushed governments to revisit policies related to policing, racial profiling, and equity in public service delivery. The movement has led to legislative proposals in the US and UK, such as police reform bills, and heightened public accountability mechanisms in several municipalities (Lebron 2023). Thus, voice can be a crucial mechanism of accountability on street-level bureaucrats, in contexts where formal accountability mechanisms prove insufficient for addressing street-level behaviors that result in systemic administrative inequality.

Loyalty, too, can be a mechanism for change; for example, the waves of voluntary citizen engagement in administrative action (or co-production) that are typical for situations of crisis and stress. Catastrophes, such as wildfires or floods, and/or prolonged events like the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic or the so-called refugee-crisis in Europe in 2015/16 typically trigger major voluntary societal engagement aimed at reinforcing administrative service delivery (Eckhard et al 2021). Collaborative structures that emerge in such situations can bridge the gap between state and society, enabling transfer of knowledge that ideally leads to improved service delivery for precisely those societal groups most affected by the initial crisis situations. For instance, after the German refugee crisis of 2015/16, many of the voluntary aid coordinators were employed as integration officers by their cities and subsequently served as boundary spanners to facilitate service provision for immigrants.

These examples illustrate how constructive voice and loyalty, when organized and sustained, can disrupt administrative inequality. They underscore the importance of building supportive structures that enable affected communities to exercise voice and loyalty, particularly those who may lack individual capacity or resources. They also highlight how voice and loyalty responses can generate "negative feedback" by pressuring institutions to address the inequalities they perpetuate, thus contributing to broader systemic change. For the front-line action of public servants, this implies a prioritization of citizen co-production and participation, for instance through community liaison officers.

However, we know too little about the conditions under which voice and loyalty emerge, and virtually nothing about effectiveness in relation to inequalities. Exercising voice and loyalty demands capacity and willingness from people - which varies with personal resources, education,

and human capital. Moreover, exercising voice in particular requires people to have internalized a level of self-efficacy (their belief in their own capacity to act in the ways necessary to reach a specific goal) and their own deservingness vis-à-vis the state. Voice responses are also racialized and gendered in complex ways. Administrative inequality reduces racially minoritized citizen-clients' trust in government and civic predisposition, while mobilizing members of racial or ethnic minority groups to engage politically (Bell et al. 2024). Gilad and Assouline (2024) show that female gender and minority identity reduce one's propensity to engage in voice. Everything we know thus suggests that being affected by administrative inequality correlates negatively with those factors that facilitate voice. The very experience of administrative inequality itself thus discourages voice and loyalty (Gilad and Assouline 2024). These factors work in support of a self-reinforcing, "positive" feedback cycle of administrative inequality and make achieving change harder for those affected by it.

Overall, it seems decisive to better understand how administrations can provide the conditions under which citizen-clients' voice and loyalty occur and how they can succeed in disrupting administrative inequality. A spotlight on such mechanisms will contribute to a research agenda that advances social equity in public administration, by highlighting the positive agency of citizen-clients in influencing equity and equality in street-level decision-making.

## Private politics: Political negotiations at the street level

*Ayesha Masood*

An important but understudied theme in the study of street-level bureaucracy is the longitudinal effects of experiencing inequality and inequity at the frontline and how these experiences change the democratic participation by citizen-clients, as well as legitimacy and accountability in street-level work. While recent research in public administration has focused on explanations of unequal treatment and citizen-clients' responses to it, most of this research focuses on the behavior of street-level bureaucrats or on the micro level strategies adopted by the citizen-clients. However, equally significant are the ways in which people respond, negotiate, and subvert inequality and inequity in street-level interactions, especially through collective political action. In this section, I focus specifically on this collective action, its varied and changing forms, and how the ethos of street-level work may potentially be transformed through these actions.

One arc of this collective[2] negotiation, relatively well studied in previous research, is changing policies and laws either through the formal policy process, or by influencing the street-level implementation of policies. This may include social movements targeting specific discriminatory policies, educating the citizen-clients about their rights, and equipping them with necessary competencies and tools to negotiate with street-level bureaucracy (Earle, 2012; Daniel, 2021; Herd and Moynihan 2019). The other arc of collective strategies, which has received little attention, but which will become increasingly important in the future, is what I call private politics of street-level bureaucracy. This is an alternative form of politics where the locus of politics shifts from formal policy change to informally changing the implementation process through localized activism. The idea is borrowed from management and organization studies where private politics explains how activists change the way businesses work, through boycotts and awareness campaigns, without any changes in broader regulatory environments (Baron, 2003). In the context of public management, private politics targets street-level bureaucracy and attempts to change its procedures, thus making the implementation more equitable for certain groups without any substantial change in formal policy.

Private politics can include naming and shaming bureaucrats for their behaviors, calling out street-level organizations and causing reputational damage to them, and protesting specific state agencies. Examples of this alternative form of politics that directly engages with street-level bureaucracy are common across the world. Khawaja Sira (gender nonconforming individuals) protesting against police to stop apprehending them for public begging (Nisar, 2018) and gay activists and grass root movements pressuring health organizations to offer information on treatment and prevention of AIDS in Brazil (Rich, 2019) are examples of situations where citizen-clients can change the implementation of policies, and the behavior of street-level bureaucrats without any formal policy change.

Private politics is significant for multiple reasons. First, it can take the form of a civic conflict, where experiences of inequality can trigger violence against the state and its agents. This is

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[2] It must be noted here that the landscape of these collectivities is inherently messy, as different communities differ in their degree of organization, cohesion, and networking strategies. For example, these collectivities can range from social media groups to social movements and social movement organizations. More importantly, collectivities evolve and change as the support for the cause and internal organization changes and matures.

especially true for marginalized minority groups who lack political voice and power and thus feel unrepresented in the formal political process. Service delivery protests, riots on housing and evictions, protests on water insecurity and electricity shortages, and protests by farmers and peasants on landownership policies (Beall, Goodfellow and Rodgers 2013) were all directed towards the unequal provision of basic state services disproportionately affecting disenfranchised citizen-clients.

Second, private politics is becoming increasingly significant in the context of democracies marred by populism and lack of trust in the state. In the context where marginalized and minority groups no longer trust the state to respond to their concerns, directly targeting street-level bureaucracy becomes an easier way to address one's concerns. Likewise, changing policies to increase more equitable outcomes is not easy, especially for minority groups as it incurs multiple transactional, social, and administrative costs. Activism and protests, especially mediated through social media, thus provide novel ways of participating and interacting with the state.

Third, private politics increases the precarity of street-level work. As street-level organizations or bureaucrats respond to direct activism by citizens, they become vulnerable to even more challenges. Street-level bureaucrats are no longer anonymous bureaucrats; instead, every part of their work can potentially be surveilled, scrutinized, and made public through ever present technologies of vision. They could use blame-avoidant strategies to shield themselves from criticism (Hinterleitner & Wittwer, 2013). Thus, traditional avenues of transparency and accountability are being replaced by more direct, immediate, and personal forms of accountability (Eriksson & Vogt, 2013).

Finally, private politics also requires street-level bureaucrats to change the way they work. As activism by citizen-clients and their private politics subvert bureaucrats' legal-rational authority to represent the state, bureaucrats must develop alternate sources of authority and legitimacy. Mimicking citizen-clients' strategies, bureaucrats are increasingly relying on social media to reach out to and engage with the public directly. In such contexts, they cultivate an influencer-like status to bolster the legitimacy of their work, using celebrity and heroism to provide alternative basis of authority. More research is needed to systemically document and understand the impact of private politics through collective action on the legitimacy and accountability of street-level bureaucrats.

To fully understand the impact of inequality and inequity in public service delivery, it is imperative to connect multiple strands of contentious collective actions and activism by the citizen-clients with unequal policy outcomes.

## AI at the street level: How AI-based technology can mask or magnify inequities in public safety

*Vinuri Dissanayake and Andrea M. Headley*

The integration of technology, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), into public administration is reshaping the dynamics between street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and the citizen-clients they serve. In contexts such as public safety, where historical disparities are entrenched, AI tools promise greater efficiency, consistency, and objectivity in street-level decision-making. However, it also raises significant concerns about accountability, equity, and transparency. While the design of AI systems can reproduce existing inequities or create new ones, they can also be implemented to expose or obscure historically embedded biases of street-level policies and practices in public safety. This essay aims to explore the latter by determining whether and how AI might mask or magnify inequities that arise at the street level, where citizen sentiment on justice and bureaucracy is already influenced by broader social, cultural, and institutional conditions. To understand AI's effect on equity, we need to understand the socio-technical dynamics that influence AI's complexity and consequences after its development. Examining community perceptions of AI-influenced street-level decisions can offer insight into public experiences of technologies and the visibility of underlying inequities that may be influencing them.

In practice, the very tools designed to minimize bias may reinforce existing racial and socio-economic disparities in street-level interactions. For instance, in the criminal justice system, predictive policing tools, like Geolitica, leverage machine learning algorithms to conduct data analysis and predict future crime. These tools have been critiqued for reinforcing racial and socio-economic inequity in communities. SLBs may deploy these tools under the framing of objectivity, suggesting to the public that the AI system has taken the guesswork and disparity out of policing practices, when in reality it is doing the exact opposite by hiding overpolicing practices. In such cases, technology may act as a mask that conceals the systemic inequities inherent in the

application of the tool, shielding the street-level worker from direct accountability to the citizen-client via procedural uniformity. Research indicates that this is more likely when AI is treated as output, rather than input for discretionary decision-making (Meijer et al., 2021).

Fully automated AI systems can exacerbate public distrust by undermining accountability in the anonymous, street-level administration of justice. In the case of surveillance tools or automated ticketing systems like NYC's Automated Bus Lane Enforcement (ABLE), which mounts cameras on buses to capture car information and provide tickets to drivers for violating traffic rules in bus lanes, AI can mask the inequity of enforcement practices. Automated systems, while promoted as efficient in issuing citations and applying rules uniformly, also lack transparency on the socio-economic conditions of communities where the technology is most prevalently implemented, leading to disparate impacts on lower-income populations (Eubanks, 2017). The real-world consequences of inequitable enforcement practices that would otherwise have required SLB accountability are hidden within impersonal and indisputable decisions.

On the other hand, when technology serves as a magnifier, it brings into sharp focus the systemic inequities and biases at the street-level of public service. AI systems, with their ability to process vast amounts of data and be programmed to prioritize the public interest, can significantly enhance transparency and accountability (Gaozhao et al., 2024). In some applications, AI can help bridge information gaps between the street-level administration of public safety and the citizen-clients it seeks to serve. An example of this can be seen in the use of computational tools to analyze police body camera footage (Voigt et al., 2017). Using data from the Oakland Police Department, researchers developed an AI tool to assess racial disparities in the language used by police officers during traffic stops. The study revealed that officers consistently used less respectful language with Black drivers compared to White drivers, even after controlling for factors such as the officer's race, the severity of the infraction, and the location. By exposing racial disparities in how police officers engage with different communities, it offers valuable data that can drive efforts to address systemic bias and improve police-community relations.

Furthermore, AI can be used to enhance transparency in the justice system's procedures and balance the information flows in public safety interactions between SLBs and citizen-clients. For example, Macomb County's AI-driven court reminder system uses AI to automate communication

with crime victims, ensuring all individuals receive timely and accurate updates about their cases. This system can help bridge gaps in service delivery that disproportionately affect lower-income or marginalized individuals, who may not engage with or lack access to traditional communication channels. Additionally, by providing equitable access to information, the technology serves as a magnifier, highlighting and correcting areas where equity had previously been compromised due to manual errors or administrative inefficiencies (Young et al., 2019).

However, to fully understand the role of technology, an important, yet underexplored, consideration remains how the public experiences and perceives the implementation of these tools, irrespective of the actual or advertised technical intent of the tool. Specifically, whether the public views or experiences AI as a fair, transparent decision-making magnifier or as a force that diminishes their agency and trust. For example, systems like Geolitica or ABLE can create mistrust and alienation, particularly when citizen-clients feel inequitably treated by impersonal, algorithmic systems. This lack of transparency can erode trust in public safety efforts, leading to an unwillingness to engage in co-production or compliance with future AI-based policies (Gaozhao et al., 2023). In contrast, when AI is used to magnify prior inequities and support citizen-clients in engaging in a public safety process, like in Macomb County, it can foster trust and cooperation via more equitable procedures at the street-level. How the public perceives and experiences the use of AI, thus, influences their attitudes and behaviours towards the state, potentially exacerbating inequity or, conversely, enhancing equity.

To ensure fairness and accountability, public administrators and policymakers must carefully design, deploy, and evaluate these tools while involving groups who have been historically marginalized. Even when an AI tool is implemented to magnify inequitable practices and improve procedures, it may not be perceived by citizens as such. Further research is needed to explore when, how, and why AI obscures or reveals inequity, as well as identify conditions that allow a citizen-client to accurately experience its technical intent. This can include understanding how AI is shifting micro-level decision-making and accountability as well as examining how AI policies may be institutionalizing and masking inequities at the macro-level. Ultimately, unpacking the duality of AI requires an ongoing, inclusive dialogue and education between citizen-clients and public administrators about equity, justice, and the role of technology in public service delivery.

## Citizen perspectives on bureaucratic service differentiation: A call for mapping

*Mogens Jin Pedersen*

Equality and equity are widely recognized as fundamental public values guiding public service delivery to citizen-clients, yet public administration scholars have only rarely examined whether citizen-clients themselves endorse these ideals. Do their normative beliefs and preferences consistently align with these ideals across policy areas and service settings? Or, in certain contexts, might they actually support forms of "bureaucratic service differentiation" (BSD)—defined here as street-level workers' unequal treatment of service recipients that is neither codified in policy nor aligned with formal rules?[3] As citizen-clients are key stakeholders in public service delivery within democratic societies, this question warrants greater scholarly attention. This inquiry is both significant and timely, directly connecting to the sociological imagination (Mills 2000), particularly regarding cultural beliefs and values. It urges scholars to treat citizen-clients as central units of analysis and examine their attitudes toward (in)equity and (in)equality in street-level decision-making.

Consider, for example, the dilemma where the public favors BSD in specific policy areas, even when these preferences conflict with established policy and procedures that uphold the principle of equal treatment based on established criteria. Illustrative examples might include, say, public opinion supporting racial profiling for law enforcement purpose, prioritizing refugees or immigrants from certain countries, or providing selective public healthcare access based on social status. While this may provoke discomfort, such insights would be valuable for advancing a nuanced understanding of democratic governance, responsive policymaking, and (in)equality in public service delivery. Yet, research on this topic remains sparse. While recent research examines

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[3] For conceptual clarity, BSD specifically refers to (a) the systematic differentiation of individual citizen-clients and service users by street-level workers in relation to (b) the exercise of bureaucratic discretion and decision-making—such as providing certain individuals with additional help, time, leniency, or specific benefits—that (c) is not supported by formal policies and procedures. BSD occurs when 'like cases' are treated unequally, with 'like cases' defined strictly in terms of policy consistency. Service recipients are considered 'like cases' when their characteristics and attributes should not influence street-level discretion and decision-making, either because such considerations are explicitly prohibited (e.g., ethnocentric discrimination) or extend beyond the intended scope and jurisdiction of formal policies (e.g., differentiation based on perceptions of service recipients' actions, attitudes, or situations that contradict or are not codified as legitimate factors in policy and procedures).

beliefs and preferences about how street-level workers prioritize clients (Hansen et al. 2025), citizen perspectives on BSD are largely uncharted. Recent studies have explored citizen perspectives on issues like tolerance for administrative burdens (Baekgaard et al. 2025), but to advance scholarship and support responsive policymaking, research on public tolerance of BSD is likewise essential.

Existing research challenges the ideal of equal treatment for service recipients by street-level workers in practice. Therefore, understanding how citizen-clients perceive this issue is critical for advancing public administration research on street-level bureaucracy. Certain individuals receive discretionary treatment or decisions that conflict with or extend beyond formal rules, shaped by workers' beliefs and perceptions; BSD clearly happens in practice. While some forms of BSD are linked to demographics, such as gender and race, and are explicitly prohibited, BSD can also arise from perceived behaviors or personal circumstances. For example, street-level workers' perceptions of a citizen-client's actions, attitudes, or situation may influence discretionary decisions (Guul et al. 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018), even when such factors are not formally authorized as decision criteria. These forms of BSD are problematic and lack legitimacy in terms of formal laws and policies. They undermine the principles of Weberian governance, political-legal accountability, and core values of equality, impartiality, and legality within the administrative state. Given these concerns, how might we characterize citizen perspectives on BSD—both in general and how they relate to the work of street-level workers?

Mapping public attitudes toward BSD is both important and complex. Beyond considering citizen-clients' awareness of such practices and the service areas where they may observe them, a critical issue is citizen-clients' actual preferences. In theory, public views may align with values of equality, impartiality, and legality—core public values reflecting a broad normative consensus. As a result, citizen-clients may oppose most forms of BSD across public service areas. Conversely, citizen-clients may accept or even endorse certain forms of BSD, including favoritism toward individuals with specific demographic characteristics or attributes. For example, based on implicit stereotypical beliefs, some may support BSD that prioritizes service recipients based on race, gender, age, or socio-economic status.

Moreover, support for BSD may extend beyond demographic differences to include preferences for treatment based on behaviors or personal situations. For example, citizen-clients might favor prioritizing resources, effort, and time for individuals seen as motivated, competent, or lacking control over their circumstances. Such expectations align with political science research on public preference for welfare directed to those deemed "deserving" (Van Oorschot 2000) and with public administration research on deservingness in street-level decision-making (Guul et al. 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018). As members of the public themselves, street-level workers' decision-making may reflect societal values and psychology. Therefore, the factors influencing street-level workers' cognition and actions—including tendencies toward BSD—may mirror broader public attitudes. These considerations provide preliminary expectations regarding citizen support of certain forms of BSD.

Understanding citizen perspectives on BSD is scholarly significant, providing insights into democratic governance and accountability in street-level service delivery. Traditionally, public administration scholarship emphasizes "public-administrative accountability," focusing on political and legal compliance (Hupe and Hill 2007). However, as an additional benchmark, scholarship could benefit from considering whether instances of BSD reflect the normative beliefs and preferences of the broader public. If citizen-clients' views align with documented BSD practices, this could present challenges that may not resonate well with all social equity scholars. Moreover, some public administrators and policymakers might find themselves in a delicate position, balancing policy compliance with public sentiment.

Nonetheless, such inquiry and mapping are appropriate when recognizing that public accountability at the street level extends beyond political and legal forms (Hupe and Hill 2007). Specifically, potential public support for BSD in certain contexts relates to "participatory accountability"—a concept echoing Lipsky's (2010) notion of client-based evaluation of street-level work. Aligned with New Public Service principles (Denhardt and Denhardt 2015), this form of accountability emphasizes participatory citizenship and the importance of considering citizen-clients' views and voices alongside public-administrative accountability. While highlighting bureaucratic responsiveness to public sentiment, however, it also raises inherent normative and

unresolved questions when the public support for BSD conflict with legal principles and moral considerations.

Ultimately, public administration research should continue to examine bureaucratic service delivery to understand how and when practices deviate from political-legal rights and policies. This essay does *not* advocate abandoning or dismissing the study of BSD in relation to public-administrative accountability as the primary evaluative standard. Nor does it suggest that public endorsement of BSD in a given context implies that such practices are therefore democratically effective or warranted—or that incorporating such sentiments into service delivery and policymaking is inherently a matter of democratic legitimacy[4]. Rather, it calls for mapping citizen perspectives, thereby enabling inferences—the extrapolation of analytical findings, the diagnosis of the issue's severity, and the consideration of policy recommendations—to all be informed *also* by public views. Even documenting public preferences for BSD that is explicitly prohibited is valuable, as it flags a significant misalignment, prompting further inquiry into causes of such support and informing scholarly debate on its implications.

Specifically, mapping citizen perspectives on BSD should extend beyond identifying average levels of tolerance or endorsement, focusing also on distribution and variance in attitudes. Public attitudes toward BSD may be diverse and polarized, potentially linked to political partisanship. Furthermore, future research could explore whether instances of BSD tolerated or endorsed by the public are, in fact, perceived by citizen-clients and policymakers as conflicting with norms of equality and equity. Could tolerance of BSD be due mainly to a lack of cognitive awareness regarding its implications for equality and equity? Might information about these implications reduce such tolerance?

In sum, citizen perspectives on public service delivery—particularly their tolerance or endorsement of BSD—have received insufficient scholarly attention. Mapping these perspectives will not only expand but also deepen our understanding, evaluation, and discourse on democratic responsiveness in public service delivery. Additionally, such research holds practical importance

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[4] For example, support for overt racism, misogyny, or lookism in public service delivery within a population subgroup does not imply that such perspectives should be considered, nor that disregarding them undermines democratic effectiveness and legitimacy.

for street-level organizations and bureaucrats, offering relevant insights for policymakers and supervisors concerned with bureaucratic accountability and responsiveness—thereby informing and potentially prompting policy revisions or managerial actions[5]. Research should thus prioritize identifying citizen perspectives on BSD, with the aim of informing both public administration research and policymaking. Are there specific service recipients or attributes for whom BSD is considered legitimate? If so, in which policy areas and aspects of service? Research in this area is currently lacking but justified by its potential to advance both scholarly understanding and democratic governance and responsiveness.

## The future of research on equity and equality in street-level public service delivery

*Nadine Raaphorst*

Public administration scholars studying equity and equality are often motivated by a normative commitment to social justice. This commitment involves not only understanding and explaining how inequality and inequity in street-level decision-making arises but also working to improve outcomes for historically disadvantaged groups, grounded in scientific knowledge. However, social science research on these issues is itself affected by societal dynamics, including what appears to be growing political contestation and public skepticism. What does it imply for social scientists if individuals, including street-level bureaucrats in inequality-reducing public services, fail to understand the extent and causes of inequality, or when established scientific evidence diverges from their beliefs? What does it mean for our research on equity and equality, if it is associated with hidden political agendas and viewed as ideologically driven and biased? These perceptions carry significant normative implications for our role as researchers and educators, as we bear a responsibility not only for producing rigorous knowledge, but also for defending it and correcting misperceptions, particularly in a polarized environment. To do so effectively, however, we must first understand the factors that shape views held by citizens and bureaucrats of social scientific research on inequality and inequity. This necessitates a sociological approach that addresses not only the mechanisms of inequality and inequity in street-level public service delivery

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[5] For example, if the public strongly favors BSD in a particular service context, policymakers may need to assess whether formalizing such practices in policy and procedures is warranted. Similarly, strong public opposition to a specific form of BSD might prompt policymakers to evaluate whether current policies adequately codify that form of BSD as illegitimate. Supervisors may also be encouraged to actively monitor, incentivize, and support the elimination of such BSD among employees.

and the public's beliefs about inequality, but also the ways in which people perceive, trust, and engage with scientific evidence on these issues.

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