

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

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Habilitation thesis

Implementation of Labour Market Policy by Street-level Bureaucrats in Public Administration Affecting Regional and Social Development: Analytical Model and its Applications

Reviewer

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The habilitation thesis examines the role of frontline workers (or street-level bureaucrats) in the implementation of public policy at the regional and local levels, highlighting their active contribution to shaping policy outcomes rather than merely executing centrally designed policies. Building on Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory, the study investigates how organisational, institutional, and contextual factors influence frontline workers' decision-making and, consequently, citizens' access to public services and broader patterns of regional and social development. To address the complexity of policy implementation, the thesis introduces a novel analytical framework—the Organisational Model of Public Policy Implementation by Frontline Workers—designed to identify and assess the causal factors affecting policy delivery. The model is empirically applied to the implementation of active labour market policies in two regions of the Czech Republic, demonstrating its analytical value and flexibility across different policy domains. By integrating theoretical, methodological, and empirical perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing street-level policy implementation and advances the understanding of how frontline practices shape public policy outcomes in diverse organisational and socio-political contexts.

The thesis is structured into four main parts. The first provides a comprehensive review of the extensive literature on public policy implementation, the theory of street-level bureaucracy, and the various analytical frameworks developed within this research tradition. The second part adopts a methodological focus and introduces the *Organisational Model of Public Policy Implementation* by frontline Workers, the analytical framework developed by the author and employed throughout the study, which is proposed as a transferable tool for investigating policy implementation across different contexts. The third part presents the empirical research, illustrating both the data collected and the main findings. In this section, the analytical categories derived from the literature review and subsequently refined through the proposed *Organisational Model* are empirically tested. Finally, the fourth part synthesises the principal findings of the study and provides a systematic overview of the main strengths and analytical advantages of the *Organisational Model*.

The literature review is comprehensive, exceptionally thorough, rigorous, and well structured. The organisation of the material and the overall structure of the thesis are clear, coherent, and highly effective. The proposed analytical framework—the *Organisational Model*—is introduced in a consistent and well-argued manner and is applied throughout the study in a way that is highly effective and fully aligned with the overall research design.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence

Within the context of my overall positive assessment of the thesis, as discussed above, I would like to offer a few comments for consideration. I hope these observations may prove useful in any future revision of the manuscript and/or in the preparation of one or more publications based on the material presented here.

Arguably, one of the manuscript's greatest strengths—namely, its sharply focused analytical attention to *street-level bureaucrats*—may also represent an aspect that could benefit from further development. Lipsky's seminal work derived much of its influence from its ability to shift the terms of the scientific, political, and public debate on public policy by introducing a perspective that (a) overturned the conventional analytical approach, which focused primarily on policy content while paying limited attention to implementation, and (b) transcended the administrative fragmentation of policy problems by identifying issues common to a wide range of professional groups, including social workers, police officers, teachers, and others.

Today, however, several decades after the publication of Lipsky's work, the central insights of his approach can be regarded as firmly established. Both the scientific legitimacy of the street-level bureaucracy perspective and the critique it advanced of prevailing ways of conceiving, designing, and implementing public policies have become widely accepted within the field. In my view, preserving the deeper significance of Lipsky's contribution now requires relocating it within a broader framework of social analysis capable of renewing its critical and explanatory potential.

Among the various possible directions, one particularly promising avenue would be to place *street-level bureaucracy*—regardless of the specific institutional setting—in its historical context and to subject it to a process of *problematisation*, understood in the sense proposed by Robert Castel (1994). Such an approach would entail examining not only street-level bureaucracy itself, but also the broader policy regime of which it is an expression, together with the internal tensions, conflicts, and contradictions that shape its operation (Castel, R. (1994). *Problematisation as a Mode of Reading History*. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Foucault and the Writing of History* (pp. 237–304). Oxford: Blackwell).

More specifically, let me illustrate this point with a few examples. At times, the manuscript appears somewhat “disembodied”. Greater attention could be devoted to the broader context in which street-level bureaucracy operates and to the *regime of justification* within which its practices are embedded (Borghi, V. (2011a). *One-way Europe? Institutional Guidelines, Emerging Regimes of Justification, and Paradoxical Turns in European Welfare Capitalism*. *European Journal of Social Theory*, 14(3), 321–341), even if only with reference to the national context. For instance, the thesis notes that *New Public Management* has not been adopted, but does not explain why. What features of the broader labour market policy and

public policy environment account for this choice? What institutional and political context does this decision reflect?

At a more specific level, what are the characteristics of the local labour market systems in which the two case studies are situated? The thesis states that these are areas with a particularly high level of utilisation of the services provided by the employment agencies under investigation, but the reasons for this remain unclear. What socio-economic conditions account for this pattern? More broadly, what is the socio-economic history of the territories in which these frontline workers operate? Along the lines of the process of *problematisation* discussed above, I believe that the analysis could engage more explicitly with some of the key analytical perspectives that have profoundly shaped the (more or less) recent debate in this field of research. To mention just three examples:

- the analysis of labour market and employment policies—and, consequently, of the measures they encompass and the street-level modes through which they are implemented—could benefit from engagement with the *capability approach*, which offers a powerful analytical framework for understanding the relationship between public action, individual agency, and opportunities for participation (O. De Leonardis, S. Negrelli & R. Salais (eds.) (2012), *Democracy and Capabilities for Voice: Welfare, Work and Public Deliberation in Europe*. Brussels; Bonvin, J.-M., & Farvaque, N. (2005). *What Informational Basis for Assessing Job-Seekers? Capabilities vs. Preferences*. *Review of Social Economy*, 63(2), 269–289; Bonvin, J.-M., & Laruffa, F. (2024). *Transforming Social Policies and Institutions in a Capability Perspective: Agency, Voice and the Capability to Aspire*. *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, Vol. 25, no. 4, pp. 575–594).
- the profound transformation of the organisational settings and working practices of street-level bureaucracies, increasingly shaped by processes of neoliberal bureaucratisation (Hibou, B. (2015). *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Neoliberal Era*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan).
- the constitutive interplay between frontline actors and the material and immaterial policy instruments through which they act, an issue that has become central to the literature on policy instrumentation and highlights how policy implementation is always mediated by the tools, technologies, and organisational devices mobilised in practice (Halpern, C., Lascoumes, P., & Le Galès, P. (eds.) (2026). *Policy Instrumentation*. Edward Elgar).

A further aspect that would benefit from more extensive discussion concerns the researcher's standpoint. All research is necessarily situated, and adopting an argumentative style that implicitly assumes the objective neutrality of the account tends to obscure the analytical perspective underpinning the study. Instead, it would be preferable for the author to make explicit the standpoint from which the research problem is defined and the research design is constructed. Such a reflexive stance would help avoid the "scholastic fallacy" identified by Pierre Bourdieu—that is, the tendency to conflate the researcher's perspective with that of the actors under investigation (Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian Meditations*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).

The thesis advances the ambitious claim that the proposed model "*can be applied to the analysis of the implementation of any public and social policies.*" While this is undoubtedly one of its strengths, it also raises the possibility of a methodological bias: the implicit assumption that *wicked problems* (Alford, J., & Head, B. W. (2017). *Wicked and less wicked*

problems: A typology and a contingency framework. *Policy and society*, 36(3), 397-413; Grint, K. (2022). Critical essay: Wicked problems in the age of uncertainty. *Human Relations*, 75(8), 1518-1532) can be resolved primarily through methodological refinement. Such a position risks conflating methodological sophistication with explanatory adequacy, treating what is essentially a technical solution—necessarily provisional and contingent—as if it could substitute for the interpretative work required to understand the substantive content, dynamics, and contradictions of the policy issues under investigation.

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled “Implementation of Labour Market Policy by Street-level Bureaucrats in Public Administration Affecting Regional and Social Development: Analytical Model and its Applications” by PhDr. Pavel Horák, Ph.D., **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Social Policy and Social Work.

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