Article

International Review of Administrative Sciences

International Review of Administrative Sciences
1–19

DOI: 10.1177/00208523221103196
journals.sagepub.com/home/ras

Street-level bureaucracy in weak state institutions: a systematic review of the literature

Rik Peeters
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico

Sergio A. Campos
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Aguascalientes, Mexico

Abstract

The study of street-level bureaucracy has been dominated by research from the Global North. Mainstream conceptualizations are, therefore, based on observations from institutional contexts that may vary significantly from the working conditions of frontline workers elsewhere. This article takes stock of the growing body of literature on street-level bureaucracy in weak institutional contexts and brings together relevant insights from comparative political science and public administration into a coherent analytical framework. We identify four institutional factors that shape frontline working conditions and three behavioral patterns in frontline worker agency. These patterns in frontline agency – ranging from policy improvisation to informal privatization – can be understood as an institutional waterbed effect caused by institutional deficiencies, such as resource scarcity and accountability gaps: if the complexity of public service provision is not tackled at the institutional level, it is pushed towards the street-level where frontline workers cope with it in highly diverse ways.

Points for practitioners

- Frontline workers in weak state institutions are commonly faced with highly precarious working conditions.
- If the structural preconditions for policy implementation and rule enforcement are unresolved, these complexities are pushed towards frontline workers that cope with

Corresponding author:
Rik Peeters, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE), Mexico City, Mexico.
Email: rik.peeters@cide.edu

them through informal privatization, policy improvisation, or alienative commitment focused on mere job survival.
- Frontline agency is an indispensable factor for understanding the selective and often distributive nature of service delivery and rule enforcement in the Global South.

Keywords
frontline work, Global South, institutional analysis, literature review, street-level bureaucracy, weak institutions

Introduction

How do structurally adverse working conditions impact the behavior of street-level bureaucrats? And how does this affect policy implementation, public service provision, and citizens' experiences of the state? Most research on street-level bureaucracy has been conducted in institutional contexts of the Global North that are generally characterized by high levels of professionalization, administrative capacity, and bureaucratic autonomy (Bertelli et al., 2020; Pepinsky et al., 2017). The vast majority of the world's street-level bureaucrats, however, work under a very different set of institutional incentives and constraints, including highly politicized bureaucracies (Zarychta et al., 2020), precarious labor conditions (Lima and D'Asenzi, 2017), scarcity of basic resources (Gibson, 2004), systematic corruption (Justesen and Bjørnskov, 2014), and low social trust in government (Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021). In this article, we take stock of the literature on street-level bureaucracy in the Global South and analyze recurring institutional factors and the way they shape frontline worker agency. We do so through the concept of 'weak institutions' (Brinks et al., 2020): state institutions – rules that permit, require, or prohibit certain behavior – that fail to redistribute and refract power, authority, or expectations in a way that significantly diverges from a pre-institutional outcome (Brinks et al., 2020: 8).[1]

The primary aim of this article is to advance our understanding of frontline work, service delivery, and state-citizen interactions in weak institutional settings. Therefore, we: (1) identify and outline a specific body of literature and (2) develop an analytical framework for understanding the nature of frontline work in weak institutions. Our findings suggest that the variation in frontline agency patterns, which ranges from policy improvisation to predatory bureaucracy, can be understood as responses by street-level bureaucrats to institutional factors such as resource shortage, social inequality, and precarious labor conditions. Deficiencies in the institutional preconditions for policy implementation and service provision trigger an *institutional waterbed-effect*, pushing these deficiencies towards the street-level where frontline workers cope with them in highly diverse ways. Thereby, we help shed light on how precarity makes frontline work in the Global South different from strong institutional settings, and, more broadly, on the often-contested nature of state-citizen interactions, the patchiness of service delivery, and the mechanisms underlying implementation and enforcement gaps (Holland, 2015; McDonnell, 2017; Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021).

A second objective of this article is to bridge insights from public administration and (comparative) political science. Both fields have largely studied street-level bureaucracy and frontline work from their own perspective. In line with the observation that '[t]he face of politics for most citizens […] is a bureaucrat' (Pepinksy et al., 2017: 250), our findings suggest the added value of incorporating frontline worker agency as a crucial variable in political science analyses of bureaucratic performance and of the relationship between politics and electorate. Likewise, the theory-building in comparative politics can complement the understanding of frontline workers' agency in public administration, enabling the incorporation of institutional factors into analytical frameworks for explaining variance in the behavior of frontline workers and their interactions with citizens.

In the following, we first discuss a preliminary analytical framework to organize the findings of our literature review. We build on key publications in the field to suggest four institutional dimensions – administrative, political, social, and professional – and three agency patterns as constitutive for understanding street-level bureaucracy in weak state institutions. Next, we present the findings of the systematic literature review. This includes both descriptive analytics on key characteristics of the identified studies as well as a qualitative content analysis. We conclude the article with a summary of our main findings and suggestions for further research.

An institutional analysis of frontline work

Institutional factors

Consistent with well-established insights from institutional theory (Ostrom, 2005) and street-level bureaucracy literature (Brodkin, 2007; Evans, 2011; Hupe and Hill, 2007; Thomann, 2015), we assume that structural working conditions are a crucial explanatory factor for variation in frontline work. Institutional factors simultaneously constrain and enable frontline work. For instance, professional guidelines limit frontline workers' freedom, but also facilitate the execution of their profession; and formal rules demand frontline workers to follow specific procedural steps, but also legitimize their decisions. In other words, institutional factors shape the 'action possibilities' (Norman, 2013) for frontline workers. However, what sets the working conditions in weak institutions apart from those in strong institutions has not been the subject of many systematic analyses. We draw on the comparative analytical frameworks of Brinks et al. (2020), Hupe and Buffat (2014), Lameck and Hulst (2020), and Pepinksy et al. (2017) to identify four institutional dimensions that allow us to organize the findings of our literature review:

- *Administrative factors*, or the organizational and administrative preconditions for frontline work, including formal rules and structures (Hupe and Buffat, 2014; Lameck and Hulst, 2020), and state capacity and resource allocation (Brinks et al., 2020). In weak institutional settings, we can expect to see more limitations in the formalization of working procedures (Kelly, 2017), in managerial supervision and control (North, 1990), and in administrative capacity to provide public services (Gibson, 2004) and enforce laws (Amengual and Dargent, 2020).

- *Political factors*, or the influence of political actors and electoral interests in frontline work (Brinks et al., 2020; Pepinsky et al., 2017). In settings with low bureaucratic autonomy (Dasandi and Esteve, 2017), common in the Global South, frontline work may be influenced by political hiring and firing power (Perelmiter, 2016), politically motivated work instructions (Holland, 2016), patronage and clientelism (Harris et al., 2022), machine politics (Nichter, 2008), and high levels of personnel turnover (Nieto Morales et al., 2014).
- *Social factors*, or the attitudes and characteristics of public service clients and the public at large (Brinks et al., 2020; Lameck and Hulst, 2020; Pepinsky et al., 2017). Specifically for weak institutions, relevant social factors include low social trust in government (Peeters and Dussauge Laguna, 2021), competing social institutions and norms (Masood and Nisar, 2020), high social inequality (Lotta and Pires, 2019), and high levels of violence and social conflict (Ballvé, 2012). This can lead to more dangerous frontline working conditions (Sundström, 2016), more complexity in dealing with marginalized public service clients (Bhavnani and Lee, 2018), and more citizens actively resisting (Nisar, 2018), avoiding (Chudnovsky and Peeters, 2021a), or gaming (Peeters et al., 2020) client–worker interactions.
- *Professional factors*, or the formal and informal professional norms, terms of employment (including salary, job certainty, and career possibilities), and action resources that frontline workers have at their disposal in terms of the quality and quantity of personnel, budget, and technical tools (Hupe and Buffat, 2014; Lameck and Hulst, 2020; Pepinksy et al., 2017). We expect to see widespread precarious frontline labor conditions in the Global South, including low salaries and lack of job security (Lima and D'Asenzi, 2017) and poorly maintained and equipped working facilities (Walker and Gilson, 2004), as well as large variation in professional training (Chudnovsky and Peeters, 2021b) and professional norms – ranging from systemic corruption (Justesen and Bjørnskov, 2014) and predatory bureaucracy (Bernstein and Lü, 2003) to pockets of strong professional ethos (Mangla, 2015).

Agency patterns

Following our objective to analyze how institutional factors shape frontline work in weak institutions, we also identify recurring patterns in frontline worker agency. We use the typology of coping mechanisms for client–worker interactions developed by Tummers and colleagues (2015) to formulate several initial expectations. First, frontline workers may move against citizens in the form of 'informal privatization' (Blundo, 2006). Here, personal convictions and interests prevail over public ones; for instance, by applying personal considerations and criteria to their clients, or by displaying corrupt and predatory bureaucratic behavior. This agency pattern can be associated with further aggravating the selective enforcement and uneven service provision common for weak institutions. Alternatively, frontline workers may move towards citizens by using their discretion to deliver services under adverse conditions. Through 'policy improvisation' (Campos and Peeters, 2022) or 'policy repair' (Masood and Nisar, 2021), frontline workers may mitigate and partially compensate for institutional weakness.

Finally, frontline workers may move away from citizens to deal with overdemand of public services or a lack of job motivation. Forms of 'alienative commitment' (Usman et al., 2021), such as gatekeeping or rationing of services, can be associated with a focus on job survival and self-preservation (Satyamurti, 1981). In the qualitative analysis of the identified studies in our literature review, we further explore these frontline agency patterns and how they are associated with specific institutional factors.

Methodology

Mapping the field

A systematic literature review requires, above all, making choices about inclusion and exclusion to identify relevant texts. Before outlining the details of the selection process, we discuss two strategic choices regarding country sample and academic scope. First, although weak institutions are not limited to the Global South (Mahler, 2018) and strong institutions not limited to the Global North (McDonnell, 2017), we focus our review on studies covering all non-high-income countries of Latin America, Asia, and Africa as well as former communist non-EU Eastern European and Central Asian countries. We primarily exclude Anglo-Saxon and most European countries as well as specific high-income countries and regions such as Japan, Israel, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Although countries in the Global South are usually identified based on economic development and differ greatly among each other in terms of, for instance, state capacity and trust in government, they also tend to have common traits, such as colonial legacies, fragile democratic institutions, and imperfect rules of law (World Justice Project, 2020) that make them the most logical country sample for the study of weak institutional settings.

Second, within public administration research, the concepts 'street-level bureaucracy' and 'frontline work' provide cohesion to a specific field of research, which helps the identification of relevant studies. However, we found that using these search terms often excludes profession-specific studies on police officers, teachers, and (to a lesser extent) medical professionals, among others. Although we acknowledge their possible relevance, we have not explicitly included these because of their sheer quantity and because we believe that studies specifically focused on street-level bureaucracy provide sufficient insights for the purposes of our review. Furthermore, there are many studies beyond the field of public administration that address street-level bureaucrats, albeit using different and varied terms (such as frontline officials, local enforcers, bureaucrats, municipal workers, and so on). Despite the limited conceptual cohesion, we have tried to include as many relevant studies as possible, especially from comparative political science.

Data collection

The literature review is conducted according to the PRISMA format (Moher et al., 2009) – while also taking cues from other systematic reviews in the field (Bustos, 2021; Tummers et al., 2015). Documents are selected in two different search strategies in

online databases. A first strategy focuses on the identification of relevant texts in public administration, political science, sociology, public health, and development studies based on a keyword search of the terms 'street-level bureaucracy' and 'frontline work' (and variants thereof). A second strategy excludes public administration literature and, instead, uses broader keywords such 'bureaucrat', 'policy implementation', 'service delivery', and 'public goods' to identify relevant texts from fields of study that do not use the idiom common for public administration literature. Both strategies consist of the following four phases: (1) a keyword search in the bibliographic database Web of Science (and Google Scholar in case of the first search strategy) and in key journals in the fields of public administration and political science; (2) a manual selection for Global South and topic relevance; (3) a backward and forward search in key publications; and (4) expert consultation. Both searches only included records with the following criteria:

- Only publications in English. This likely excludes a number of relevant studies in Spanish, French, and other global and local languages, but avoids a bias towards specific regions given our specific and limited language skills.
- Only articles, book chapters, and books for which we could verify double-blind peer review. This excludes possibly relevant research reports from international organizations or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), unpublished manuscripts, and conference papers.
- Only publications between 1981 and September 2021. This time frame was chosen because it covers the period after Lipsky's (1980 [2010]) foundational work in street-level bureaucracy, although it is possible that this excludes relevant documents from an earlier date.
- Exclusion of COVID-19 related studies. The global pandemic triggered a boom of studies from the Global South, but we have excluded these to avoid a bias towards frontline work under emergency conditions.

A complete overview of the selection procedure and a full list of selected texts are provided in an online Appendix. Figure 1 (see online Appendix) depicts the results of the selection of a total of 358 relevant texts.

Data analysis

The bibliographical details and abstracts of all selected entries were analyzed on descriptive statistics and qualitative content. For the descriptive statistics, the following elements are identified: (1) year of publication; (2) type of study (theoretical or empirical); (3) region and country; (4) field of study (public health, public administration, social issues, etc.); and (5) type of frontline worker (health worker, desk clerk, etc.). Furthermore, we used the Bibliometric R-package to analyze the thematic cohesion of the identified body of literature (Aria and Cuccurullo, 2017; Bibliometrix, n.d.). For the qualitative content analysis, abstracts were coded according to the aforementioned analytical framework of institutional factors and agency patterns. More specifically, we used the following coding procedure:

- Relevance: the abstracts of all entries are coded according to whether they: (1) mention factors specifically relevant for weak institutional settings; (2) make a causal argument by using institutional factors to explain patterns in frontline worker agency; or (3) include an overview of relevant literature. Entries with a causal argument or a literature overview are marked as a 'key publication' and used for step 3 in the selection procedure outlined above.
- Institutional factors: abstracts with relevant information regarding institutional factors that shape frontline working conditions in weak institutions are coded using the analytical framework developed above to assist the first coding cycle. In a second round of coding, we inductively identify more specific observable variables in frontline working conditions for each institutional factor.
- Frontline agency: abstracts with relevant information regarding patterns in frontline worker agency are also coded using the analytical framework developed above. In a second round of coding, we inductively identify more specific observable variables in frontline agency for each of the three agency patterns.

Findings I: descriptive analytics

Publications by geographical region

We have coded all documents according to the geographical region and country the study was performed in. The three most represented regions are Sub-Saharan Africa (105), Latin America and Caribbean (80), and South Asia (71). Several individual countries stand out for their number of studies: China (56), India (46), Brazil (31), South Africa (24), Ghana (21), and Mexico (15) (see Figure 2 online).

Publications by year

All documents are coded according to publication year. This shows a clear rising trend in number of publications, especially since 2016 (see Figure 3 online).

Publications by type of study

Documents are also coded to determine whether they are theoretical or empirical, with a further classification of empirical studies into qualitative, quantitative, experimental, or mixed methods. The vast majority of the identified documents are qualitative studies (245) (see Figure 4 online).

Publications by academic field

Consistent with the inclusion criteria in the Web of Science search, we have coded the identified documents according to the academic field they are published in. Unsurprisingly, public administration studies are the most common (100), followed by

public health studies (71), which indicates some level of cross-field conceptual cohesion (see Figure 5 online).

Publications by type of street-level bureaucrat

Finally, documents are coded according to the type of street-level bureaucrat that is the object of study and analysis. Health workers emerge as the most common type of street-level bureaucrat in our systematic review (94), followed by a miscellaneous category including non-specified policy implementers, local bureaucrats, rural development officers, and planning officials (88), police and enforcement officials (64), and social policy workers (61) (see Figure 6 online).

Thematic evolution and cohesion

An essential question for mapping a field of study is: to what extent is there thematic cohesion in the identified documents? We use Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) to analyze the topic homogeneity and measure the conceptual relationship between authors' keywords. Bibliometrix, a bibliometric R-package, allows us to identify 'semantic or conceptual groups of different topics treated by the research field' (Cobo et al., 2011: 147) and generate a dendrogram showing hierarchical relationships between terms (see Figure 7). We identify three clusters of terms: a cluster with concepts related to street-level bureaucracy, such as discretion, agency, accountability, implementation, leadership, and motivation; and two smaller clusters more specific for the Global South in general and more specifically for political science ('patronage', 'clientelism') and public administration ('bribery', 'poverty', 'governance', and 'corruption'). Notwithstanding, in general, we find a substantial homogeneity in concepts, which suggests a high level of thematic cohesion among the identified documents of our systematic review. This supports our claim that the review outlines a specific body of literature (see Figure 7 online).

Findings II: qualitative content analysis

Coding results of institutional factors

Out of a total of 358, we have coded 296 documents as engaging with their specific weak institutional context.[2] First, the coding results of the 249 documents we identified as highlighting institutional factors that shape frontline working conditions in weak state institutions demonstrate the relevance of all four dimensions discussed above. Table 1 summarizes the results of the coding of institutional factors, including three observable variables for each dimension (identified through a second round of inductive coding). These factors are not present in all working conditions nor are all factors present simultaneously. There is, above all, a large variation among the analyzed documents. Our objective here is analytical – to identify what the relevant variables are when studying frontline work in weak institutions. The most often mentioned factors that shape frontline

Table 1. Coding results of institutional factors.

Institutional factor	Incidence[a]	Variable	Description	Incidence
Administrative factors [IF.ADM]	142	Resource scarcity [IF.ADM.SCA]	A lack of material resources to deliver an adequate level or number of services, owing to an overdemand of clients and/or a shortage of basic equipment. (e.g. Jitta et al., 2003; Mohammed, 2021; Mukuru et al., 2021)[b]	55
		Dysfunctional rules [IF.ADM.DIS]	Opaque, contradictory, complex, or inefficient rules and procedures that impede service delivery or leave frontline workers with ambiguous instructions and task descriptions. (e.g. Hoag, 2010; Nimpagaritse and Bertone, 2011; Peeters et al., 2018; Perez, 2016)	39
		Leadership and accountability gaps [IF.ADM.LEA]	A lack of managerial support and control that leads to unchecked discretion at street-level and a large distance between formal policies and their implementation. (e.g. Mathauer and Imhoff, 2006; Nambiar and Sheikh, 2016; Perazzone, 2019; Verma et al., 2018)	48
Political factors [IF.POL]	59	Clientelism and patronage [IF.POL.CLI]	Equal and predictable service delivery and rule enforcement is complicated by political actors engaging in favoritism and vote buying with social actors or groups. (e.g. Ali, 2021; Gore, 2021; Oliveros, 2016)	24
		Authoritarian context [IF.POL.AUT]	Authoritarian political regimes create a culture of strict rule compliance, thereby shifting attention away from the needs of clients and citizens. (e.g. Forrat, 2018; Gaibazzi, 2017; Zang and Musheno, 2017)	22
		Political influence in the bureaucracy [IF.POL.INF]	Political actors with hiring and firing power directly pressure and instruct frontline workers to prioritize or waive certain actions. (e.g. Holland, 2016; Klem, 2012; Konkipudi and Jacob, 2017; Oliveros, 2021)	13
Social factors [IF.SOC]	97	Social inequality and marginalization [IF.SOC.INE]	Service provision and rule enforcement in marginalized communities, in conflict zones, and towards socio-economically vulnerable citizens complicates street-level interactions and	57

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Institutional factor	Incidence[a]	Variable	Description	Incidence
			outreach work. (e.g. Cogburn, 2020; Mangla, 2021; Pellissery, 2006)	
		Low expectations and trust [IF.SOC.EXP]	A lack of trust by service clients and prevailing social norms and attitudes reduces their willingness to engage with frontline workers and seek service provision through formal channels. (e.g. Raven et al., 2018; Spink et al., 2021)	19
		Brokerage and gaming [IF.SOC.BRO]	Citizens use personal resources or collective action to pressure or negotiate with frontline workers to informally obtain a preferential treatment. (e.g. Forkuor et al., 2020; Hossain, 2010; Nading, 2017)	21
Professional factors [IF.PRO]	72	Precarious labor conditions [IF.PRO.PRE]	Frontline work is characterized by job uncertainty, low salaries, limited career possibilities, and poorly maintained and equipped work facilities. (e.g. Hayat, 2020; Oliveros and Schuster, 2018; Peiffer et al., 2021; Walker and Gilson, 2004; Xie and Liu, 2019)	35
		Limited training and professionalization [IF.PRO.TRA]	Frontline workers receive insufficient training for the tasks they are expected to perform and are hired based on non-meritocratic criteria. (e.g. Crook and Ayee, 2006; Jaeger et al., 2018)	17
		Culture of corruption [IF.PRO.COR]	Organizational contexts are characterized by systemic corruption that converts frontline work into positions of extraction and rent seeking. (e.g. Justesen and Bjornskov, 2014; La Forgia et al., 2015; Nkyabonaki, 2019)	20

[a]The total incidence is not equal to the total number of entries in the literature review because some documents mention multiple institutional factors.
[b]References in the tables are included in the online Appendix documenting all identified entries in the literature review.

working conditions in the Global South are social inequality and marginalization (57), resource scarcity (55), leadership and accountability gaps (48), dysfunctional rules (39), and precarious labor conditions (35) (Table 1).

Coding results of patterns in frontline agency

Second, we discuss the coding results of the 186 documents we identified as mentioning behavioral and motivational patterns of frontline agency specific for weak state institutions. In a similar procedure to the institutional dimensions, we found evidence for the three patterns outlined above. In a second round of inductive coding, we identified two more observable variables for each pattern. Table 2 summarizes the results of the coding of frontline work patterns. The most mentioned pattern is local embeddedness and networks (60), followed by professional self-determination (33) and predatory behavior (30) (Table 2).

Coding results of causal arguments

Finally, and consistent with the main argument of this article that institutional constraints and incentives shape the 'action possibilities' (Norman, 2013) of frontline work, we have analyzed the abstracts of 69 documents coded as explicitly linking institutional factors to patterns in frontline worker agency. While we recognize the limitations of this article and acknowledge that a full text analysis may reveal additional insights, our analysis gives a tentative understanding of how certain working conditions are associated with specific frontline action patterns.

First, informal privatization is associated with resource scarcity in combination with accountability gaps and uncontrolled street-level discretion, and, to a lesser extent, with precarious labor conditions such as low pay, with political-clientelist motives, or with citizen-initiated manipulation attempts. According to Perelmiter (2021), a patchy and selective legal and bureaucratic apparatus leads to a structural experience of arbitrariness in bureaucratic encounters. However, the boundaries between predatory bureaucracy (moving against citizens) and policy improvisation (moving towards citizens) are sometimes blurry. A more complex account of how frontline workers may cope with scarcity and accountability gaps is provided by Jitta et al. (2003), Agyepong and Nagai (2011), and Diarra and Ousseini (2015). These studies of African public hospitals show how medical staff cope with medicine shortages by informally charging patients for services to then use part of these acquired resources on the local commercial market to buy medicines for their most vulnerable patients. Similarly, the boundaries between predatory behavior and alienative commitment are sometimes difficult to draw; for instance, when frontline workers facilitate political vote-buying out of fear of being transferred or losing their job (Brierley, 2020), or when they take bribes to protect themselves from intimidation by their colleagues or criminal gangs (Sundström, 2016).

Second, policy improvisation also emerges as an action pattern in contexts with large frontline discretion and lack of managerial support and leadership and, to a lesser extent, with a dysfunctional formal rule system. However, this pattern's reliance on professional norms and motivation to provide satisfactory services and restore trust is also strongly associated with an embeddedness in social contexts with high marginalization or

Table 2. Coding results of patterns in frontline worker agency.

Agency pattern	Incidence[a]	Variables	Description	Incidence
Informal privatization [FW.PRI]	58	Personal convictions and motivations [FW.PRI.PER]	Applying personal and subjective criteria to determine client eligibility, treatment, or access to services. (e.g. Aitken, 1994; Leduka, 2006; O'Brien and Li, 1999; Schmoll, 2021)	28
		Predatory behavior [FW.PRI.PRE]	Displaying corrupt behavior by demanding material or immaterial rewards from clients. (e.g. Hausken et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2016; Markowitz, 2011)	30
Policy improvisation [FW.IMP]	93	Professional self-determination [FW.IMP.DET]	Developing professional values and norms to improve service delivery under adverse conditions. (e.g. Aberese-Ako et al., 2014; Gaede, 2016; McKnight et al., 2020; Nzinga et al., 2019)	33
		Local embeddedness and networks [FW.IMP.EMB]	Engaging with local communities, their norms, and their interests to improve service provision. (e.g. Bhavnani and Lee, 2018; Dhanju et al., 2017; ; Gross et al., 2012; Hrynick et al., 2019; Puffer et al., 2021)	60
Alienative commitment [FW.ALI]	49	Low service motivation [FW.ALI.MOT]	Low motivation and 'going through the motions' with a focus on job survival and self-preservation. (e.g. Aberese-Ako et al., 2018; Chesoli et al., 2018; Usman et al., 2021)	26
		Gatekeeping and rationing [FW.ALI.GAT]	Dealing with overdemand of public services by restricting access or rationing service delivery. (e.g. Atinga et al., 2018; Ramani et al., 2020)	23
Other [FW.OTH]	7			

[a]The total incidence is not equal to the total number of entries in the literature review because some documents mention multiple patterns.

vulnerability – with frontline workers sometimes using their own personal experiences as socio-economically vulnerable citizens or community members. To some extent, improvisation can compensate for political capture, resource scarcity, and opaque rule systems. This is a phenomenon that Masood and Nisar (2021) describe as 'policy repair'. However, moving towards citizens through local embeddedness may also lead to a reinforcement of inequalities in the access to services and rights. For instance, in a study on the formal registration of people as indigenous in Nigeria – who are entitled to certain social and political benefits – Ehrhardt (2017) shows how street-level bureaucrats rely on locally salient norms of belonging in the absence of clear formal criteria. Thereby, they unintentionally prioritize certain social groups over others, affecting their economic and political participation.

Third, alienative commitment in the form of low motivation can be linked to resource scarcity in combination with precarious labor conditions, such as low pay, dangerous work, and job uncertainty, or with encroachment by political pressures and clientelism or by societal power brokers. Contrary to policy improvisation and informal privatization, this agency pattern is associated with low street-level discretion. Frontline workers may be mostly concerned with their own job survival rather than with the implementation of a formal policy – thereby sometimes spilling over into informal privatization. Alienative commitment in the form of gatekeeping behavior is associated with resource scarcity and service overdemand, especially when frontline workers function in a context of complex rules or dysfunctional performance incentives. This can have a profound effect on service delivery as, for instance, Eiró's (2019) study on vicious cycles in client–worker interactions in a Brazilian social program shows: beneficiaries fear losing the benefit because of misinformation and myths surrounding the program, which leads some of them to behave strategically to keep the benefit, thereby triggering suspicion among social workers who adopt a stricter approach in response. This, in turn, reinforces fear and uncertainty among beneficiaries. Elsewhere, Smith-Oka (2013) argues that obstetric violence in Mexican public hospitals can be traced back to service overdemand and the subsequent rationing behavior by medical staff.

Table 3 summarizes the coding results of the documents identified as presenting a causal argument.

Conclusion

The systematic literature review presented here makes three contributions. First, we identify and outline a body of literature on a topic of growing academic interest. Bringing together studies on street-level bureaucracy from weak institutional contexts, common in the Global South, can be of use for reference by other scholars in both research and teaching. Future studies could address various limitations of our review, such as the limited inclusion of profession-specific literature (e.g. teachers and police officers) and of non-English publications.

Second, we develop an analytical framework for the institutional analysis of frontline work to advance theorizing on how specific institutional factors shape frontline agency in weak institutional settings. We also identify patterns in frontline agency: 'informal privatization' (Blundo, 2006), 'policy improvisation' (Campos and Peeters, 2022), and 'alienative commitment' (Usman et al., 2021). A preliminary content analysis indicates that the

Table 3. Coding results of causal argument documents.

Agency pattern	Exemplary studies	Associated institutional factors	Document codes[a]
Informal privatization	Agyepong and Nagai, 2011	Resource scarcity & Leadership and accountability gaps	PA.001; PA.003; PA.006; PA.019; PA.021; PA.075; PA.122; PA.198; PA.207; PA.238; NPA.010; NPA.041; NPA.079; NPA.099
	Blundo, 2006		
	Brierley, 2020	Precarious labor conditions	PA.139; PA.142; NPA.042
	Diarra and Ousseini, 2015	Clientelism and patronage	PA.130; PA.150; NPA.033; NPA.036; NPA.050
	Perelmiter, 2021	Brokerage and gaming	PA.181; PA.256; NPA.037
	Sundström, 2016		
Policy improvisation	Campos and Peeters, 2022	Dysfunctional rules & Leadership and accountability gaps	PA.002; PA.023; PA.040; PA.043; PA.135; PA.206
	Ehrhardt, 2017	Social inequality and marginalization	PA.134; PA.097; PA.173; PA.182; PA.183; PA.202; PA.210; PA.227; NPA.048; NPA.062; NPA.067
	Lameck and Hulst, 2020	Low expectations and trust	PA.159; PA.175; PA.248
	Masood and Nisar, 2021		
	Müller et al., 2016		
Alienative commitment	Eiró, 2019	Precarious labor conditions	PA.029; PA.052; PA.089; PA.199; PA.200; PA.204; NPA.045; NPA.093
	Hyun et al., 2018		
	Karadaghi and Willott, 2015	Clientelism and patronage	PA.033; PA.056; PA.111
		Brokerage and gaming	PA.062; PA.191
	Smith-Oka, 2013	Resource scarcity & Dysfunctional rules	PA.047; PA.071; PA.083; PA.169; PA.197; PA.203; PA.209; NPA.026; NPA.034; NPA.093

[a]Paper references are the codes given to each paper. See online Appendix for full references.

variation in frontline agency patterns can be understood as responses by street-level bureaucrats to the implementation and enforcement gaps caused by institutional factors, such as resource shortage, social inequality, and precarious professionalization.

The third contribution of our review is its attempt to bridge academic fields of study, especially comparative politics and public administration. Although there is a considerable thematic cohesion regarding studies of street-level bureaucracy in weak institutional contexts, work remains to be done in terms of integrating theoretical and conceptual approaches. On the one hand, public administration scholars can take inspiration from political science to develop more explanatory approaches of frontline worker agency in specific institutional settings. On the other hand, comparative political science can be enriched by incorporating frontline agency in analyses of bureaucratic performance. The findings presented here indicate that frontline workers are a key element in understanding that weak institutions not only explain the nature of street-level bureaucracy, but that street-level bureaucrats also actively contribute to or partially compensate for institutional weakness through their daily work.

The body of literature on street-level bureaucracy in weak state institutions brought together in this review includes important insights for future studies in both the Global North and the Global South. By disentangling the institutional dimensions that shape frontline work, it is also possible to better identify the preconditions for reliable public service delivery and effective policy implementation (cf. Brodkin, 2007; Evans, 2011; Hupe and Hill, 2007). Furthermore, the study of how structurally adverse working conditions impact the behavior of street-level bureaucrats helps understand why, if anywhere, weak institutions are the setting where the idea of street-level discretion as 'the wild card of policy delivery' (Brodkin, 2008: 326) holds true. At the same time, several recurring mechanisms can be observed. First, the findings reflect the well-documented implementation and enforcement gaps and limited capacity common for public administrations in weak institutional contexts (Brinks et al., 2020; Williams, 2021). Institutional factors such as resource scarcity, dysfunctional rules, and precarious working conditions impose limits on what is possible in terms of implementation and enforcement at the street-level.

Second, frontline workers also actively shape the daily functioning of weak institutions. Our preliminary analysis of the causal mechanisms between institutional factors and agency patterns suggests that: (1) 'informal privatization' is associated with resource scarcity, a lack of formal accountability mechanisms, large street-level discretion, and – to a lesser extent – with precarious labor conditions; (2) 'policy improvisation' with a similar lack of formal accountability mechanisms and large street-level discretion, but in combination with an embeddedness in local communities and interactions with vulnerable clients; and (3) 'alienative commitment' with resource scarcity in combination with low street-level discretion and precarious labor conditions. More generally, we argue that these patterns in frontline agency can be best understood as an *institutional waterbed-effect*: if the structural preconditions for policy implementation are left unresolved at the institutional level, these complexities are pushed towards the street-level where frontline workers cope with them in highly diverse ways. Thereby, frontline agency emerges as an indispensable factor for understanding the selective (O'Brien and Li, 1999), patchy (McDonnell, 2017), and, ultimately, distributive (Holland, 2015) nature of service delivery and rule enforcement in weak institutional contexts.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Muhammad Azfar Nisar, Virginia Oliveros, Jan Pierskalla, Gabriela Lotta, Milena Ang, and Francesca Jensenius for their invaluable contributions.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Rik Peeters https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9013-6192
Sergio A. Campos https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6078-3535

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. While the concept is developed for understanding state institutions in Latin America, we argue that it is also helpful to understand other settings where rule enforcement, service provision, and policy implementation are 'selective' (O'Brien and Li, 1999) or 'patchy' (McDonnell, 2017).
2. The remaining 62 documents are coded according to their main topic (see online Appendix).

References

Agyepong IA and Nagai RA (2011) 'We charge them; otherwise we cannot run the hospital' front line workers, clients and health financing policy implementation gaps in Ghana. *Health Policy* 99(3): 226–233.

Amengual M and Dargent E (2020) The social determinants of enforcement: Integrating politics with limited state capacity. In: Brinks DM, Levitsky S and Murillo MV (eds) *The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 161–182.

Aria M and Cuccurullo C (2017) Bibliometrix: An R-tool for comprehensive science mapping analysis. *Journal of Informetrics* 11(4): 959–975.

Ballvé T (2012) Everyday state formation: Territory, decentralization, and the narco landgrab in Colombia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30(4): 603–622.

Bernstein TP and Lü X (2003) *Taxation Without Representation in Contemporary Rural China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bertelli AM, Hassan M, Honig D, et al. (2020) An agenda for the study of public administration in developing countries. *Governance* 33(4): 735–748.

Bhavnani RR and Lee A (2018) Local embeddedness and bureaucratic performance: Evidence from India. *The Journal of Politics* 80(1): 71–87.

Bibliometrix (n.d.) biblioshiny. The shiny interface for bibliometrix. https://www.bibliometrix.org/Biblioshiny.html.
Blundo G (2006) Dealing with the local state: The informal privatization of street-level bureaucracies in Senegal. *Development And Change* 37(4): 799–819.
Brierley S (2020) Unprincipled principals: Co-opted bureaucrats and corruption in Ghana. *American Journal of Political Science* 64(2): 209–222.
Brinks DM, Levitsky S and Murillo MV (eds) (2020) *The Politics of Institutional Weakness in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Brodkin EZ (2007) Bureaucracy redux: Management reformism and the welfare state. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 17(1): 1–17.
Brodkin EZ (2008) Accountability in street-level organizations. *International Journal of Public Administration* 31(3): 317–336.
Bustos EO (2021) Organizational reputation in the public administration: A systematic literature review. *Public Administration Review* 81(4): 731–751.
Campos SA and Peeters R (2022) Policy improvisation: How frontline workers Cope with public service gaps in developing countries—the case of Mexico's prospera program. *Public Administration and Development* 42(1): 22–32.
Chudnovsky M and Peeters R (2021a) The unequal distribution of administrative burden: A framework and an illustrative case study for understanding variation in people's experience of burdens. *Social Policy & Administration* 55(4): 527–542.
Chudnovsky M and Peeters R (2021b) A cascade of exclusion: Administrative burdens and access to citizenship in the case of Argentina's national identity document. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*. DOI: 10.1177/0020852320984541.
Cobo MJ, López-Herrera AG, Herrera-Viedma E, et al. (2011) An approach for detecting, quantifying, and visualizing the evolution of a research field: A practical application to the fuzzy sets theory field. *Journal of Informetrics* 5(1): 146–166.
Dasandi N and Esteve M (2017) The politics–bureaucracy interface in developing countries. *Public Administration and Development* 37(4): 231–245.
Diarra A and Ousseini A (2015) The coping strategies of front-line health workers in the context of user fee exemptions in Niger. *BMC Health Services Research* 15(S3): S1.
Ehrhardt D (2017) Indigeneship, bureaucratic discretion, and institutional change in Northern Nigeria. *African Affairs* 116(464): 462–483.
Eiró F (2019) The vicious cycle in the bolsa familia program's implementation: Discretionality and the challenge of social rights consolidation in Brazil. *Qualitative Sociology* 42(3): 385–409.
Evans T (2011) Professionals, managers and discretion: Critiquing street-level bureaucracy. *British Journal of Social Work* 41(2): 368–386.
Gibson D (2004) The gaps in the gaze in South African hospitals. *Social Science & Medicine* 59(10): 2013–2024.
Harris AS, Meyer-Sahling J-H, Sass Mikkelsen K, et al. (2022) Activating the 'big man': Social status, patronage networks and pro-social behavior in African bureaucracies. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*. DOI: 10.1093/jopart/muac009.
Holland A (2016) Forbearance. *American Political Science Review* 110(2): 232–246.
Holland AC (2015) The distributive politics of enforcement. *American Journal of Political Science* 59(2): 357–371.
Hupe P and Buffat A (2014) A public service gap: capturing contexts in a comparative approach of street-level bureaucracy. *Public Management Review* 16(4): 548–569.
Hupe P and Hill M (2007) Street-Level bureaucracy and public accountability. *Public Administration* 85(2): 279–299.

Jitta J, Whyte S and Nshakira N (2003) The availability of drugs: What does it mean in Ugandan primary care. *Health Policy* 65(2): 167–179.

Justesen MK and Bjørnskov C (2014) Exploiting the poor: Bureaucratic corruption and poverty in Africa. *World Development* 58: 106–115.

Kelly G (2017) Patient agency and contested notions of disability in social assistance applications in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine* 175: 109–116.

Lameck W and Hulst R (2020) Explaining coping strategies of agricultural extension officers in Tanzania: The role of the wider institutional context. *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 86(4): 749–764.

Lima LL and D'Ascenzi L (2017) O papel da burocracia de nível de rua na implementação e (re) formulação da Política Nacional de Humanização dos serviços de saúde de Porto Alegre (RS). *Revista de Administração Pública* 51(1): 46–63.

Lipsky M (1980 [2010]) *Street-Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services [30th Anniversary Expanded Edition]*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Lotta G and Pires R (2019) Street-Level bureaucracy research and social inequality. In: Hupe P (ed.) *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Cheltenham & Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 86–101.

Mahler AG (2018) *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mangla A (2015) Bureaucratic norms and state capacity in India: Implementing primary education in the Himalayan region. *Asian Survey* 55(5): 882–908.

Masood A and Nisar MA (2020) Crushed between two stones: competing institutional logics in the implementation of maternity leave policies in Pakistan. *Gender, Work & Organization* 27(6): 1103–1126.

Masood A and Nisar MA (2021) Repairing the state: policy repair in the frontline bureaucracy. *Public Administration Review* 82(2): 256–268.

McDonnell E (2017) Patchwork leviathan: How pockets of bureaucratic governance flourish within institutionally diverse developing states. *American Sociological Review* 82(3): 476–510.

Moher D, Liberati A, Tetzlaff J, et al. (2009) Preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses: The PRISMA statement. *Annals of Internal Medicine* 151(4): 264–269.

Nichter S (2008) Vote buying or turnout buying? Machine politics and the secret ballot. *American Political Science Review* 102(1): 19–31.

Nieto Morales F, Heyse L, Pardo MC, et al. (2014) Building enforcement capacity: Evidence from the Mexican civil service reform. *Public Administration and Development* 34(5): 389–405.

Nisar MA (2018) Overcoming resistance to resistance in public administration: resistance strategies of marginalized publics in citizen-state interactions. *Public Administration and Development* 38(1): 15–25.

Norman D (2013) *The Design of Everyday Things: Revised and Expanded Edition*. New York: Basic Books.

North DC (1990) *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Brien KJ and Li L (1999) Selective policy implementation in rural China. *Comparative Politics* 31(2): 167–186.

Ostrom E (2005) *Understanding Institutional Diversity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Peeters R and Dussauge Laguna MI (2021) Acting out or playing along: A typology of citizens' low trust responses to public organizations. *Governance* 34(4): 965–981.

Peeters R, Gofen A and Meza O (2020) Gaming the system: Responses to dissatisfaction with public services beyond exit and voice. *Public Administration* 98(4): 824–839.

Peeters R, Trujillo Jiménez H, O'Connor E, et al. (2018) Low-Trust bureaucracy: Understanding the Mexican bureaucratic experience. *Public Administration and Development* 38(2): 65–74.

Pepinsky TB, Pierskalla JH and Sacks A (2017) Bureaucracy and service delivery. *Annual Review of Political Science* 20(1): 249–268.

Perelmiter L (2016) *Burocracia plebeya: la trastienda de la asistencia social en el Estado argentino*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: UNSAM.

Perelmiter L (2021) 'Fairness' in an unequal society: Welfare workers, labor inspectors and the embedded moralities of street-level bureaucracy in Argentina. *Public Administration and Development* 42(1): 85–94.

Satyamurti C (1981) *Occupational Survival: The Case of the Local Authority Social Worker*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Smith-Oka V (2013) Managing labor and delivery among impoverished populations in Mexico: Cervical examinations as bureaucratic practice. *American Anthropologist* 115(4): 595–607.

Sundström A (2016) Violence and the costs of honesty: Rethinking Bureaucrats' choices to take bribes. *Public Administration* 94(3): 593–608.

Thomann E (2015) Is output performance all about the resources? A fuzzy–set qualitative comparative analysis of street–level bureaucrats in Switzerland. *Public Administration* 93(1): 177–194.

Tummers LL, Bekkers V, Vink E, et al. (2015) Coping during public service delivery: A conceptualization and systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 25(4): 1099–1126.

Usman M, Ali M, Mughal F, et al. (2021) Policy alienation and street-level Bureaucrats' psychological wellbeing: The mediating role of alienative commitment. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 31(2): 278–294.

Walker L and Gilson L (2004) 'We are bitter but we are satisfied': Nurses as street-level bureaucrats in South Africa. *Social Science & Medicine* 59(6): 1251–1261.

Williams MJ (2021) Beyond state capacity: bureaucratic performance, policy implementation and reform. *Journal of Institutional Economics* 17(2): 339–357.

World Justice Project (2020) *World Justice Project Rule of Law Index 2020*. https://worldjusticeproject.org/sites/default/files/documents/WJP-ROLI-2020-Online_0.pdf.

Zarychta A, Grillos T and Andersson KP (2020) Public sector governance reform and the motivation of street-level bureaucrats in developing countries. *Public Administration Review* 80(1): 75–91.

Rik Peeters is a research professor of public administration at the Centre for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE), Mexico. His main areas of expertise are street-level bureaucracy, administrative burdens, and state–citizen interactions, with a special emphasis on developmental and low-trust contexts.

Sergio A Campos is a visiting professor of public administration at the Centre for Research and Teaching in Economics (CIDE), Mexico. His research focuses on citizen-state interactions, street-level bureaucracy, and citizen agency during bureaucratic encounters.