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**MERELY POLICY CLIENTS? CITIZEN AGENCY DURING STREET-LEVEL
POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND PUBLIC SERVICE DELIVERY**

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La investigación científica en general y la elaboración de una tesis, en particular, suelen ser procesos solitarios. Especialmente para quienes salimos de casa y llegamos a vivir a una ciudad nueva, ese proceso tiene un conjunto de dificultades adicionales. Sin embargo, a pesar de ser un proceso solitario uno siempre es acompañado de varias formas, en lo emocional, en lo intelectual, en lo familiar. Es gracias a las personas que nos acompañan que uno toma fuerzas y energía, particularmente durante los momentos difíciles, en los momentos de duda, y vaya que mi camino fue accidentado: la eliminación de la política a la que dedique 4 años de estudio, una pandemia, accidentes, pérdidas personales y enfermedades. Ciertamente la vida no es la misma después de haber iniciado este viaje en el aparentemente lejano 2016, pero los cambios siempre traen aprendizajes y si yo no soy el mismo es porque algo aprendí en el camino. Cinco años y medio después de haber iniciado este viaje, solamente puedo tener gratitud hacia todas las personas e instituciones que han hecho posible este recorrido. Sin ellos, no habría podido llegar hasta acá, no sería el mismo que soy ahora, en lo personal, en lo profesional y en lo intelectual. Aunque las palabras no hacen justicia al profundo agradecimiento que tengo hacia ellos, intentaré hacerlo a continuación:

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ABSTRACT

It is now well-accepted that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play a key role as the face of government for the public and that their implementation actions exert immediate, major implications for citizens-clients. An extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to the ways through which SLBs exercise their discretion during direct delivery interactions. However, citizens are traditionally referred to as subjective to the actions of SLBs and referred to as the powerless side of the interaction. To allow a broader perspective on the role citizens play in their encounters with government, this dissertation focuses on citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery. The main research question this thesis tries to answer is: how citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery can be conceptualized, how does policy structure enable it, and what are its effects? To answer this question, I use three papers: one theoretical and two empirical. In the first paper I conduct a systematic literature review to know how literature has studied and defined citizen agency. In the second and third paper I explore the role of policy structure as an enabler of citizen agency, and particularly, the role of interactional structure. I use the empirical case study of Prospera, a conditional cash transfer in Mexico. The second paper contributes to answering my research question by focusing specifically on how the policy structure helps to develop citizen agency. This study fills a gap in the literature because it explains how policy structure contributes to citizen agency beyond individual factors like traditionally has been the case. In the third paper, I focus on repeated interactions between citizens and street-level bureaucrats as a source of citizen agency. With this study, I contribute to the literature in two ways: first, by providing a distinction between one-shot and repeated interactions, which the literature has avoided, and stating the possible consequences not only for the interaction but for street-level work in general. Second, by exploring how repeated interactions have implications for the way citizens behave during policy implementation and public service delivery.

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Introduction

María, an office clerk in a Mexican city, arrives at the nearest anti-COVID-19 vaccination center to get her first shot of the vaccine. The government has prioritized seniors citizens and pregnant women to be the first to get the vaccines. But, unfortunately, María just recently turned twenty-eight years, so her turn to get vaccinated is far away in time. Notwithstanding, she is determined to get the vaccine, so she decides to perform being pregnant. With this objective in mind, she asks one of her friends to pretend to be her gynecologist; her friend agrees. The performance is set in motion: first, she changes her friend's contact information on her phone, changes the name of her friend to “someone gynecologist”. Fortunately, she already is a mom, so, she looks in her phone files a photo of one of her ultrasound scanners when she was pregnant. Then the two friends pretend an online chat in which the friend (now as “someone gynecologist”) delivers the ultrasound to María and informs her that the pregnancy is going great. With this WhatsApp conversation and the ultrasound photo, María goes with the officials at the entrance of the vaccination centers and gives the acting of her life. She is convincing, and the result is successful; she got vaccinated months before her turn.

It is now well-accepted that street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) play a key role as the face of government for the public and that their implementation actions exert immediate, major implications for citizens-clients (Brodin, 1997, 2003, 2011, 2012; Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Hand, 2018; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 1980/2010; May & Wood, 2003; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Meyers & Nielsen, 2012; Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003; Peeters et al., 2018; Sager, Thomann, Zollinger, van der Heiden & Mavrot, 2014; Schram, Soss, Fording, & Houser, 2009; Smith, 2012; Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011; Tummers, Bekkers, Vink & Musheno, 2015; Van Parys & Struyven, 2018). Indeed, an extensive scholarly attention has been devoted to the ways through which SLBs exercise their discretion during direct delivery interactions, to the sources of influence on SLBs' actions, to SLBs' willingness to implement policy, as well as to how and to what extent SLBs could be influenced (Evans & Harris, 2004; Gofen, Sella & Gassner, 2019; Handler, 1986; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Maranto & Wolf, 2013; May & Winter, 2009; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003; Meyers, Glaser & Donald, 1998; Moynihan & Pandey, 2007; Raaphorst, 2018; Riccucci, Meyers, Lurie & Han, 2004; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

Complementary, citizens are referred to as subjective to the actions of SLBs and as influencing the SLBs' actions mainly in terms of their socio-demographic attributes, such as gender and race (Gofen, Blomqvist, Needham, Warren & Winblad, 2019; Raaphorst & Groeneveld, 2018; Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018; Watkins-Haye, 2011). Therefore, SLBs are referred to as the powerful side of the interaction, whereas citizens are often approached as the “powerless side of the interaction” (Gofen et al., 2019, p. 198).

Referring to citizens as reactive or passive is also evidenced in additional lines of research that focus on the citizen's perspective during their interactions with the state, including co-production (Jakobsen, 2013; Nabatchi, Sancino & Sicilia, 2017), citizens' expectations and satisfaction with the performance of public services (James, 2011a; 2011b); and citizens' experience with administrative burdens (Heinrich, 2016; Heinrich & Brill, 2015; Moynihan, Herd & Harvey, 2015), red tape (Moynihan & Herd, 2010), bureaucratic encounters (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Holder & Flanigan, 2019; Peeters et al. 2019), or racial bureaucratic representation (Watkins-Haye, 2011).

To allow a broader perspective on the role citizens play in their encounters with government, this dissertation focuses on citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery. Citizen agency is defined here as the *potential capacity to imaginatively exert some degree of control over interactional and policy structure during policy implementation and service delivery*.

Main Research Question

The main research question this thesis tries to answer is: *how citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery can be conceptualized, how does policy structure enable it, and what are its effects?*

To answer this question, I use three papers: one theoretical and two empirical. Given the lack of a conceptual framework that gives an order to the messy study of citizen agency, in the first paper I conduct a systematic literature review to know how literature has studied and defined citizen agency. Then, to capture the heterogeneous nature of the concept, I provide an operational definition of citizen agency and a framework to analyze it based on three dimensions: type of agency, the source or enabler of agency, and the agency effects.

The results of the systematic literature review indicate that we know extensively about specific instances of citizen agency. However, the knowledge about the sources of citizen agency is still underdeveloped. To explore the role of policy structure as an enabler of citizen agency, and particularly, the role of interactional structure, I use the empirical case study of Prospera, a conditional cash transfer in Mexico, in the second and third paper. Given its design, Prospera provides an excellent opportunity to empirically observe variation in terms of policy structure because the same beneficiary is subject to different policy sector structures at the same time (education and healthcare). Moreover, the program also provides an opportunity to study repeated interactions empirically.

The second paper contributes to answering my research question by focusing specifically on how the policy structure helps to develop citizen agency. This study fills a gap in the literature because it explains how policy structure contributes to citizen agency beyond individual factors like traditionally has been the case.

While the second paper gives a panoramic view of how policy structure contributes to producing citizen agency, in the third paper, I focus on a specific structural source of agency. Thus, my interest in the third paper is on repeated interactions between citizens and street-level bureaucrats. With this study, I contribute to the literature in two ways: first, by providing a distinction between one-shot and repeated interactions, which the literature has avoided, and stating the possible consequences not only for the interaction but for street-level work in general. Second, by exploring how repeated interactions have implications for the way citizens behave during policy implementation and public service delivery.

Outline of the Thesis

The thesis is organized as follows: employing a seven steps model methodology (Cooper, 2017), the first chapter presents a research synthesis based on a systematic review of the literature to set the conceptual and theoretical foundations for citizen agency during street-level implementation. In addition, based on the literature on policy dissonance, policy feedback, and coping, this chapter presents a theoretical framework to study citizen agency focused on types of agency, its sources, and its effects.

Then, the second paper focuses on what enables citizen agency during street-level implementation. Drawing from qualitative interviews with SLBs and Prospera beneficiaries, I

argue in this study that citizen agency is the result of policy structure flexibility. Furthermore, I find that flexibility is a function of three mechanisms: SLBs' alienation, citizen empowerment, and uncertainty reduction.

The third paper focuses on the evolution of the relationship pattern during prolonged interaction, which emerged as two phases during which citizens-clients internalize street-level implementation rules and learn the personal traits of the SLBs they interact with. Acquiring this knowledge allows them to exercise an active agency through their bureaucratic encounters.

After the three chapters, the last section is a general conclusion in which the results are summarized and discussed in the context of the theoretical framework proposed in chapter one. This last section also includes a discussion of the limitation of the thesis, proposals for a future research agenda, and some empirical implications of the findings.

1. Citizen Agency in Street-Level Policy Implementation and Public Service Delivery:

A Systematic Literature Review

Abstract

Governments and citizens are often engaged in relations in which both parties give and receive different resources. This relation suggests that the behavior of citizens is relevant to the study of public administration and policy, particularly during its implementation. Although PA research has not entirely neglected citizen agency, traditionally, literature has focused on SLBs' reactions and responses to citizens' behaviors and attitudes. Recent studies shift attention to citizens' agency by focusing on ways in which they exercise discretionary power and agency capacity. Notably, different concepts are used to name the citizens' actions during street-level policy implementation and no conceptual or theoretical framework capture the empirical evidence for citizen agency and its consequences for the relationship with the bureaucrats as well as for the policy outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to advance our knowledge of the concept of citizen agency during street-level policy implementation and service delivery. This is done via a systematic review of the literature from 1980 to 2021. The research questions that guide the paper are: how citizen agency empirically manifests during street-level implementation? What influences citizen agency? And how does citizen agency influence policy implementation? The first contribution of the paper is theoretical: defining citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery. The second contribution is to provide a comprehensive overview of how citizen agency has been studied from 1980-2021 and advance its future research. The third contribution is empirical by classifying citizen agency types, sources, and effects.

1.1 Introduction

All public policies seek to influence the behaviors of the targets to which it is addressed (Gofen, 2015; Howlett, 2018; Schneider & Ingram, 1990; Tummers, 2019; Weaver, 2014). For example, either by promoting beneficial behaviors (e.g., vaccination) or trying to avoid or punishing behaviors considered harmful (e. g. driving in a state of drunkenness). Moreover, government organizations and citizens¹ are often engaged in exchange relations where each party gives and receives different resources (Alford, 2002). For example, customers give money for public services, welfare gives beneficiaries public value and social cohesion, and obligatees provide compliance and cooperation to the government (Alford, 2002, pp. 340-342). This relation suggests that the behavior of citizens is relevant to the study of public administration and policy, particularly during its implementation.

Citizen behavior relevance manifest in the increasing interest in collaborative forms of governance, which needs the active participation of citizens as partners with governments (Bovaird, 2007; Michel et al., 2021; Ryan, 2012; Vigoda, 2002) and in the trend welfare systems face towards more activation models (Marston et al., 2005; Wright, 2016). Furthermore, a more active role of citizens results in more complex street-level interactions. Mainly because every actor involved has his understandings of the roles and tasks they must perform (Michel et al., 2021, p. 4); and because citizens can react (Hasenfeld, 2010) in ways not desired by policies and regulations (de Boer, 2020b; Gofen et al., 2019).

Even though in its original formulation street-level scholarship emphasized the implications of implementation and service delivery for citizens, particularly because street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) mediate the “constitutional relationship of citizens to the state” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 4), street-level interaction literature remained focused on the bureaucratic side of this interaction. Only two decades later, the citizen side of street-level interactions was acknowledged (Sandfort et al., 1999). However, citizens are still primarily considered the “powerless side of the interaction” (Gofen et al., 2019). This understanding of the interaction overlooks that citizens may have agency: the capacity to engage in past and present patterns of

¹ Although according to Alford, the role of client is the one which involves a higher degree of interaction with public organizations (2002, p. 340), and that street-level work research acknowledge the specific distinction between citizen and client as the product of people processing organizations (see for example Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010), in this paper I will use the concept of citizens to refer to the members of the public that interact with SLBs, given that is broader and is linked with a more active perspective of the public.

action and relations and imaginatively reflect and act towards the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Although PA research has not entirely neglected citizen agency, traditionally, literature has focused on SLBs' reactions and responses to citizens' behaviors and attitudes: like SLBs' willingness to include public participation (Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2020); frontline efforts to engage the public (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021); government's efforts to increasing citizens' coproduction (Jakobsen, 2013); public responses to benefit fraud (Søbjerg, 2018), cynical citizens (Berman, 1997), and most prominently, reactions to non-compliance (de Boer et al., 2018; Gofen, 2015; Gofen et al., 2019; Nielsen, 2006; Weaver, 2014). Thus, it is logical for PA research to focus on the bureaucratic side of street-level interactions, given the centrality of practitioners as part of the discipline identity (Catlaw, 2006; Nisar, 2017). Unfortunately, however, this practitioner-centered research model has made researchers turn their backs on the citizen (Catlaw, 2006; Nisar, 2017; 2020; 2021) and deprioritize central citizen issues (Nisar, 2021).

Recent studies shift attention to citizens' agency by focusing on how citizens exercise discretionary power (Gofen et al. 2019; Johanessen, 2019) and agency capacity (Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Kelly, 2017; Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019). Notably, different labels/terms/concepts are used to name the actions carried out by citizens during street-level policy implementation. However, no conceptual or theoretical framework captures the empirical evidence for citizen agency and its consequences for the relationship with the SLBs and the policy outcomes. Recently, Nielsen and her colleagues (2021) proposed a framework by adapting the concept of coping (Tummers et al., 2015) to understand citizen coping behavior. However, as I show in the next section, this approach has limitations in understanding citizen agency, which is a more abstract and broader concept than coping.

The purpose of this paper is to advance our understanding of the concept of citizen agency during street-level policy implementation and service delivery. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions: how does the literature have studied citizen agency? How citizen agency empirically manifests during street-level implementation? What influences citizen agency? And how does citizen agency influence policy implementation? The first contribution of the paper is theoretical. Citizen agency is conceptualized as the *potential capacity to imaginatively exert some degree of control over interactional and policy structure*

during policy implementation and service delivery. The second contribution is to provide a comprehensive overview of how citizen agency has been studied to date and advance its future research. This overview is done through systematic identification and analysis of the relevant literature. Finally, the third contribution is empirical, by providing a classification of citizen agency types, their sources, and their effects.

I acknowledged that other types of agency are relevant for understanding citizens' behavior while dealing with public policies. Notably, what is known as second order agency — directed towards more radical and long-term changes in people's lives— (e. g., Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004 for an account of this type of agency). However, other literature streams like social policy and social work (Bowpitt, 2020; Dagdeviren & Donoghue, 2019; Gram et al., 2019; Nnaeme et al., 2020; Parsell et al., 2014; 2017) had studied it. Moreover, this type of agency is less common than more everyday types of agency (Frost & Hoggett, 2008, p. 441). Therefore, this paper focuses on first order agency, which has been poorly studied in the field of Public Administration (Masood & Nisar, 2021; Nisar, 2018). The rest of the paper is structured as follows: I develop a definition of citizen agency in the next section. Then the methodology for the systematic review is explained. Next, I present the results of the systematic review. In the final section, I discuss some conclusions and formulate the research agenda on citizen agency.

1.2 Defining Citizen Agency in Street-Level Policy Implementation and Public Service Delivery

Traditionally, PA literature has favored the importance of structure over agency to explain decision-making and bureaucratic behavior (Ferris & Tang, 1993; March & Olsen, 1984; Ostrom, 2015). One notable recent exception that focuses on citizens' behaviors during public encounters is Nielsen and her colleagues (2021). Adapting the concept of coping (Tummers et al., 2015), these authors propose the concept of citizen coping behavior as “behavioral efforts citizens employ during and in preparing for interaction with public authorities to master the demands of the public encounter.” (Nielsen et al., 2021, p. 383).

However, their theoretical framework fails to consider certain citizen behaviors, furthermore, does not allow for a more broad understanding of citizen agency. First, by defining

citizen behavior as coping, the authors lose abstraction in their conceptualization because coping is one specific instance of citizen agency. Second, the focus on the behavioral dimension of the concept of coping (Nielsen et al., 2021, p. 383) obscures other forms of citizen agency documented in the literature. Therefore, Nielsen and colleagues' framework does not contemplate agency manifestations like identity work (e. g., Hillman, 2014; Little, 1999; Mik-Meyer, 2017), or withdrawal from the interaction (e. g., Clair, 2020; Juhila et al., 2014; Nisar, 2018; Werner & Malterud, 2003; Wright et al., 2020). Moreover, actions by citizens that border with illegality or corruption are not considered, such as fraud (see for example Dean & Melrose, 1997; Fletcher et al., 2016; Gustafson, 2011; Saltsman, 2014), prostitution (Gustafson, 2011), or bribing (Leclerc-Madlala, 2006; Tuckett, 2015).

Even in Social Theory, the predominance of structuralism limited the study of agency (Deacon, 2004; Deacon & Mann, 1999), which resulted on inconsistent and vague agency definitions (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962; Hitlin & Elder, 2007, p. 171). Since the eighties, authors like Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu have been highly influential for studying agency in the social sciences by linking subjects' actions with social structure. While there is great value in these approaches, they still have limitations to capture the full complexity of human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hoggett, 2001). Furthermore, these limitations led to less attention for what agency constitutes separately from structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), including, for instance, non-reflexive or passive forms of agency (Hoggett, 2001). Several sociologists have taken up these issues, such as Emirbayer and Mische, and Paul Hoggett. I will use their definitions as a starting point because it focuses on the internal mechanisms of agency and their acknowledgment of the limits of human agency.

In most accounts, the agency is understood as an ability or capacity to act and make choices within the limits of constraints (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Hoggett, 2001; Sewell, 1992). Emirbayer and Mische define agency as the “temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal-relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations” (1998, p. 970). Agency in this formulation refers to how an individual can imagine potential future actions based on past and present patterns of action and relations.

This definition is relevant in the context of street-level implementation. First, it is consistent with the contingent manner of the actions carried out in the context of street-level implementation and public services delivery (Prior & Barnes, 2011). Second, it recognizes that actors come from different structural environments with different interpretations of their roles and actions during policy implementation (Michel et al., 2021). Third, it considers agency as a dynamic and temporal process through which the agent is linked to the structure. To the extent that citizens often use their past experiences with bureaucratic encounters to acquire knowledge and information about administrative rules and about the enforcement styles of SLBs (de Boer, 2020b; Döring, 2020; Masood & Nisar, 2021), this is particularly relevant for the development of a citizen agency definition.

In addition, the definition proposed by Emirbayer and Mische (1998) opens the black box of agency. It helps to understand the elements that make it up and how it functions to reproduce or modify structures. According to these authors, the agency comprises three dimensions: iterative, projective, and practical-evaluative (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, pp. 971-1001). The first dimension is an “orientation towards the past” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 979). It refers to the way agents focus their attention to pieces of reality, identify patterns and relations in past experiences, and recognize repertoires of past actions. Through the projective dimension, agents orient themselves towards the future by imagining and hypothesizing possible action patterns and their constraints. Finally, the projective-evaluative dimension allows agents to make contextualized judgments about a present social situation through problematization, characterization, deliberation, decision, and execution.

Given the diversity of resources, interpretive schemes, and agentic capacity of individuals, a common misconception is to think that the ability to act and to change structures happens in absolute terms: either you can act or you can not, which is not the case as some empirical studies on street-level interactions have shown (Dean, 2003, p. 701; Dubois, 2016, p. 154; Koenig, 2011, p. 1108; Prior & Barnes, 2011, p. 270). In that sense, some elements in Emirbayer and Mische’s definition of agency, particularly the more reflexive components of the projectivity dimension, obscure the possibility of thinking in terms of degrees of agency and reflexivity. In that respect, Hoggett’s (2001) agency model is helpful for a more complete and nuanced account of agency. According to this author, there are limits to our reflexivity and

agency. Hence, any agency definition should recognize that an individual's capacity to act and be reflexive is a continuum in which the subject situates depending on the constraints they face.

Moreover, Hoggett critiques some normative assumptions on agency that equates it to something necessarily constructive and positive (Hoggett, 2001, p. 43). The result is a conception of agency that contains the idea of potentially harmful or impulsive actions and inaction (Hoggett, 2001). In that sense, agency is a matter of degrees, which is particularly relevant when dealing with the agency of vulnerable or disadvantaged citizens (Mohammed, 2021; Nisar, 2018), which is often the case in frontline encounters.

This paper focuses on citizen agency during street-level policy implementation and public service delivery. I concentrate on active and passive actions taken by citizens while interacting with frontline workers during policy implementation and public service delivery. Furthermore, based on the above discussion, and in order to have an operative definition for doing the systematic literature review, this paper defines citizen agency as the *potential capacity to imaginatively exert some degree of control over interactional and policy structure during policy implementation and service delivery*. This definition is helpful because it is sufficiently abstract to include various actions through which citizens can exert control over policy structures. Besides, by stating the potentiality of capacity, it recognizes that agency is a matter of degree (Hoggett, 2001) which includes the possibility of having little or no control over the structure. Furthermore, the definition recognizes the imaginative capacity of citizens and, to that extent, the different temporal dimensions of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

1.3 A Classification of Citizen Agency. Its Sources and Effects.

There have been different agency classification efforts in the literature (e.g., Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Hoggett, 2001; Lister, 2004). However, the interplay between citizen agency and policy structure is still missing; instead, most agency models focus on agency broadly. One exception is Djuve and Kavli's model. Drawing on Le Grand's (2003) motivation and agency model, these authors propose a service user agency typology based on two dimensions: the level of service user autonomy (queens vs. pawns in Le Grand terminology) and the level of consensus between them and service providers. The resulting four types are "good agency" (highly autonomous and agreeing users), "bad agency" (highly autonomous but

disagreeing users), silent consent (passive and agreeing users), and silent resistance (passive and disagreeing users). However, this model's limitation is that it adopts the SLB point of view, resulting in its normative bias against certain forms of citizen agency by considering them “bad.” Thus, a full understanding of the complex phenomenon of citizen agency and its interplay with policy structure requires a more nuanced vision of agency.

One helpful alternative for the classification of citizen agency comes from Anat Gofen, particularly her work on policy dissonance. The literature has shown that SLBs' actions often diverge from political principles and policies mandate (Gofen, 2014). Furthermore, concepts like policy dissonance have helped understand that SLBs' actions produce divergent results and policy targets' noncompliance (Gofen, 2015). Moreover, by acknowledging the role divergent actions play in the policy process, concepts like policy dissonance and street-level divergence call the attention that any “normative judgment of divergence is neither straightforward nor unambiguous” (Gofen, 2014, p. 474). However, the concept proposed by Gofen is closely linked to non-compliance, which is one specific type of citizen agency manifestation. Notwithstanding, the concept of policy dissonance is helpful to understand how policy targets' behavior conflicts with policy mandates (Gofen, 2015, p. 7). I use the concept of policy dissonance and extend it to capture non-compliance and other behaviors included in the concept of citizen agency.

Drawing from the concept of policy dissonance (Gofen, 2015), I classify citizen agency into three forms of agency: *dissonant agency*, *consonant agency*, and *contingent agency*. The first form of agency refers to those citizen agency manifestations that challenge, conflict, are incongruent with a policy, the SLB, or public service delivery. Contrary to this, consonant agency includes actions (or inactions) that are in accordance or at least do not challenge policy, the SLB, or the public service. In line with the agency definition I use in this paper, I recognize that agency manifestations are not always straightforward dissonant, or consonant. Still, it all depends on the specific situation in which an individual engages with the policy structure. In that sense, agency manifestations will be contingent on the policy structure and individual capacity. I use these concepts to classify the citizen agency manifestations found in the literature.

In addition, I looked in the literature for sources that explain citizen agency and the effects that agency produced. Following the recent stream of literature within PA focused on citizens' capacity to navigate bureaucratic encounters and policy feedback, I classified agency sources according to the nature of the resources or conditions in play during street-level

implementation: personal, social, and policy sources. The first source type refers to *individual* characteristics and resources (e.g., information, knowledge, self-efficacy) citizens either intrinsically have or acquire (Christensen et al., 2020; Döring, 2021; Masood and Nisar, 2021). Next, social sources refer to resources developed by citizens through their *social relations and networks* (Masood & Nisar, 2021). Finally, policy sources are characteristics of policies and public services that promote certain attitudes, capacities, and abilities (but also burdens) that can empower (but also disempower) citizens through a policy feedback effect (Moynihan & Herd, 2010; Moynihan et al., 2015; Wichowsky & Moynihan, 2008). In line with the citizen agency classification and taking inspiration from the coping classification made by Tummers and colleagues (2015), I also classify agency effects on policy and the citizens themselves. Therefore, citizen agency could have consequences against or towards the policy, and towards themselves (see Table 4).

1.4 Methodology for Systematic Review

To advance our understanding of citizen agency during street-level policy implementation and service delivery and to answer the following research questions: how citizen agency manifests during street-level interactions? What influences citizen agency? And how citizen agency affects policy implementation? I carried out a Systematic Literature Review. In this section, I provide an overview of the methodology.

1.4.1 Literature Search

To reduce bias and guarantee a more rigorous and transparent research synthesis, I use the seven steps model developed by Cooper (2017) (see Appendix B for an overview of the methodology). In reporting the findings, I adhere to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). Specifically, the review analyzes scholarly works focusing on citizens' capacity to originate and direct actions with their own set of purposes during street-level interactions and public service delivery. Taking as a point of departure the year of publication of seminal work on street-level implementation (Lipsky, 2010), this systematic review analyzes scholarly work published during the period

1980-2021 (June). To find the relevant research, I used five strategies (see Appendix C for the PRISMA information flow chart):

First, using the Web of Science (WoS) main database², a search was made for one of the terms [street-level], [frontline] (and several variants), [bureaucratic encounters], [public encounters] plus one of [agency], [human agency] [citizen agency], [client agency], [agency of the citizen], [agency of the client], [citizen as agent], [client as agent], [client's discretion], [citizen's discretion], [subversive citizen], [subversive client], [resistance of the client], [resistance of the citizen], [active citizen], [active client], [empowered citizen], [empowered client]. This search generated 437 results.

Second, an electronic search using Google Scholar database was carried out. The search terms used were: [street-level], [frontline] (and several variants), [bureaucratic encounters], [public encounters]; plus one of the following [citizen agency], [client agency], [citizen as agent], [client as agent], [agency of the client], [agency of the citizen], [client's discretion], [citizen's discretion], [subversive citizen], [subversive client], [resistance of the client], [resistance of the citizen], [active citizen], [active client], [empowered citizen], [empowered client]. This search generated 671 results.

Third, searching for journal articles on citizen agency during street-level policy implementation was conducted on the web page of ten relevant public policy and public administration journals (see Table 1). These journals were selected using two criteria: 1) their impact (total citations) on the category of Public Administration journals according to the Journal Citation Report (for the cases of JPART, PAR, JEPP, PA, and PMR); and 2) because they have been outlets for previous studies relevant for the subject of citizen agency (for the cases of Governance, PPA, JSP, AS, and SPA). The search terms used were more open to get more possible results [street-level], [frontline] (and several variants), [bureaucratic encounters], [public encounters], plus one of [human agency], [agency] (and several variants). I identified a total of 1,948 papers through this strategy.

² The search was made in the next WoS categories: Development Studies, Sociology, Social Work, Management, Anthropology, Law, Political Science, Health Policy Services, Social Issues, Public Administration, and Criminology Penology.

Table 1

Number of studies identified through journal search

Journal	Number of papers identified
Public Administration Review (PAR)	706
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)	280
Journal of European Public Policy (JEPP)	22
Public Administration (PA)	193
Public Management Review (PMR)	193
Governance	18
Public Policy and Administration (PPA)	23
Journal of Social Policy (JSP)	413
Administration & Society (AS)	43
Social Policy & Administration (SPA)	57
Total	1,948

Source: Own elaboration

Fourth, using Google Scholar database, backward and forward search in 10 key publications. I found a total of 1,048 documents.

Table 2

Number of studies identified through relevant papers

Paper	Number of references in the paper (backward)	Number of studies that cited the paper (forwards)
Djuve & Kavli (2015)	42	31
Garmany (2017)	50	9
Gofen et al. (2019)	69	16
Johannessen (2019)	67	13

Kelly (2017)	56	7
Lens (2009)	45	22
Mik-Meyer & Silverman (2019)	54	12
Nielsen et al. (2021)	89	2
Prior & Barnes (2011)	56	96
Tuckett (2015)	29	49
Total	791	257

Source: Own elaboration

Fifth, to avoid missing relevant works given the relative scarcity of works about citizen agency in street-level implementation and the heterogeneous nature of the subject, I conducted two additional forward searches using the Google Scholar database. First, I searched for papers that cited core publications in the study of human agency in social policy literature. Second, I also looked for works that cited the most relevant authors in the study of agency in the field of Social Theory. These relevant works were hand-selected as they were highly cited within the papers previously identified. These publications theoretically study the subject of human agency in a broad context of the welfare state or the society, therefore giving relevant insights but not focusing on street-level interactions. However, given their relevance to the human agency debate, I used it to trace possible missing relevant studies. According to Google Scholar, the total number of citations would have made the searching extremely time-consuming (around 227,524 works cited those studies). Therefore, I searched for Social Theory using one of the next keywords: [street-level], [frontline] (and several variants), [bureaucratic encounters], [public encounters], plus one of [client agency], [citizen agency].

Table 3

Number of studies identified through relevant theoretical agency papers

Paper	Number of studies that cited the paper
Social Policy Literature	

Deacon (2004)	55
Deacon & Mann (1999)	220
Dean (2003)	87
Greener (2002)	131
Hoggett (2001)	321
Le Grand (2003)	1,832
Musolf (2003)	45
Titterton (1992)	69
Social Theory Literature	
Bourdieu (1977; 1990)	1,760; 899
De Certeau (1984)	1,230
Foucault (2008)	599
Giddens (1984)	1,250
Goffman (1959)	711
Emirbayer & Mische (1998)	157
Scott (1985)	990
Sewell (1992)	214
Total	10,570

Source: Own elaboration

1.4.2 Inclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the systematic review if they met all the following inclusion criteria:

1. Subject: only papers that empirically or theoretically study actions and decisions that citizens actively carry out in the context of policies' implementation, public services' provision at the street-level, and/or during direct interactions between citizens and SLBs. Although the subject of human agency is broad, and I looked for studies in and outside of PA research, I examined the list of references to know the intellectual roots of the study as a relevance indicator. Mainly of interest was the coexistence of street-level bureaucracy and social theory literature.

2. Type of publication: only papers that have undergone a peer-review process or books from well-established scholarly publishers in the field of public administration.
3. Language: only papers written in English.
4. Year of publication: only papers published during the period from 1980 to 2021.

Once the papers were identified and duplicates eliminated, the studies were subjected to the analysis procedure. The analysis consisted of selecting text fragments of statements about specific manifestations of the citizens' actions, decisions, or other types of display of agency capacity. These texts fragments were coded and classified into the following categories: definitions, labels, classifications, sources, effects, and additional constructions about citizens' agency.

1.4.3 Data Analysis

After applying the inclusion criteria, we included 75 studies in the review (see Appendix B for the PRISMA flowchart of identification of studies). When carefully reading each of these studies, the first step was to look for the data to analyze the literature by answering the following questions: 1) what is the concept/label used in the study to name the citizen agency? 2) does the study define citizens agency? 3) how is citizen agency manifested or measured in the study? 4) what is the citizen agency source or enabler(s)? And 5) what are the effects of citizen agency?

The second step consisted of selecting relevant text fragments about agency, sources of citizen agency, and effects of citizen agency. I draw the analysis from 263 text fragments that mentioned specific instances of citizen agency, 75 on concepts and definition of citizen agency, 130 on sources of that agency, and 111 on agency effects extracted from the 75 papers included in the literature. Given the lack of a conceptual framework of citizen agency, many of the studies included did not explicitly define agency. In those cases, I took the implicit understanding of agency.

The coding of the 263 text fragments on citizen agency followed two phases. First, an open coding phase in which I coded every text according to the specific action (or inaction) present in the literature. This phase was like what Nielsen and her colleagues did with the nine behavioral dimensions of citizen coping they found (Nielsen et al., 2021, pp. 384-385). In this phase, I found more than fifty behaviors. Second, I classified the fifty behaviors into the three

forms of agency (dissonant, consonant, contingent). I did the same with the codes for sources and effects of agency.

Table 4

Codes for citizen agency, its sources and its effects

Forms of agency	Description	Number of text fragments
Dissonant agency	An agency that challenges, conflict, are incongruent or disagree with the policy, the interaction with SLB or public service delivery	154
Concordant agency	An agency that is in line with policy, the interaction with SLB or public service delivery	33
Contingent agency	An agency that is not straightforward in conflict or line with policy. It depends on how the citizen uses it	76
Sources of agency	Description	Number of text fragments
Personal sources	Personal resources, abilities, or conditions that allow citizens to exercise agency	42
Policy sources	Resources, abilities, or conditions defined by policies or public service structures that allow citizens to exercise agency	49
Social sources	Social resources, abilities, or conditions that allow citizens	39

to exercise agency

Effects of agency	Description	Number of text fragments
Effect towards the policy	Citizen agency consequences agency that is consistent with policy or public service structure or directed towards improving it	22
Effect against the policy	Citizen agency consequences that conflict with policy or public service structure	24
Effect towards themselves	Citizen agency consequences that are gains or losses to the citizen.	65

Source: Own elaboration

Table 5

Definitions of citizen agency in the literature

Implicit understanding of some type of citizen capacity or ability to act	36 (48%)
Use of another author definition of agency	22 (29.33%)
Definition of specific mode or instance of citizen agency	14 (18.67%)
Own author's definition of agency	3 (4%)
Total	75 (100%)

Five most cited authors (agency theory)

James C. Scott (1990)	7 (9.33%)
Erving Goffman (1959)	7 (9.33%)

Michel De Certeau (1984)	6 (8%)
Prior & Barnes (2011)	5 (6.67%)
Hoggett (2001)	5 (6.67%)

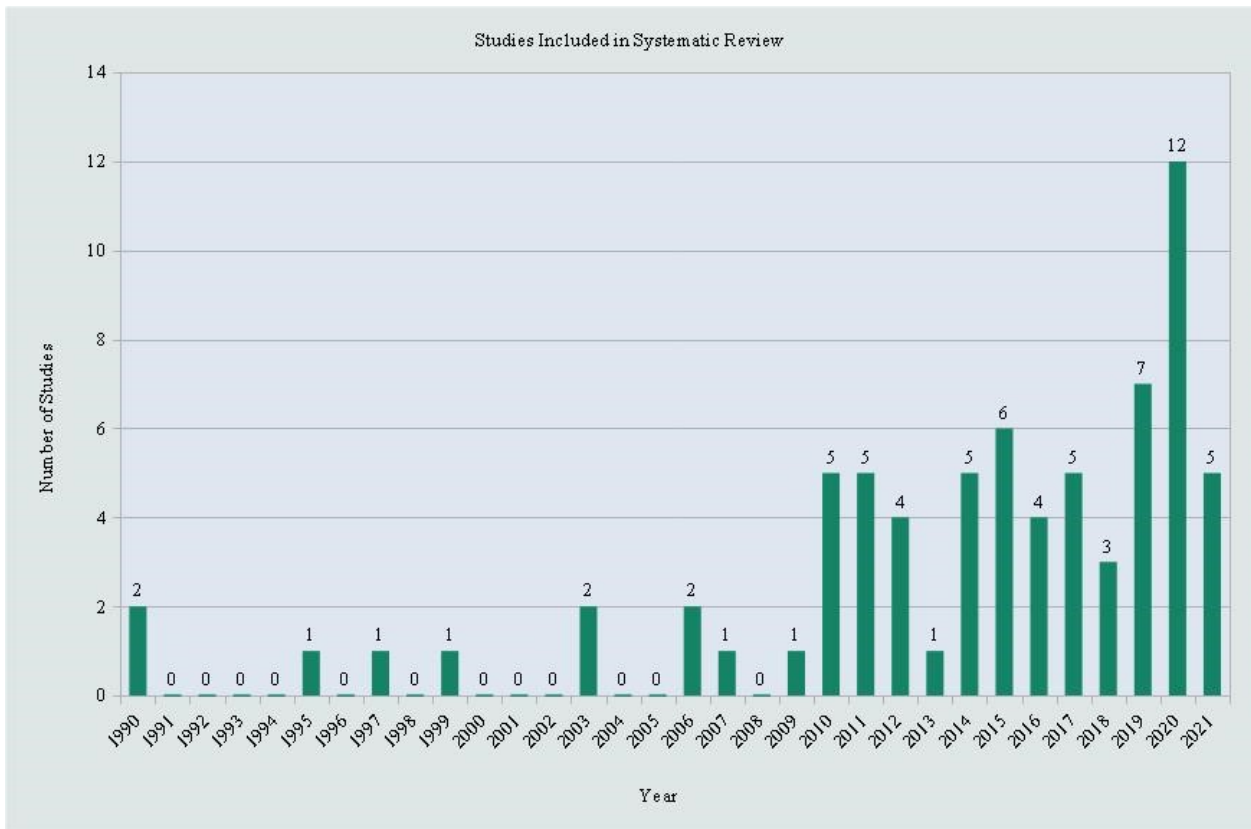
Source: Own elaboration

1.5 Findings

1.5.1 Descriptive statistics

Citizen agency is a relatively new subject in scholarly work. The oldest work included was published in 1980. After that, there was a gap until the year 2009 in which there were only sporadic publications (13; 17.33%). However, since 2009 the publications about citizen agency had increased (62; 82.67%), being 2020 the single year with the highest number of studies published (12; 16%).

Figure 1 Annual Production

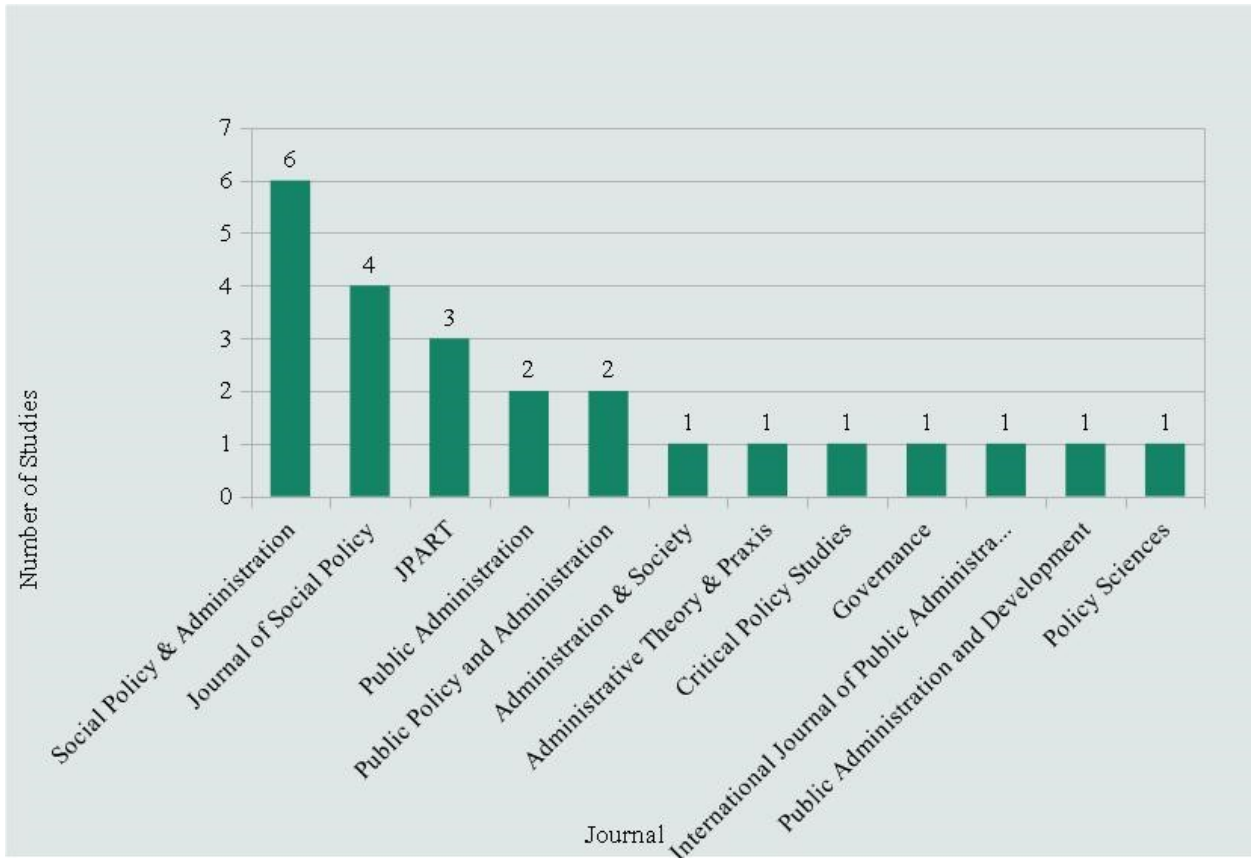


Source: Own elaboration

Most studies were published in peer-reviewed journals (68; 90.67%), followed by books or book chapters (7; 9.33%). Most papers were published in a PA or policy journal (24; 32%, see Figure 2), followed by interdisciplinary journals (23; 30.67%) and sociology or anthropology journals (12; 16%). Within PA and policy journals, most of the studies were published in *Social Policy & Administration* (6; 25%), followed by *Journal of Social Policy* (4; 16.67%), and the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (3; 12.5%).

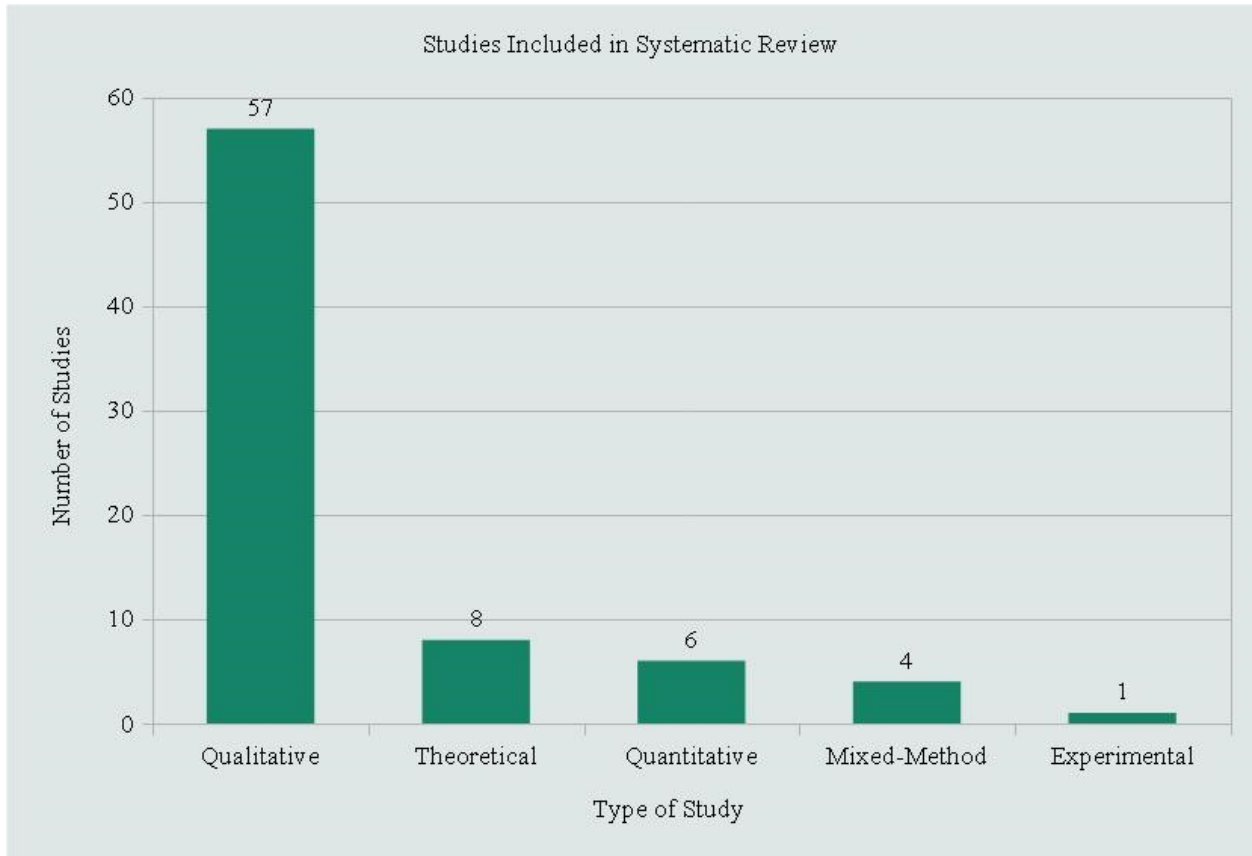
Most of the studies included are empirical (67; 89.33%), and only 8 (10.67%) are conceptual or theoretical. Many of the theoretical studies used empirical examples from the literature as in the case of Prior & Barnes (2011) study on ways of subversion and resistance in frontline policy implementation, the Tonkens & Newman (2011) study on the power relations change between frontline workers and citizens in activation policies, and Cohen's (2012) study about informal payments in healthcare in Israel. Within empirical studies, most sampled studies use a qualitative design (57; 85.07%), and interviews and ethnographic fieldwork are the more frequent methods used. Six studies used a quantitative design (8.96%), and four used mixed-methods (5.97%). The most frequent quantitative method used was regression analysis (e.g., May & Stengel, 1990; Peeters et al., 2020). The most frequent mixed-method used was a focus group with a survey (Hossain, 2010; Hunter & Sugiyama, 2014). Only one of the studies used an experimental design (de Boer, 2020).

Figure 2 Studies Published in PA or Policy Journals



Source: Own elaboration

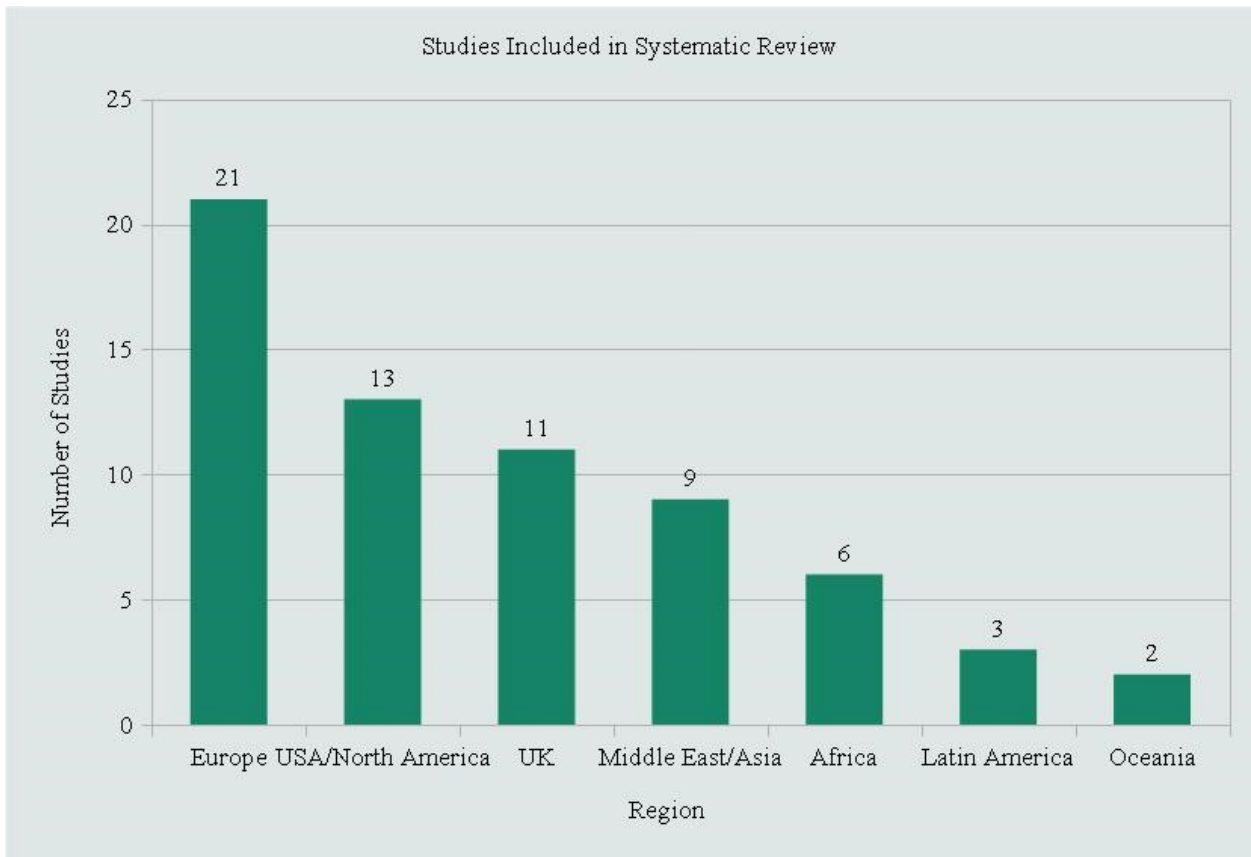
Figure 3 Type of Study



Source: Own elaboration

The studies' most frequent sources of empirical data included were both the citizens and frontline workers (33; 49.25%), followed by those studies that only used citizens as informants (30; 44.78%). And four studies relied only upon SLBs as the source of empirical data (5.97%). Most studies included in the review were conducted in single countries (64; 95.52%), and only three are cross-national (Fletcher et al., 2016; Gofen et al., 2019; Juhila et al., 2014); within cross-national studies, only the study of Gofen et al. (2019) make an explicit comparison between the countries studied. Within single country studies, most of the studies were based in developed countries (50; 78.13%), and fourteen in developing countries (21.87%). If we consider the two cross-national studies, the difference increases because both were based in developed countries. Most studies based in developed countries were conducted in the United Kingdom or Europe (32; 64%) and North America (13; 26%). Within studies based in developing countries, almost a third focus on South Africa (4; 28.57%).

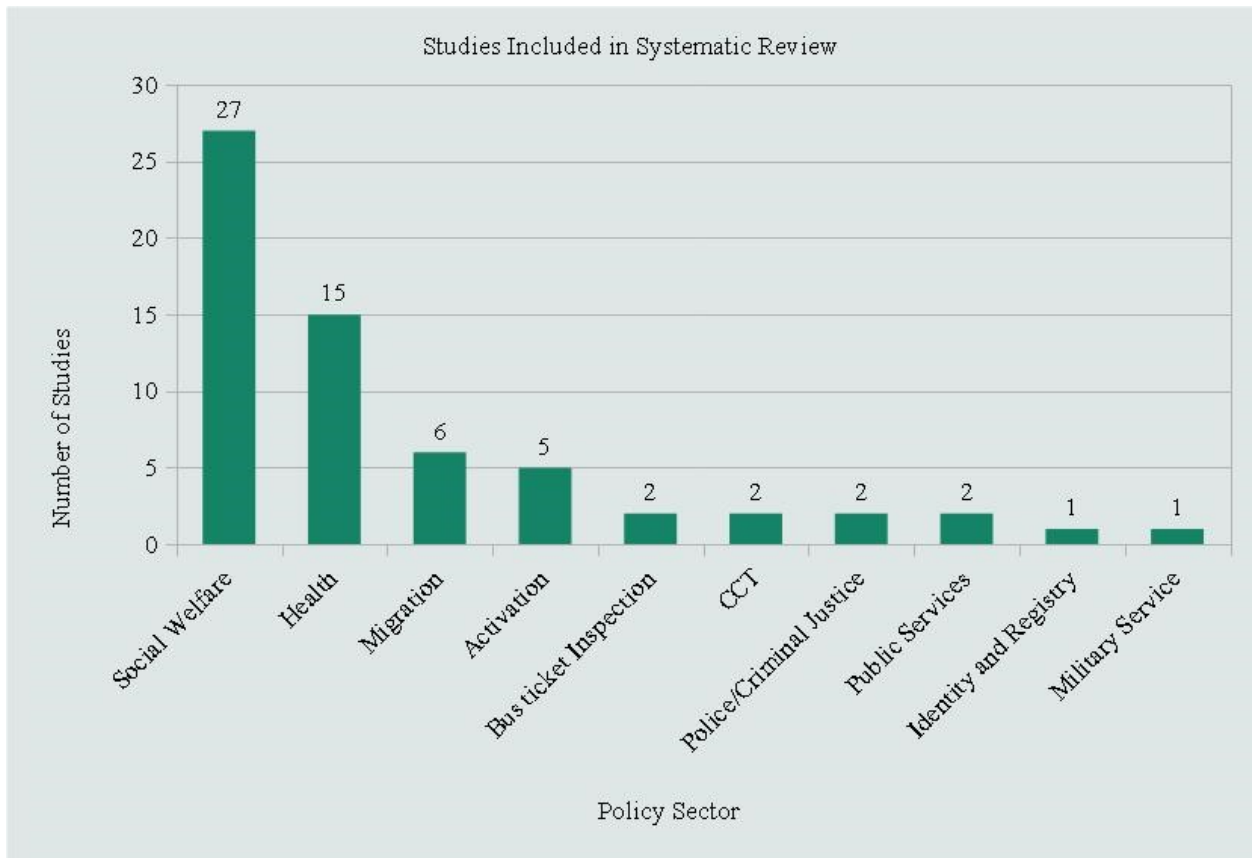
Figure 4 Studies by Region



Source: Own elaboration

Almost all the studies focused on a single policy sector (63; 94.02%), and only four are cross-sector (5.98%). The most frequent policy sectors within single sector studies are social welfare (27; 42.86%) and health (15; 23.81%).

Figure 5 Studies by Policy Sector



Source: Own elaboration

Almost half of the studies included used an implicit understanding of agency (36; 48%), which means that the authors did not engage in a conceptualization effort. Instead, they took for granted that citizens can act or exercise control over policy or public service structure. Within these works, two studies deal explicitly with some source of citizen agency, instead of agency itself (Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021). These are followed by studies that use another author’s definition of agency (22; 29.33%). Fourteen studies use their definition of a particular instance or mode of citizen agency (18.67%), or an adaptation, as in the case of Nielsen and her colleagues (2021), whose study adapts the concept of coping by SLBs proposed by Tummers and his colleagues (2015) to define citizens’ behavior. Finally, only three (4%) studies use an explicit definition of agency (Boomkens et al., 2019; Hunter & Sugiyama, 2014; Mik-Meyer, 2017).

The studies included in the review extensively use theoretical works to define their understanding of agency. The authors most frequently cited³ are James C. Scott (1990) and Erving Goffman (1959), cited by seven studies (9.33%), followed by Michel De Certeau (1984) that was cited by six studies (8%), and Prior and Barnes (2011) and Hoggett (2001), both authors cited by five studies (6.67%). Identifying the most cited authors helps to understand the intellectual roots of the studies included in the review and the predominant use of agency. In that sense, the most prevalent type of agency in the studies is resistance enacted in the context of imbalances of power or subordination. This type of agency is present in studies that cite Scott, De Certeau, and Prior and Barnes (see Garmany, 2017; Sarat, 1990; Schneider et al., 2010; Stewart, 2015). Connected to this is an awareness of a passive and unreflective dimension of agency derived from the work of Paul Hoggett (see Lundberg, 2018; Wright, 2012). Finally, those studies that cite Erving Goffman tend to focus on a performative type of agency in which the citizens exert control over how they present themselves to the frontline workers (Friisa & Lindegaard, 2021; Mik-Meyer, 2017; Mik-Meyer & Haugaard, 2020).

Using the R package bibliometrix, I could identify the most cited works within my sample that were published in a PA or policy journal⁴. Two of the five most cited works are focused explicitly on agency (Dean, 2003; Wright, 2012), one on subversive actions (Prior & Barnes, 2011), while the other two focus on bureaucratic encounters (Dubois, 2016) and informal politics (Cohen, 2012). The most cited work is the book by Dubois (2016), in which he focuses on bureaucratic encounters in French welfare offices. This author does not define citizen agency explicitly but focuses on how the welfare clients can distance themselves from their institutional role characterized by domination and elude the effects of dominance through attitudes and practices.

1.5.2 Content Analysis of the Literature: Modes, Sources, and Effects of Citizen Agency

I classified the 263 text fragments I used to analyze citizen agency in the literature into three agency forms. The most extensive form of agency is dissonant agency (58.6%). Specific instances of agency within this category are located across a spectrum that goes from active to passive and from disruptive to not disruptive. For example, we can find extreme gaming

³ This was found using the R-Package Bibliometrix.

⁴ I am taking the global citation as indicator of relevance. That means that the documents were cited not only by the documents within my sample, but for all the documents in the Web of Science database.

instances among the most disruptive end of the spectrum, as in Leclerc-Madlala's study. According to this author's case study, people eager to access a disability grant to HIV patients manage to sell and buy HIV-infected blood to try to cheat the system or even engaging in unprotected sex to become infected (Leclerc-Madlala, 2006, p. 253). But not all disruptive forms of dissonant agency are active behaviors. For example, Mohammed (2021) found in his work on Ghana School Feeding Programme that schoolchildren implement a *thin agency* by refusing to eat the food served to them because of its poor quality (Mohammed, 2021, p. 7). Similarly, in his case study on French welfare, Dubois found that welfare clients used a passive form of resistance. This author argues that welfare beneficiaries refused to participate in welfare activities and withhold information relevant to bureaucratic encounters (Dubois, 2016).

Another active form of dissonant agency that is not disruptive is the different forms of negotiation. Unlike gaming or fraud (e.g. Dean, 2003; Dean & Melrose, 1997), where citizens explicitly subvert or cheat the system, sometimes as the only way possible to act (Peeters et al., 2020), negotiation implies a more constructive behavior in which citizens and SLBs engage in a joint decision-making process (Gofen et al., 2019). For example, there are cases where clients disagree with activation plans and negotiate them with their caseworkers (e.g., Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Eskelinen & Caswell, 2010). Negotiation is also frequent in healthcare settings where patients negotiate with medical staff a preferred treatment (Koenig, 2011; Gofen & Needham, 2015; Gofen et al., 2019), diagnosis (Stewart, 2015), or their access to treatment (Johannessen, 2019, see also Benjamin, 2020 for a case of access to welfare benefits). Finally, there are passive and not disruptive instances of dissonance agency. For example, when citizens leave the interaction or the public service as a response to a conflict with the SLB (May & Stengel, 1990; Werner & Malterud, 2003) or as a response to sanctions received (Juhila et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2020), or to simply avoid bad service providers (Stewart, 2015).

The contingent agency is a form that is not straightforward in conflict or line with policy but depends on how it is used by the citizen in a particular context and engagement with structure. For example, one of the most frequently studied forms of agency in this category is performing. Performing refers to a way of acting a role within an interactional order (Goffman, 1959). In that sense, this agency mode, as an instance of contingent agency, could be done as a way to gaming, like in the case studied by Erica Weiss, where young people perform a role "tailored to the purpose of avoiding military service" (Weiss, 2016, p. 20). But it also could be

done to fit a role or identity imposed by the policy or public service (Cook & Cole, 2020; Hillman, 2014; Lens & Cary, 2010; Mik-Meyer, 2017; Mik-Meyer & Hugaard, 2020; Schneider et al., 2010). The difference between these two uses of performing is that in one case (military service), there is an open opposition to be part of the bureaucratic encounter. While in the other (welfare or healthcare), citizens need the bureaucratic encounter because to receive a public benefit or value.

Finally, the less frequently studied form of agency is concordant agency (12.5%). This category includes behaviors in line with policy, the interaction with SLB, or public service delivery. Here also, we can find behaviors that range from active to passive. In the active extreme of concordant agency, we can find behaviors expected and promoted by activation and prevention policies, what Hoggett has called the reflexive agent (Hoggett, 2001). For example, Dean (2003) talks about *heroic consumers* and Mik-Meyer and Silverman (2019) about *resolute clients*, for referring to welfare clients that act autonomous and responsibly to provide their own welfare (Dean, 2003, p. 700). At the same time, other authors talk about citizens who are cooperative with the SLBs for complying with policies mandates (e.g., Benjamin & Campbell, 2015; Murray, 2006; Rossi, 2016; Schneider et al., 2010). In contrast, within the passive end of the concordant agency, there is the *passive citizen* (Dean, 2003; Mik-Meyer & Haugaard, 2019) who passively adapts to hierarchical and inefficient public services (Eyles et al., 2015). Other citizens avoid calling attention by neglecting their true identities (Nisar, 2018) or passively assumes “normal” ways of life for them (Mik-Meyer & Silverman, 2019).

I classified agency sources into three categories: social, policy, and personal sources. The largest agency source is policy sources (37.7%). This type of agency source refers to resources, abilities, or conditions defined by policies or public service structures that allow citizens to exercise agency. For example, the most common trigger of agency was the quality of public service delivered and the encounter with the SLB. When citizens engage in a formal procedure to correct a bureaucratic error or complain about mistreatment from the SLB, citizens' assessment concerning the quality of public service or the SLBs was determinant (e.g., May & Stengel, 1990; Lens, 2009; Seefeldt, 2017). Moreover, this assessment also gives origin to informal responses and alternatives from citizens (see Cohen, 2012; Hossain, 2010; Peeters, et al., 2020).

Agency personal sources is the second most common source found among the studies included. This category refers to personal resources, abilities, or conditions that allow citizens to exercise agency. Two of the most recent and relevant works in PA systematically discuss two of the most critical personal sources of agency. Masood and Nisar (2021) propose the concept of administrative capital as “an explicit or tacit ability to understand bureaucratic rules, processes, and behaviors to achieve favorable outcomes in bureaucratic encounters” (p. 66). For their part, Döring (2021) propose the concept of administrative literacy (AL) as the multidimensional capacity of citizens when dealing with public bureaucracies, characterized by functional literacy, communicative literacy, structural literacy, processual literacy, civic literacy, and media literacy (Döring, 2021, p. 6). Both concepts highlight the importance of knowledge and information for the citizens to act in a bureaucratic context. In that sense having administrative capital or being administrative literate allows citizens to navigate better the bureaucracy (e.g., Gustafson, 2011; Lang, 2019; Nelson, 1980; Salmon & May, 1995; Tripi, 1984), but also to challenge professional decisions (e.g., Gofen & Needham, 2015; Gofen et al., 2019; Weiss, 2016).

Agency social sources are the resources, abilities, or conditions from social networks or social interactions that allow citizens to exercise agency. Given the relevance of SLBs for citizens' lives (Lipsky, 2010) is no surprise that the most frequent social source of citizen agency in the literature was the relationship between citizens and the SLBs. Particularly in cases where collaboration is desired, SLBs can become the main encouragers of citizen agency by making them recognize their own worth and capacity (Benjamin & Campbell, 2015, p. 995). However, in the literature, it was more common to find examples of how bad or conflictive relationships with the SLBs trigger negative behaviors from citizens (e.g., Clair, 2020; Lens, 2009; Stewart, 2015).

Finally, influenced by the classification of SLBs' coping behaviors made by Tummers and his colleagues (2015), I classified the effects of citizen agency based on the consequences agency had for the policy, the public service structure, and the citizen themselves. The most common effect in the literature was the effects towards the citizens. That means consequences that represent a gain (or loss) personally for the citizen. For example, getting access to benefits was the most frequent effect of the agency. Citizens accomplish this effect through different actions and behaviors, some more conflictual (e.g., Hossain, 2010; Schneider et al., 2010;

Stewart, 2015; Kelly, 2017) than others (e.g., Carswell, et al., 2019; Rossi, 2016; Tuckett, 2015). Then we have those actions against the policy, which are actions to cheat the system or undermine public authority (Dean, 2003; Weiss, 2016). Often, the motivation behind the actions that produce these effects is dissatisfaction with public services (Simmons et al., 2012; de Boer, 2020). But there were also those effects towards the policy, which are those consequences consistent with policy or public service structure. For example, Tonkens and Newman (2011, see also De Corte et al., 2018; Eyles et al., 2015; Garmany, 2017; Morgan-Trimmer, 2014) find that citizen participation in activation policies can result in the improvement of welfare services (2011).

1.6 Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to systematically review the literature to provide a comprehensive overview of citizens' agency during street-level policy implementation and advance to the conceptualization of citizen agency.

Although there is an increasing interest in citizen agency in the street-level implementation literature, there is still a lack of a conceptual or theoretical framework that captures the empirical results in the literature. Furthermore, there are examples of actions taken by the citizens that reflect manifestations of their agency capacity, which are labeled with different names. The different labels used in the literature to name citizens' actions during street-level policy implementation include negotiation, discretion, resistance, subversion, and non-compliance, among others. While discretion is a broader concept that refers to the *capacity* to act within the constraints of rules, the other labels focus on the ways through which this capacity is *manifested* independently of regulations or even against them (e.g., de Boer, 2020; Gustafson, 2011; Juhila et al., 2014; Prior & Barnes, 2011). Also, discretion may be confusing because this concept is intertwined with the state agent role of SLBs (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Musheno & Maynard-Moody, 2015). Consequently, this paper suggests using the concept of citizens' agency as an umbrella term that encompasses the different and heterogeneous manifestations identified so far in the literature.

Frequently, literature labels the empirical manifestations of citizen agency from a negative perspective as divergent in terms of their consequences for the policy objectives. This

normative standing is characteristic of PA research compared to more critical bodies of literature, resulting from PA obsession with the practitioner's point of view (Nisar, 2017; 2020). The obsession scholars have with a practitioner-centered public administration research model deprioritizes citizens' issues (Nisar, 2021, p. 2), including manifestations of their agency, particularly those actions that are seen as more conflictive (Nisar, 2018; 2021). However, a better understanding of citizen agency could help the discipline moving to a public-centered research model. A public-centered perspective helps to recognize that agency does not always follow a divergent pattern and that citizens' actions could trigger beneficial changes in policies (Gofen, 2015; Nisar, 2020). In that sense, understanding citizen agency helps us acknowledge abuses and inform citizens about their rights when accessing public benefits (Nisar, 2020; 2021).

The findings and conclusions of this article bring us to a future research agenda that explore new methodologies, research designs, and theoretical venues. First, methodological difficulties limit researchers to grasp more subtle and passive forms of citizen agency fully. Thus, the least frequent types of agency found in the literature are in the low autonomy side of the model. Overall, there are several methodological issues and limitations to grasp agency manifestations, even more, when we talk about passive forms of agency. Therefore, we need to use innovative methodologies in public administration that facilitate engagement with citizens' voices (see Nisar, 2021, p. 2 for specific methods), including ethnography. Although there are increasing examples of ethnographic research in public administration (Dubois, 2016; Nisar, 2018; Masood & Nisar, 2021), many of the ethnographic studies included in the review are coming from journals outside the public administration.

Second, as some authors have argued: culture is one of the determinants of SLBs' actions (Cohen, 2018; Møller, 2019). Furthermore, to the extent that SLBs are a reflection of society in which they are embedded (Bhavnani & Lee, 2018; Lotta & Marques, 2020; Møller, 2019), it is logical to think that citizen agency will show similarities and differences across societies and cultures. Therefore, to fully understand citizen agency, and more broadly, public encounters, we need to do more comparative research. Unfortunately, only one of the studies included in the review makes a proper comparison. This research agenda also point to expand research to include countries outside the traditional US-Europe countries.

Theoretically, there are some research questions that we can begin to address. First, how the citizens' agency is developed or limited. Second, do different national or subnational

cultures imply different levels or types of citizens' agency? This last research question goes hand in hand with doing more comparative research. Finally, street-level bureaucrats are very aware that citizens are not passive actors. Therefore, they can make their own decisions and take actions to challenge them or the policy itself. However, there is still a missing link: how can the policy designers consider or exploit the citizens' agency?

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Appendix A. PRISMA Checklist

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
TITLE			
Title	1	Identify the report as a systematic review.	p. 2
ABSTRACT			
Abstract	2	See the PRISMA 2020 for Abstracts checklist.	p. 3
INTRODUCTION			
Rationale	3	Describe the rationale for the review in the context of existing knowledge.	pp. 4-6
Objectives	4	Provide an explicit statement of the objective(s) or question(s) the review addresses.	pp. 6
METHODS			
Eligibility criteria	5	Specify the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review and how studies were grouped for the syntheses.	p. 16-17
Information sources	6	Specify all databases, registers, websites, organisations, reference lists and other sources searched or consulted to identify studies. Specify the date when each source was last searched or consulted.	p. 13-16
Search strategy	7	Present the full search strategies for all databases, registers and websites, including any filters and limits used.	pp. 13-16
Selection process	8	Specify the methods used to decide whether a study met the inclusion criteria of the review, including how many reviewers screened each record and each report retrieved, whether they worked independently, and if	p. 16

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
		applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	
Data collection process	9	Specify the methods used to collect data from reports, including how many reviewers collected data from each report, whether they worked independently, any processes for obtaining or confirming data from study investigators, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	pp. 17-18
Data items	10a	List and define all outcomes for which data were sought. Specify whether all results that were compatible with each outcome domain in each study were sought (e.g. for all measures, time points, analyses), and if not, the methods used to decide which results to collect.	N/A
	10b	List and define all other variables for which data were sought (e.g. participant and intervention characteristics, funding sources). Describe any assumptions made about any missing or unclear information.	N/A
Study risk of bias assessment	11	Specify the methods used to assess risk of bias in the included studies, including details of the tool(s) used, how many reviewers assessed each study and whether they worked independently, and if applicable, details of automation tools used in the process.	N/A
Effect measures	12	Specify for each outcome the effect measure(s) (e.g. risk ratio, mean difference) used in the synthesis or presentation of results.	N/A

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
Synthesis methods	13a	Describe the processes used to decide which studies were eligible for each synthesis (e.g. tabulating the study intervention characteristics and comparing against the planned groups for each synthesis (item #5)).	M/A
	13b	Describe any methods required to prepare the data for presentation or synthesis, such as handling of missing summary statistics, or data conversions.	pp. 17-18
	13c	Describe any methods used to tabulate or visually display results of individual studies and syntheses.	p. 18
	13d	Describe any methods used to synthesize results and provide a rationale for the choice(s). If meta-analysis was performed, describe the model(s), method(s) to identify the presence and extent of statistical heterogeneity, and software package(s) used.	N/A
	13e	Describe any methods used to explore possible causes of heterogeneity among study results (e.g. subgroup analysis, meta-regression).	N/A
	13f	Describe any sensitivity analyses conducted to assess robustness of the synthesized results.	N/A
Reporting bias assessment	14	Describe any methods used to assess risk of bias due to missing results in a synthesis (arising from reporting biases).	N/A
Certainty assessment	15	Describe any methods used to assess certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for an outcome.	N/A

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
RESULTS			
Study selection	16a	Describe the results of the search and selection process, from the number of records identified in the search to the number of studies included in the review, ideally using a flow diagram.	p. 17; p. 42
	16b	Cite studies that might appear to meet the inclusion criteria, but which were excluded, and explain why they were excluded.	p. 42
Study characteristics	17	Cite each included study and present its characteristics.	pp. 19-26; pp. 43-44
Risk of bias in studies	18	Present assessments of risk of bias for each included study.	N/A
Results of individual studies	19	For all outcomes, present, for each study: (a) summary statistics for each group (where appropriate) and (b) an effect estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval), ideally using structured tables or plots.	N/A
Results of syntheses	20a	For each synthesis, briefly summarise the characteristics and risk of bias among contributing studies.	pp. 43-44
	20b	Present results of all statistical syntheses conducted. If meta-analysis was done, present for each the summary estimate and its precision (e.g. confidence/credible interval) and measures of statistical heterogeneity. If comparing groups, describe the direction of the effect.	N/A

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
	20c	Present results of all investigations of possible causes of heterogeneity among study results.	N/A
	20d	Present results of all sensitivity analyses conducted to assess the robustness of the synthesized results.	N/A
Reporting biases	21	Present assessments of risk of bias due to missing results (arising from reporting biases) for each synthesis assessed.	N/A
Certainty of evidence	22	Present assessments of certainty (or confidence) in the body of evidence for each outcome assessed.	N/A
DISCUSSION			
Discussion	23a	Provide a general interpretation of the results in the context of other evidence.	pp. 26-30
	23b	Discuss any limitations of the evidence included in the review.	pp. 13-16
	23c	Discuss any limitations of the review processes used.	pp. 26-30
	23d	Discuss implications of the results for practice, policy, and future research.	pp. 30-32
OTHER INFORMATION			
Registration and protocol	24a	Provide registration information for the review, including register name and registration number, or state that the review was not registered.	N/A
	24b	Indicate where the review protocol can be accessed, or state that a protocol was not prepared.	N/A

Section and Topic	Item #	Checklist item	Location where item is reported
	24c	Describe and explain any amendments to information provided at registration or in the protocol.	N/A
Support	25	Describe sources of financial or non-financial support for the review, and the role of the funders or sponsors in the review.	N/A
Competing interests	26	Declare any competing interests of review authors.	N/A
Availability of data, code and other materials	27	Report which of the following are publicly available and where they can be found: template data collection forms; data extracted from included studies; data used for all analyses; analytic code; any other materials used in the review.	N/A

Source: Adapted from Page et al (2021).

Appendix B. Research Synthesis Methodology.

Table B1

Seven stages of citizens’ agency in street-level implementation research synthesis

Step in research analysis	Research question	Answer
Formulating the problem	What type of research evidence will be relevant to the problem or hypothesis of interest in the synthesis?	<p>The way citizen/client’s agency has been studied in the literature of policy implementation and public service provision at the street-level.</p> <p>Although one of the contributions of this paper is to advance a conceptualization of citizen’s agency, it is necessary to state what is understood as agency to be clear what to look at in the literature. Citizen/client’s agency is understood as the potential capacity to imaginatively exert some degree of control over interactional and policy structure during policy implementation and service delivery</p>
Searching the literature	What procedures should be used to find relevant research?	1. Sources of relevant research: Google Scholar database; search in ten relevant public administration and public policy journals; forward and backward search

		<p>using ten relevant papers previously identified.</p> <p>2. The terms used are: “street-level”, “frontline”, “bureaucratic encounter” “public encounter” plus one of the next “citizen agency” “client agency” “citizen as agent” “client as agent” “agency of the client” “agency of the citizen” “client’s discretion” “citizen’s discretion” “subversive citizen” “subversive client” “resistance of the client” “resistance of the citizen” “active citizen” “active client” “empowered citizen” “empowered client” “resistance tactics” “resistance strategies” “subversive tactics” “subversive strategies” “negotiated order” “negotiation” “negotiated compliance” “negotiated discretion” “non-compliance”</p>
<p>Gathering information from studies</p>	<p>What is information about each study relevant to the problem or hypothesis of interest?</p>	<p>1. Manifestation of the citizen/client’s agency.</p> <p>2. Label used to name the agency.</p> <p>3. Agency definition provided.</p>

		<p>4. Whether the agency is constructed as a positive or a deviant action.</p> <p>5. The source of the citizen/client's agency</p> <p>6. The effects of the citizen/client's agency either for the policy or the SLB.</p>
Evaluating the quality of the studies	What research should be included in the synthesis?	<p>1. Include only works that empirically or theoretically study actions and decisions that citizens/clients actively carry out in the context of the implementation of policies and the provision of public services at the street-level and during their interactions with SLBs.</p> <p>2. Include only works that have undergone a peer-review process.</p> <p>3. Include only works written in English.</p>

		4. Include only works published during the period from 1981 to 2019.
Analyzing and integrating the outcomes of studies	What procedures should be used to summarize and combine the research results?	<p>The analysis procedure will consist of coding and classifying the text fragments to identify:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Citizen agency definitions, labels, or classifications. 2. Specific citizen agency manifestations. 3. Citizen agency sources. 4. Citizen agency effects for the policy or the SLB. <p>These text fragments could be drawn either from the empirical data of the study analyzed or from the author's analysis (s).</p>
Interpreting the evidence	What conclusion can be drawn about the cumulative state of the research evidence?	1. There are in the literature some examples of actions taken by the policy clients that are a manifestation of their agency capacity even when the literature uses different names to refer to them.

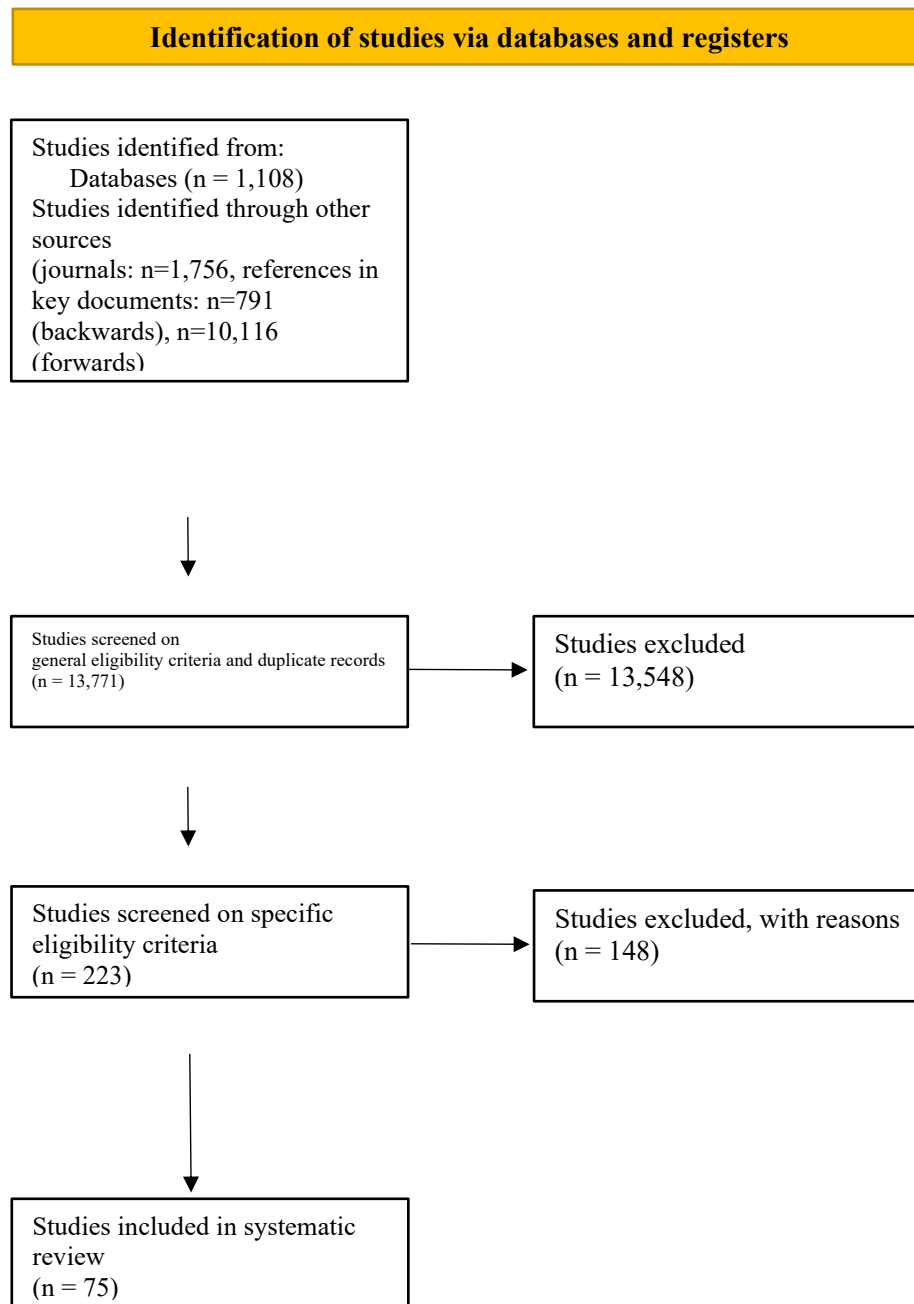
		<p>2. There are different labels to refer to that actions: negotiation, discretion, resistance, subversion, non-compliance.</p> <p>3. There are two different normative positions when the literature refers to the citizen/client's actions: deviant or positive.</p>
Presenting the results	What information should be included in the report of the synthesis?	The PRISMA checklist items will be used to report the findings.

Source: adapted from Cooper (2017).

Appendix C.

Figure C1

PRISMA Flow of Information Through the Phases of A Systematic **Review**



Source: Own elaboration

Appendix D. Summary of Results

Table D1

Summary of Results of the Systematic Literature Review

Journal article	68
Book Chapter	4
Book	3
Type of study	
Empirical	67
Theoretical/Conceptual	8
Number of publications by year	
1980-2009	13
2010-2016	30
2017-2021	32
Total	75
Disciplinary distribution of journals	
PA or Policy	24
Interdisciplinary	23
Sociology or Anthropology	12
Social Work	4
Law	2
Political Science	1
Economy	1
Psychiatry	1
Total	68
Number of Studies Published in PA or Policy Journals	
Social Policy & Administration	6
Journal of Social Policy	4
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory (JPART)	3

Public Administration (PA)	2
Public Policy and Administration (PPA)	2
Administration & Society	1
Administrative Theory & Praxis (AT&P)	1
Critical Policy Studies	1
Governance	1
International Journal of Public Administration	1
Public Administration and Development (PAD)	1
Policy Sciences	1
Total	68
Design of empirical studies	
Qualitative design	57
Quantitative design	6
Mixed-Method design	4
Source of empirical data	
SLBs	4
Citizens	30
SLBs and citizens	33
Number of studies by (single) policy sector	
Social Welfare	27
Health Care	15
Migration	6
Activation policies	5
CCT	2
Public Services	2
Police/Criminal justice	2
Public Transport Inspection	2
Identity and registry	1
Military	1
Single vs cross-country	

Single country	64
Cross-country	3
Total	67
Number of studies by (single)country	
Europe	21
USA	13
UK	11
Middle East/Asia	9
Africa	6
Latin America	3
Oceania	2

Source: Own elaboration

Appendix E. Complete List of Studies Included in the Systematic Review

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2. Structural sources of citizen agency during frontline delivery of conditional social policy. The case of Prospera in Mexico

Abstract

There have been recent efforts in the literature to understand how conditional social policies are implemented at the frontline. Moreover, there is a relevant emphasis on citizen agency that helps us understand conditionality practices at the frontline since the SLBs are not the only actors with agency, and citizens also play an active role in the production of conditional frontline practices. However, the existing explanations that focus on the structure to explain citizen agency are black-box explanations, obscuring the social mechanisms through which structure affects agency. This paper answers the following question: *how does the structure of conditional welfare policies influence beneficiaries' agency?* Drawing on qualitative data from a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program in Mexico, this study explores the social mechanism behind how policy structure enables citizen agency during conditional welfare delivery. Three dimensions were found to influence how flexible the structure is, and, therefore, the citizen agency: organizational, discourse, and interactional. It is argued in this paper that conditional welfare policy structure flexibility and its effect on citizen agency depend on the interaction between organizational, discursive, and interactional dimensions. Moreover, the policy sector mediates the impact these dimensions have on conditional welfare policy structure flexibility. The results from this paper help to understand better how conditional welfare practices are produced. Specifically, this research highlights the role of policy structure in producing the citizen side of conditional welfare practices.

2.1 Introduction

Social policy in western democracies has experienced what is known as the turn towards activation (Fletcher, 2020; van Berkel, 2017; 2020; van Berkel et al., 2018). This change is characterized by designing and implementing policy tools that condition access to social benefits in different ways (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018) and mainly through behavioral conditions (Fletcher et al., 2016). Traditionally, the study of conditional welfare policies —like welfare-to-work and different forms of activation policies— has focused on developed countries with institutionalized welfare systems in Europe and the United States. However, Conditional Cash Transfer programs (CCTs) have been rarely included in the category of conditional welfare, regardless of their spread as the primary policy to combat poverty in Latin America, Africa, and Asia (Fernandez, 2021; Osorio, 2019; Sugiyama, 2011; Valencia, 2008). Furthermore, like activation policies in the United States and Europe, CCTs impose conditions on access to social benefits to recipients of social policy and, therefore, establish a special relationship between citizens and the State (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Alford, 2002).

There have been recent efforts in the literature to understand how conditional social policies are implemented at the frontline, particularly in European countries (see Fletcher, 2020; Van Berkel et al. 2018) and from the point of view of the street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) (see Freier & Senghaas, 2021; Gjersøe et al., 2020; Grandia et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2020; McGann et al., 2020; Senghaas, 2020; Van Berkel & Knies, 2018). Similarly, some authors have highlighted how citizens use their agency during the implementation of conditional policies (Eskelinen et al., 2010; Fletcher et al., 2016; Little, 1999; Prior & Barnes, 2011; Wright et al., 2020).

The emphasis on citizen agency is relevant because it helps understand conditionality practices at the frontline since SLBs are not the only actors with agency capacity. Citizens also play an active role in producing conditional frontline practices (Prior & Barnes, 2011; Wright, 2012). Furthermore, recent contributions from criminology explain how the structure influences the agency of prisoners. For instance, Rubin argues that prison regime —personnel, architecture, and daily routines—enable prisoners' micro-resistance practices (Rubin, 2017). Crewe (2007), focusing on the characteristics of prison power, argues that the prison order determines different forms of prisoner resistance. However, these explanations focus on prisoners, subject to other structural limitations and resources that situate them as obligatees and not beneficiaries, as in

the case of conditional welfare recipients (see Alford, 2002 for the difference between obligatees and beneficiaries). The fact that different types of people are subject to other structural features will affect how agency manifests. Moreover, existing explanations characterizes as being black-box explanations, obscuring the social mechanisms through which structure affects agency.

The research question I address in this paper is *how does the structure of conditional welfare policies influence the agency of beneficiaries?* I find that, in line with Rubin (2017), the structure enables citizen agency depending on how flexible it is. Furthermore, I argue that the interrelation of organizational, discursive, and interactional structures influence citizen agency by making the structure more or less flexible through three mechanisms: SLBs policy alienation, citizen empowerment and uncertainty reduction. In this paper, I take the definition of the structure by Sewell, as “mutually sustaining schemas and resources that empower and constrain social action and that tend to be reproduced by that social action” (1992, p. 19). More specifically, policy structure is a set of interpretive schemas embedded in policy design that empower and constrain citizen actions.

Drawing on qualitative data from a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program in Mexico, this study explores the social mechanism of how policy structure enables citizen agency during conditional welfare delivery. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section presents the main findings of the literature. Then I show the empirical case and its main characteristics. After that, I present the method used in this research. The next section presents the findings. Then I discuss the results in the light of social mechanisms literature and integrate them into a social mechanism that explains the link between structure and agency. And the final section presents the conclusion.

2.2 Structural Sources of Citizen Agency during Conditional Welfare Delivery

There is a recent interest in the bottom-up perspective of conditional welfare delivery (Fletcher, 2020; Van Berkel et al., 2018). Most studies focus on SLBs' use of discretion (Freier & Senghaas, 2021; Kaufman, 2020). However, recent studies started to recognize that welfare subjects have agency and that, together with SLBs, they shape the outcomes of public services (Prior & Barnes, 2011). One common explanation for neglecting citizen agency is the domination of structuralism in social science and the desire not to blame the poor for their

situation (Deacon, 2004; Deacon & Mann, 1999; Small et al., 2010; Wright, 2012). Indeed, literature often portrays welfare clients as subject to a disciplinary power by social policies (Schram et al., 2009; Soss et al., 2011). However, the current emphasis on citizen agency has reduced scholarly attention to other factors that explain welfare clients' behavior, including structure.

Public Administration research has traditionally used structural explanations for explaining individual behavior (e. g., March & Olsen, 1989; Ostrom, 2015). However, these institutional explanations often focus on macro perspectives of political and organizational phenomena. For example, Ostrom (2015) has used an institutional framework to explain the governance of common-pool resources. At the same time, March & Olsen (1989) used the cases of administrative reforms in the U. K., U. S., and Nordic countries to explain how institutions provide a framework for action. However, my interest in this paper is in a bottom-up perspective of the structural sources of citizen agency during conditional welfare delivery. By arguing the importance of structural factors as sources of citizen agency, I do not intend to neglect that agency influences structure (see Giddens, 1984 for structuration theory). Arguing for a structuration theory of conditional welfare delivery is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the first step to this structuration theory is recognizing and understanding how structure enables citizen agency.

Despite the fact some authors have recognized interaction with the citizen as relevant for understanding frontline delivery of conditional welfare (Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016; Gjersøe et al., 2020; Hasenfeld, 2010; McGann et al., 2020), literature has remained focused on SLBs' use of discretion and how they translate policy into frontline practices (Freier & Senghaas, 2021; Kaufman, 2020).

Some authors begin to acknowledge the active role played by citizens in the frontline delivery of conditional welfare, particularly regarding their agency display (Lundberg, 2018; Prior & Barnes, 2011; Wright, 2012). Given the dominant model of activation policies in which the welfare subjects must be activated because of their "incompetency or immorality" (Wright, 2016, p. 236), many authors focus on citizen agency as a form of resistance to identity construction. For example, some authors (Eskelinen et al., 2010; Little, 1999; Peterie et al., 2019; Solberg, 2011) focus on how clients actively confront the system and resist or negotiate the identities imposed on them by activation policies. Others (Caswell et al., 2013) focuses on

how citizens oppose the activities the programs demand from them. Moreover, citizens actively work for the system to adapt to them and their needs (Lundberg, 2018), sometimes through fraudulent and gaming strategies (Fletcher et al., 2016; Wright et al., 2020).

Beyond incidental mentions of the influence that ambiguity of goals (Eskelinen et al., 2010, p. 337), people-processing institutional factors (Caswell et al., 2013, p. 10), the institutional apparatus of the welfare state (Lundberg, 2018, p. 135) or the intensifying welfare conditionality (Wright et al., 2020, p. 289) have on citizen agency, literature has paid little attention to the factors that influence citizen agency. An exception is Little (1999), who uses a Foucauldian perspective to argue that the discourse of dependency embedded in the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (AFDC) allows welfare clients in the U.S. to resist the irresponsible characterization imposed on them. Although this perspective has great value, Little's work focuses only on one dimension of structure as the social mechanism behind citizen agency. My interest is in the social mechanism that integrates different structure dimensions, as one mechanism is not enough to explain social events (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998, p. 21).

Outside the literature on the delivery of conditional welfare, some authors (Cohen & Filc, 2017; Cohen et al., 2020; Döring, 2021; Golan-Nadir et al., 2020; Kristensen et al., 2012; Masood & Nisar, 2021; Peeters et al., 2020; Rubin, 2017) have proposed theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence that help to understand the sources of citizen agency during public service delivery. A body of literature influenced by Hirschman's model of exit, voice, and loyalty (EVL) focuses on explanations for different modes of citizen agency during public service delivery, including informal payments in healthcare services (Cohen & Filc, 2017; Cohen et al., 2020), alternative supply of public services (Golan-Nadir et al., 2020), and gaming (Peeters et al., 2020).

These streams of literature, especially the one influenced by the EVL model, have made relevant contributions for understanding formal policy arrangements as signals for citizens to know what is a preferred behavior (Peeters et al., 2020, p. 827). However, the findings from these authors often refer to *triggers* and not to *sources* of citizen agency. Namely, dissatisfaction with public services (Cohen et al., 2020; Golan-Nadir et al., 2020), lack (Cohen & Filc, 2017), or low (Peeters et al., 2020) trust in public services triggers the different manifestation of citizen agency. Possible agency sources present in this literature are cultural, like the concept of Alternative Politics (see Cohen, 2012), which allows a do-it-yourself culture socially accepted

towards the alternative provision of services that formally have to be provided by the government (Cohen, 2012, pp. 299-302).

Information and knowledge, either as the result of formal education (Kristensen et al., 2012) or as a consequence of bureaucratic encounters (Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021), is the most mentioned enabler of citizen agency. In that sense, these authors echo the contributions made by the bureaucratic socialization literature about the importance of education and knowledge for the citizen to be capable of dealing with bureaucracies (see Danet & Gurevitch, 1972; Danet & Hartman, 1972).

Most of these efforts highlight the importance of individual characteristics and resources as determinants of citizen agency and capacity. One exception to this is the work by criminologist Ashley Rubin. This author draws from a historical study of prisoners' behavior to argue that prison structure enables prisoners' agency⁵. Specifically, Rubin argues that the prison regime, including its personnel, architecture, and daily routines, enables prisoner agency (in the form of friction) (2017, pp. 645-646). Moreover, this author proposes a two-dimensional model to understand the "roles of agency and structure in shaping prisoner behavior" (Rubin, 2017, p. 655). The two dimensions are structure and agency. The first one refers to how flexible a regime structure is, going from rigid to flexible, while the second refers to the different behaviors agents can perform. According to the author, the type of agency performed depends on how flexible or rigid a structure is (Rubin, 2017, p. 656).

The framework proposed by Rubin is helpful to understand the extent to which structure flexibility enables agency. However, how that structure becomes flexible or rigid, enabling agency still is unknown. In that sense, the explanation provided by Rubin is a black-box explanation in which "the link between input and output, or between explanans and explanandum, is assumed to be devoid of structure, or, at least, whatever structure there maybe is considered to be of no inherent interest" (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998, p. 9). Therefore, we

⁵ I use Rubin (2017) work as point of departure for my own analysis of structural sources of citizen agency during policy implementation and public service delivery, mainly because scarcity of scholarly works within conditional welfare and PA research that focuses on structural sources of citizen agency. However, I recognize the differences between prisoners and conditional welfare beneficiaries, as well as between prisons' and conditional welfare organizations' structure. Although I also acknowledge the literature that poses critics to welfare reforms towards activation, in the sense of welfare has criminalize poverty (Gustafson, 2011), therefore becoming more disciplinary (Soss et al., 2011; van Berkel, 2020), and authoritarian by not only governing beneficiaries' selves, but also their time and behavior (Haikkola, 2019). This critical perspectives situates conditional welfare policies close to what Goffman (1961) conceptualized as total institutions which prisons are one of them.

should look for social mechanisms that link structure flexibility and citizen agency to open up that black-box. To fully understand the mechanism behind structure flexibility, we should look at structural dimensions that define behaviors for both SLBs and citizens and how these interact to make more rigid or flexible the structure.

2.3 Method

This study uses an interpretive-qualitative research approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) for two main reasons. First, I am interested in the lived experience (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, p. 18). of how structural factors influence citizen agency during frontline delivery of a conditional social policy. Second, the analysis aims to understand an empirical puzzle regarding a paradoxical and messy relation between policy structure and citizen agency during street-level implementation.

The analysis draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews with PROSPERA program beneficiaries (n = 46), social workers (n = 15), and health promoters (n = 7) collected during five months of field visits to 15 urban and rural localities of Aguascalientes, a state in Central Mexico. The reasons behind this case selection are twofold. First, it is a case of conditional welfare in a developing country, rarely studied from the frontline perspective. Second, its design allows me to empirically observe variation in terms of structural features, as the program included interactions between beneficiaries and health and educational SLBs. And third, there is also variation in the time exposed to the program and the educational and health staff.

The process for selecting both the interviewees and the localities aimed to maximize the range (Weiss, 1994, pp. 22-24) by including participants whose characteristics vary. Therefore, data collection consisted in generating a list that prioritized locations where there were secondary schools with a high number of students who were beneficiaries of the program in all of the state of Aguascalientes. Subsequently, rural localities that had not appeared in the first version were included in the list to consider the urban-rural variation among the interviewees. Thus, in total, this study included 15 secondary schools distributed in five municipalities in the state of Aguascalientes.

The schools helped me to establish contact with the beneficiaries based on registry data. First, I followed the logic of maximizing the range in the selection of beneficiaries by including mothers with different seniority and experience as beneficiaries in the study, covering

a range from 1 to 17 years of being PROSPERA beneficiaries. Then, I interviewed the workers in charge of the daily operation of the program. For the education component, I interviewed social workers. Only in one school, I interviewed a worker different from a social worker since a regular teacher operated the program in that school. Finally, in the case of the health component, I interviewed health promoters.

I used two different scripts to conduct the interviews: one for beneficiaries and another for social workers and health promoters. Each of these scripts contained a list of topics that structured each interview. The list of topics used both with the beneficiaries and with the social workers and health promoters sought to obtain information regarding the mechanisms and processes through which the beneficiaries try to exert some control during Prospera implementation.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. I made an audio recording from most of the interviews, except four beneficiaries and one social worker who disagreed with the recording of their voice. In those cases, as in the others, I took detailed field notes. The field notes allow me to register relevant nonverbal communication such as face reactions, gestures, and visible interviewees' feelings of discomfort. I also reported irruptions in the physical space where I conducted the interviews, which was not uncommon due to the nature of schoolwork. The areas I used to run the interviews with the beneficiaries differ within each school: the library, the teacher's room, classrooms of different nature such as workshops and laboratories. In addition, I used social workers and the health promoters' offices to conduct interviews with them. In most cases, the interviewees enjoyed privacy, which made it easier for them to speak freely. All recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis.

The analytic procedure followed an abductive logic of inquiry, which aligns with an interpretive research approach (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013, p. 27). This logic is characterized by an iterative and recursive back and forth path between field and theory (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). First, I established prior knowledge about citizen agency based on the literature; this knowledge informed the topics used during interviews. Then, each interview transformed the prior knowledge and triggered new questions about citizen agency. These new questions about the determinants of citizen agency pushed me to figure out the empirical puzzle and looked for new theoretical insights. Finally, I

used open codes for the qualitative data using a grounded theory logic (Corbin and Strauss, 2007) to identify the agency actions and mechanisms that emerged from the data.

2.4 The setting: Prospera program.

Prospera was a conditional cash transfers (CCT) program implemented in Mexico from 1997 to 2019⁶ to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty by improving participant families' ability to invest in human capital (CONEVAL, 2014; Hernández, 2008; Levy, 2009). The program included four components: 1) Food, which consisted of the delivery of direct monetary benefits to recipient families for buying food; 2) Health, which consisted of promoting health actions for the prevention of diseases, as well as the impulse for access to health services; 3) Education, which consisted of educational coverage, with the granting of scholarships as an incentive for the permanence of children and their advancement in the school; and 4) Linking, which consisted of advising, providing information, and promoting the access of beneficiary families to an array of programs including income generation, training, and employment, financial education, access to savings schemes, life insurance, and credits through inter-institutional coordination. In addition, these components allow exploring how the program structure functions in different policy sectors. In this paper, I focus on education and health components because they were the most relevant of the program. Moreover, the most intense interaction between SLBs and citizens occurred in schools and health centers, mainly because of the conditionalities.

Prospera gave benefits both with and without conditionalities. Given its interests in welfare conditionality, I focus on the beneficiaries assigned to the conditional modality because they are the ones who daily interact with health and education officials. Conditionalities were actions the beneficiaries were obligated to comply with as a prerequisite to obtaining the benefits granted by the program. In that sense, it is a case of welfare conditionality (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Specifically, the conditionalities included: for the health component, to register at the

⁶ Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected president in 2018, who had run a campaign as a leftist anti-establishment candidate, terminated the program and replaced it with a largely unconditional social benefit. The most important change was the elimination of the health conditionalities and the reduction of the education conditionality to merely registering children in schools (rather than actually monitoring class attendance). Thereby, Prospera as a conditional cash transfer was, by all practical means, terminated and rebranded as Becas Benito Juárez ('Benito Juárez Scholarships') which only included a minimum of conditions for receiving the financial benefit.

health center assigned to the beneficiary when joining the program and attend, by all the family members, to their scheduled medical appointments at the health center. The educational component is enrolling children in school (primary, secondary and high school) and regular attendance to classes. In addition, every head of the family must attend the Community Workshops for Health Self-Care. School social workers and health promoters made the monitoring of educational and health conditionalities compliance.

Several authors have found the existence of informal extra conditionalities imposed on the beneficiaries. One of the most frequent examples of these extra conditionalities is what in Mexico is called *faenas*, a form of community work intended to clean and give maintenance to public spaces (e.g., Adato, 2000; Crucifix & Morvant-Roux, 2018; Ramírez, 2021). During the interviews, many beneficiaries mentioned having experienced these extra conditionalities.

Prospera had a particular organizational design resulting from the federal institutional arrangement of Mexico and characterized by a strong fragmentation between organizations in charge of policy design and regulation for one side and implementation for the other. Policymakers had to rely on the existing physical structure that depended on local authorities to ensure access to health and education services for households living in poverty. Therefore, Prospera's central offices and the schools and health centers in charge of delivering its benefits and monitoring compliance with conditionalities were part of different levels of government. Not only that but federal and state governments also were from different political parties. Thus, the program's organizational and political features are relevant in terms of the structure in which policy rules and agents functioned and acted.

2.5 Findings

The analysis identified three structural dimensions that enable citizen agency during conditional welfare delivery. These structural sources affect citizen agency depending on how they interact and the policy sector in which they function. In this section, I explain each of the three structural sources as found in the data.

2.5.1 Organizational Dimension of Structure

One of the essential features of Prospera's organizational structure is the fragmentation between the organization in charge of policy-making and strategic policy decisions and the ones in charge of its implementation. The interviews with the SLBs show this classic gap present in many implementation studies:

The problem here was the lack of communication with Prospera. Yes, I communicated with a person if I had any questions, but besides that, we were on a broken phone when there was a situation with the benefits. In Prospera, they said [to the beneficiaries], "if you did not receive the benefit, ask at the school; in the school, they did not certify correctly." So they came with me, and I showed them to the parents: "here I have the certification that I did, your son has no absence marks, I don't know why you didn't get the Benefit." So then I said, "ask in Prospera." That is, the parents did not know who to ask. (Social Worker1).

This fragmentation produces in the social workers at schools the sense of being alienated from the policy by not making decisions regarding the operation and implementation of Prospera (see Tummers, 2012). For example, many of the social workers interviewed mentioned that one of the program characteristics they disagreed with was that Prospera did not demand children to have good grades but only attend school. Furthermore, the fact that state government was the formal employer of social workers and Prospera were a federal program produced the sense that social workers were working for free to Prospera:

There are rumors that there is a [monetary] compensation for the extra work that we did, which is for an agency that is not ours, that is, it is not our employer, and we do it, and they [other social workers] say "but who gets that money? Because we are not getting paid extra for that work (Social Worker2).

One possible effect of this organizational fragmentation in the education component of Prospera is social workers' less willingness to enforce beneficiaries' compliance with conditionalities (see Thomann et al., 2018 and Tummers, 2011 for studies on the relationship between policy

alienation and willingness to implement policy). To the extent that social workers did not perceive an obligation towards enforcing Prospera formal objectives, they felt more compelled to help the beneficiaries. This situation established a context in which beneficiaries' demands would be more relevant for social workers' decisions than the program, including complying with conditionalities. Therefore, this lack of willingness allowed beneficiaries to be more active in their demands of getting their children's absences erased from the system because they didn't face social workers' resistance. In that sense, policy alienation and a lack of willingness to follow the Prospera program from social workers help make the structure more flexible.

"They [Prospera beneficiaries] demand more, and they ask for more, and they are more aware of their children's absences. I believe that of the 100% of the attendance proofs that I make, 80-90% are for parents who have Prospera. Because they are the ones who are more aware. Because I have observed that other children who are also missing from classes, their parents do not come with me to try to justify their children's absence" (Social Worker3, own emphasis)

"It was not our function [help Prospera beneficiaries proofing compliance with conditionalities] to do it. They [Prospera] did not tell us that we had to fill out anything more. We did it to support the mothers." (Social Worker4, own emphasis)

This flexibility translates into the fact that beneficiaries do not perceive Prosperas' education component as problematic. In addition, with a lack of organizational pressures to social workers regarding their performance, a single not so rigid conditionality translates into less conflict with Prospera beneficiaries who only focus their agency in demanding attendance proofs for their children.

Here [at the school], the problems are matters of another nature, but not Prospera issues (Beneficiary1)

Interviewer.- For example, what was your experience with the education component and the education conditionalities? Were they difficult to comply with?

Beneficiary.- No, we only have to make sure our children come to school and do not have more than ten absences. (Beneficiary2)

Something different happens with the health component. Although there is also an organizational fragmentation between policy designers and implementers, the performance demands health centers impose on their personnel put pressure on health promoters to enforce Prospera beneficiaries' compliance with conditionalities. In contrast to what Rubin (2017) found in the prison context, this situation made the structure more rigid but, at the same time, enabled more possibilities for beneficiaries to perform their agency.

Health promoters are employed by state governments, specifically by the health state secretariat. The health state secretariat designs a series of programs that the health center's staff must implement, including health promoters. Furthermore, all personnel is subject to performance goals concerning the implementation of these programs. Therefore, health centers' staff's evaluation and renovation of job contracts depend in many cases on complying with their performance goals. Thus, Prospera became an opportunity for health centers' staff to constantly having *clients captive* for implementing the health state secretariat programs and reach their performance goals:

For example, in health promotion, if they [health state secretariat] told me 'you have to teach, I don't know, seven workshops a month with the population that you want to take.' So, if you have the captive groups, well... we had the *captive groups* of Prospera, we make them a part in the workshops that we imparted to them to report it on both sides [to Prospera and the health state secretariat] (Health Promoter1)

What happens with this is that we used Prospera people as a *captive population*. What is this? ... I mean, we as [health] promotion have [performance] goals, I mean, the whole unit has goals, yes? So, as the program forces them [Prospera beneficiaries] to have specific workshops and consultations, the Prospera beneficiaries were our captive

population. In a way, that's why I was also involved in working with them. (Health Promoter2)

This pressure incentive health promoters to be rigid with conditionalities compliance. Not only that, as the last quote shows, there were extra conditionalities for beneficiaries that allowed health centers to reach performance goals. However, and in a contradictory way, this enabled beneficiaries to negotiate compliance with a different set of conditionalities

Beneficiary.- Some doctors lend themselves more. They justify absences to the medical appointments if they [noncompliers] do some work at the health center. It happened to my sister.

Interviewer.- And what did she have to do?

Beneficiary.- She [her sister] came to paint at the health center. And with that, she was able to reschedule her medical appointment. (Beneficiary3).

The social mechanism of structural flexibility that the organizational dimension allows to see is twofold. First, in a situation in which exist an organizational gap between policy implementers and policy designers, SLBs will be more alienated and less willing to enforce welfare conditionality. This situation will make the structure more flexible as there is more leniency from SLBs. Second, if the SLBs in charge of conditional welfare delivery are subjected to performance goals, their alienation and willingness will be reduced. This situation will make SLBs more strict, resulting in a more rigid structure.

2.5.2 Discursive Dimension of Structure

The data show that two discourses enable Prospera beneficiaries agency. On the one hand, Prospera staff promoted a policy discourse that empowered beneficiaries. A discourse directed toward the idea of beneficiaries reclaiming their rights and not letting injustice happen to them. This discourse even translates into support from Prospera staff.

I tell you, people reported them [health center staff], and nothing happened. Until once, they [Prospera staff] brought us the payment here, and the person in charge said "let's go, I'll go with you," and they all went to the health center to complain because there were many absent marks. So they went to the health center to fight with the nurses, and the people from Prospera said, "I'm going to support you. Let's go. It's not fair what they're doing." (Beneficiary4).

Above all, the unpleasant part of this job was when Prospera put the parents against us. In the sense that, for example, they do not receive the benefit, what they think is: "it is school's fault. They did something wrong at school". I mean, imagine how the parents came: "No, you didn't register [attendance to classes]". (Social Worker5).

The other discourse promoted by the policy design and rules was about neediness and deservingness. Prospera is a program targeted at people in poverty whose operational rules prioritize some characteristics to access the benefit. Beneficiaries learned these rules and tried to use them to their advantage. Particularly during two moments: first when trying to enter the program, and second, when making persuasive appeals to the SLBs.

In my experience, I have realized about people who have a real need and some who do not. For example, we know some people hide even the furniture when they know that the Prospera staff will visit them. They hide the things to pretend a particular need and continue being supported by the program (Social Worker6).

For example, I have had some cases, well a specific case that told me that because the man, the father of the children, violent her a lot, she had to go with the children's grandparents and then as she was far away her children could not come to school. But I researched the father and the students and found out she was lying (Social Worker7).

The social mechanism of structural flexibility that the discursive dimension allows to see is straightforward. In a situation in which policy design socialized conditional welfare

beneficiaries into a discourse of deservingness and empowerment, they will understand and use their role mandated by the policy in two ways. First, as a trigger for demanding SLBs for fair treatment and complying with what beneficiaries see as their job. Second, as gaming by using the deservingness discourse advantageously to *perform* the specific features and qualities, conditional welfare policy define as desired to access the policy benefits.

2.5.3 Interactional Dimension of Structure

The delivery of services and enforcement of conditionalities linked to Prospera established a series of relationships between beneficiaries and SLBs (e. g., Ramírez, 2021). Furthermore, in many cases, these relationships were established repeatedly during long periods of time. Typically, policy design set that a beneficiary had to interact with health promoters at least six times a year during the health workshops, sometimes even more times because of the extra conditionalities imposed on beneficiaries. Something similar happened with the social worker, although in this case, it was not Prospera the trigger of the interaction, but maybe having more than one child enrolled in the school or having problematic children. The interactional structure includes the frequency of the interaction and how prolonged it is. Many social workers within my sample worked for more than ten years at the same school, sometimes, for almost twenty years⁷. In the health centers, personnel rotation is higher, but there are also cases of health promoters working since the late nineties with the program.

The importance of repeated interaction as an enabler of agency comes from the acquisition of knowledge it allows. This knowledge and information help reduce the uncertainty common to most bureaucratic encounters (e.g., Raaphorst, 2018) and provides a way to make more informed decisions. In addition, repeated interactions provide information for the two parts of bureaucratic encounters, the SLB and the beneficiary.

On one occasion, we had a boy. We knew he got up at three in the morning to go to the farm to peel *nopales*, and the poor kid came from the farm at 11 in the morning to bathe. And he was one of the boys who had Prospera, and sometimes he fell asleep in classes.

⁷ One of my interviewees worked as social worker for two generations as he knew the mother of one of his students since she was at the school as student.

And I helped him justifying his absences. I tried not to cheat too much, but I helped him because *I knew his problems and harsh conditions* (Social Worker8).

Interviewer.-Do you think that if the social worker were constantly changing, would it be the same relationship? With the social worker.

Beneficiary.- No, I don't think so, because I already got to know Cynthia [the Social Worker], and then it will be different to start over with another one.

Interviewer.- What do you mean to start over?

Beneficiary.- Well, yes, with the problems with my daughter, right now she is changing a lot, but if we have a new social worker, we don't know her or his ways, and we have to learn about him or her again. (Beneficiary5)

To the extent that repeated interaction provides information for both SLBs and beneficiaries, this structural dimensión has a contingent effect on structure flexibility. It serves to inform the Prospera beneficiary about the more flexible and strict SLBs, and that way, being able to ask something

Interviewer.- If you arrived late to the health center, was there a space of tolerance to arrive at the appointment?

Beneficiary.- Well, sometimes, depending on the nurses that were there, as I said, some of them did not accept that. But some did; they *lend themselves* for that. (Beneficiary6).

But the information is also a tool for the SLB that reduces beneficiaries' capacity to manipulate their image or self-presentation.

Social worker.- [...] when they are people you already know, that they are lazy, that it is because they do not want to get up, or something like that.

Interviewer.- Are you capable of identifying them?

Social Worker.- Yes, you do identify them.

Interviewer.- You know who is lazy and who is not?

Social Worker.- Yes, and who is waiting for the benefit to go to buy some beers with it ... Really, you can know that. (Social Worker9).

The social mechanism of structural flexibility that interactional dimension allows to see is contingent. When a conditional welfare policy design promotes repeated interactions between SLBs and beneficiaries, they will obtain knowledge and information about policy rules and personal features from each other that reduce uncertainty and allow them to act strategically (see, for example, Dallos, 1996, pp. 129-130). Elsewhere, based on attribution theory, Barnes and Henly (2018) have studied how citizens make sense and develop explanations for costly bureaucratic encounters. Furthermore, according to Dallos (1996), the access to covert and historical information allowed by long-term relationships would help make sense and explain other party behavior better. For example, beneficiaries could know how lenient or strict an SLB is and try to interact only with the more flexible. Similarly, SLBs' previous knowledge about a beneficiary will reduce their space for strategic performance during interaction because the SLB had access to the beneficiary's backstage, limiting how the beneficiary can perform front stage (see Danet & Gurevitch, 1972; Goffman, 1959).

2.6 Discussion

To integrate the structural dimensions found in the data and have a complete understanding of the mechanism through which structure flexibility enables citizen agency, I use the typology of social mechanisms proposed by Hedström and Swedberg (1998). According to various authors, a social mechanism is a process that links an event with another (Elster, 1989) or consequences to social structure (Merton, 1968), which serves as a plausible explanation or hypothesis as to how that link exists (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998). The typology proposed by Hedström and

Swedberg recognizes three types of social mechanisms: situational mechanisms (macro-micro), action-formation mechanisms (micro-micro), and transformational mechanisms (micro-macro).

In the first mechanism, the individual "is exposed to a specific social situation, and this situation will affect him or her in a particular way" (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998, p. 23). The action-formation mechanism "shows how a specific combination of individual desires, beliefs, and action opportunities generate a specific action" (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998, p. 23). Finally, the transformational mechanism establishes that social interaction transforms the individual actions formed during the latter mechanism into a collective outcome (Hedström & Swedberg, 1998, p. 23).

In terms of the mechanism behind conditional welfare structure flexibility, I found that the beneficiaries of Prospera are exposed to three social situations. The first is the organizational dimension of the Prospera program. Although the beneficiaries are not the target of organizational structure, they are exposed to SLBs whose work, level of discretion, and willingness to enforce conditionalities are defined by that structure. The second, directed explicitly towards beneficiaries, is the policy discourse on deservingness and empowerment. Finally, the third situation is the repeated interactions between SLBs and beneficiaries that Prospera's design promotes. These three situations —SLBs' willingness to enforce conditionalities, how effective the empowering discourse is, and the reduction of uncertainty thanks to repeated interactions— provide beneficiaries with opportunities and information that influence how their agency is materialized in specific behaviors. Collectively, the outcome is how rigid or flexible the policy structure is.

The social mechanism that explains how structure became flexible or rigid, ultimately enabling agency, is summarized as follows:

1. Situational mechanism (Macro→ Micro):

- a.1. The organizational gap between policy designers and implementers increases educational SLBs' policy alienation. Moreover, with the lack of performance goals, policy alienation negatively affects the willingness of educational SLBs to enforce welfare conditionalities.

a.2. Performance measurement in health centers positively affects healthcare SLBs' willingness to enforce welfare conditionalities because healthcare SLBs use Prospera's beneficiaries to reach their performance goals.

b. Prospera's discourse of deservingness and social justice provides the beneficiaries with a narrative that supports and empowers them in their encounters with educational and health SLBs.

c. Repeated interactions will provide SLBs and Prospera beneficiaries with an opportunity to obtain covert and historical information about each other, increasing their capacity to exert control over the interaction.

2. Action-formation mechanism (Micro→ Micro):

a. Education SLBs' lack of willingness to enforce welfare conditionalities and the empowering and supportive policy discourse will increase beneficiaries' efforts to exert control over how welfare conditionalities are enforced and their interaction with the SLBs.

b. Healthcare SLBs' willingness to enforce welfare conditionalities will counteract the effect of empowering and supportive welfare policy discourse. But it also opens an informal negotiation opportunity between SLBs and beneficiaries in which the latter can exert some control over how welfare conditionalities are enforced.

c.1. Covert and historical information about SLBs will increase beneficiaries' capacity to act strategically during their frontline encounters. This knowledge will reduce beneficiaries' uncertainty and increase their opportunities to exert control over interaction and ultimately over conditionalities' implementation and enforcement.

c.2. Covert and historical information about the beneficiary will increase the SLBs' capacity to limit how the beneficiaries can strategically behave. This knowledge will reduce SLBs'

uncertainty and beneficiaries' opportunities to exert control over interaction and conditionalities' implementation and enforcement.

3. Transformational mechanism (Micro→ Macro):

a. SLBs' lower willingness to enforce conditionalities, with a high impact of policy empowering discourse and lower uncertainty about SLBs' information, will increase the likelihood of a flexible structure.

b. SLBs' higher willingness to enforce conditionalities, with low impact of policy empowering discourse and higher uncertainty about SLBs' information, will increase the likelihood of a rigid structure.

2.6.1 Three Mechanisms of Structure Flexibility.

As a result of the latter discussion, I argue that policy structure becomes flexible, allowing citizens to use their agency, through three mechanisms: SLBs' alienation, citizen empowerment, and uncertainty reduction. The extent to which the SLB is alienated from the policy they have to implement will determine how willing they are to enforce rules and regulations. Hence, in cases where the SLB is highly alienated, the policy structure will become more flexible. Moreover, the policy structure will become flexible whenever a policy design includes a narrative of deserving and empowerment directed towards citizens. Finally, the policy structure will become flexible when policy design reduce uncertainty through repeated interactions between SLBs and citizens.

2.7 Conclusion

This study has explored the mechanism through which policy structure becomes flexible enabling citizen agency. Drawing on qualitative data on Mexican conditional cash transfers Prospera, I illustrated that three structural dimensions influence the flexibility of conditional welfare structure: 1) organizational structure, 2) discursive structure, and 3) interactional structure. My argument is that to the extent that these structural dimensions make flexible policy

structure in which SLBs and welfare recipients act, they are sources of citizen agency. Furthermore, based on the social mechanisms typology of Hedström and Swedberg (1998), I argue that policy structure becomes flexible through three mechanisms: policy alienation, empowerment, and uncertainty reduction. This social mechanism perspective integrates the three dimensions into one plausible explanation of the Prospera beneficiaries agency.

The results from this paper help to understand better how conditional welfare practices are produced. Specifically, this research highlights the role of policy structure in the production of conditional welfare practices. Particularly its role on the citizen side of these practices. Knowing this is relevant for different reasons. First, as Lipsky (2010) has recognized: efforts to empower customers can alter the relationships at the street-level (2010, p. 193), and ultimately the relationship between citizens and the State. To the extent that policy structure enables citizen agency during welfare frontline delivery, then the social mechanism explored in this paper helps to understand how the relationship between citizens and the State could be modified by the policy design.

Second, understanding the mechanism that can make policy structure more flexible enabling citizen agency helps to understand how policy design can prevent adverse effects or promote desired behaviors. In that sense, the social mechanism of structural sources of citizen agency is a relevant insight that permits better matching policy tools to the behaviors of their target (Howlett, 2018). Third, and in a more public-centered perspective (Nisar, 2021), the social mechanism studied here is a valuable insight to know the lived experience of conditional welfare beneficiaries. In that sense, that knowledge can inform reforms to conditional welfare policies towards less onerous policy designs. For example, cynical and gaming behaviors that result from the rigidity of policy structure are adopted by beneficiaries because of burdensome rules.

This paper also opens the door to future research. Structuration theory states that the relationship between structure and agency is of mutual influence in a dialectic process (Giddens, 1984). Some authors have argued for a structuration theory of policy implementation and human services organization (Sandfort, 2010; Sandfort & Moulton, 2020). These authors, however, have left out the practices and behaviors of citizens. The results of this research constitute a step towards a more complete policy implementation structuration theory by arguing how the structure influences conditional welfare recipients' agency. The next step is to complete the circle and understand how the citizen agency affects the structure.

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3. Citizen agency in Street-Level Interactions: How Beneficiaries Learn to Play the Game of Negotiated Compliance – The Case of Mexico's Conditional Cash Transfers Program

Abstract

Citizen agency is crucial for understanding the nature of most frontline work, which depends on the active and prolonged participation of usually socio-economically vulnerable citizens. However, there has been little discussion on the importance of repeated interactions between citizens and street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) and its impact on citizen agency. Repeated interactions are particularly relevant if one considers that SLBs' clients are predominantly non-voluntary and maybe got 'trapped' in interaction for months or years. It is argued in this paper that repeated interactions between citizens and SLBs influence citizen agency. This paper uses the case of Prospera, a Conditional Cash Transfers program in Mexico characterized by repeated interaction between beneficiaries and SLBs. Drawing from qualitative interviews with Prospera's beneficiaries (n=47), this paper found that program beneficiaries' agency is developed through two phases. A first phase in which beneficiaries learn to internalize the rules and procedures they need to comply with ('routinization of compliance'), and a second phase in which many beneficiaries move on to learn the informal rules of the game and how they can influence or manipulate the formal rules and procedures ('activation of agency'). Repeated interactions put at the disposition of citizens strategic knowledge that helps them to be successful in their bureaucratic encounters. Moreover, citizen agency and what citizens learn about how policies and programs work can have a major impact on the outcome of public policies and the nature of frontline work.

3.1 Introduction.

Citizen agency is an emerging issue in the literature on street-level implementation and bureaucratic encounters. In this article, I argue that analyzing the role of citizens is crucial for understanding policy implementation and street-level interactions. Citizen agency is an emerging topic in various academic debates, such as coproduction (Bovaird, 2007), compliance (May & Winter, 2011), and administrative burdens (Moynihan et al., 2015). However, there is still a lack of consensus on the way citizens actively shape street-level interactions (Nielsen et al., 2021; Wright, 2012). Moreover, the current literature has various shortcomings: first, it often uses static rather than dynamic conceptualizations (Le Grand, 1997; 2003) and manifestations (de Boer, 2020b; Nielsen et al., 2021) of citizen agency. Second, it sees citizen agency through the eyes of street-level bureaucrats (e.g., Djuve & Kavli, 2015). And third, it focuses on situations where empowered citizens interact with the government (e.g., Masood & Nisar, 2021; Nielsen, 2015). These limitations are problematic because a static understanding of citizen agency does not fully capture the complexities in agents' actions (or inactions) and decisions (Hoggett, 2001). Moreover, by focusing on the SLBs' perceptions of citizen agency, the literature perpetuates a practitioner-centered research model (Nisar, 2021) and obscures citizens' voices and lived experiences. Finally, citizen agency has rarely been studied in the context of public service delivery and frontline work, which are usually characterized by power asymmetries between citizens and frontline workers and by prolonged street-level interactions – as opposed to one-shot encounters in government offices.

This lack of attention for citizen agency is remarkable for two reasons. First, frontline work, such as education, counseling, and welfare work, forms the core of the street-level bureaucracy literature (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). Second, citizen agency is crucial for understanding the nature of most frontline work, which depends on the active and prolonged participation of usually socio-economically vulnerable citizens (Ravn & Bredgaard, 2021; Solheim et al., 2020). Traditionally, interactions between citizens-clients and bureaucrats are recognized as one of the essential elements of street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). In addition, there has recently been a conscious effort by some authors to establish a relational agenda for the study of encounters between public officials and citizens (Bartels, 2013; Bartels & Turnbull, 2019; Hand & Catlaw, 2019; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Samanta & Hand, 2021). While there is great value in these approaches, there

has been little discussion on the importance of repeated interactions. The absence of the time variable in the literature on street-level interactions is particularly striking if one considers that SLBs' clients are predominantly non-voluntary (Lipsky, 2010, p. 54). Therefore, unable to decide on their exit from interactions, citizens may be 'trapped' in them for months or years, during which time they will inevitably generate social relations (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010, p. 257; Ramírez, 2020; Solheim et al., 2020). To the extent that frontline work cannot be fully understood without considering citizen agency and that human agency is a relational phenomenon (Emirbayer, 1997), I argue in this paper that repeated interactions between citizens and SLBs influence citizen agency. Moreover, as an enabler of citizen agency, repeated interactions will ultimately influence policy outcomes because it alters how citizens and SLBs act and make decisions.

In order to, for instance, break patterns of unemployment, criminal behavior, or poverty, frontline workers may act like "engineers of human choice, attitude, and self-care" (Peeters, 2019a, p. 60; cf. Weaver, 2015), but their daily work is also determined by the attitudes and actions of the citizens whose behavior they seek to change. By considering time, a distinction can be made between *one-shot* street-level interactions, such as in government offices or with traffic police, and *repeated* street-level interactions common in social policy implementation (see Goodsell, 1981, p. 6 for one of the first mentions of this distinction). Even though citizens can have multiple one-shot interactions over a specific period of time and learn from those experiences, a key difference is that there is, in principle, no time to develop personal relations or personalized expectations between citizens and specific frontline workers. The possibility of creating long-lasting, significant, and even strategic personal relationships during repeated bureaucratic encounters radicalizes the personal side of the bureaucracy already recognized by the literature on SLBs (Thomas, 1986). Furthermore, unlike one-shot interaction, repeated interactions allow citizens —and not just SLBs, as the literature traditionally has suggested— to build trust between them and SLBs (McCaffrey et al., 2006; Pautz, 2009; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012), to acquire bureaucratic knowledge, necessary to be successful during bureaucratic encounters (Döring, 2020; Masood & Nisar, 2021), and to make better assessments of the SLBs with whom they interact (Barnes & Henly, 2018; de Boer, 2020a; Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018).

The argument that citizen agency is crucial for understanding frontline work and policy implementation is developed as follows. First, I review the emerging literature on citizen agency and identify its current shortcomings. Second, I present an exemplary case study of a Mexican activation policy to demonstrate how disadvantaged beneficiaries express their agency and learn to see their interactions with SLBs as part of a 'game' of negotiated compliance (Gofen et al., 2019). In the final section, I discuss the meaning of the findings for the study of street-level bureaucracy and the implementation of social policies with prolonged street-level interactions.

3.2 The Citizen in Street-Level Bureaucracy Literature

3.2.1 Citizen agency

My main interest in this paper is citizen agency due to repeated street-level interactions, which are more frequent in social policies. Therefore, I only focus on citizen agency in the context of the street-level implementation of social policies. Even though client interaction is one of the main sources of ambiguity (Raaphorst, 2018) and difficulties in the daily work (Morrel & Currie, 2015) of SLBs, only recently have scholars started to explicitly study their interactions with citizens (Bartels, 2013; Bartels & Turnbull, 2019; Hand & Catlaw, 2019; McDonald & Marston, 2005; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Raaphorst & Van de Walle, 2018; Samanta & Hand, 2021). However, there is still a lack of consensus on the way citizens actively shape social policies in street-level interactions (Wright, 2012), especially when it comes to contexts where citizens have prolonged interactions with frontline workers. In other bodies of literature, citizen agency has been more pronounced (e. g., Hoggett, 2001; Le Grand, 1997; 2003; Lister, 2004). However, the specific focus of this literature implies certain limitations for its applicability to the street-level interactions of interest in this article. Without pretending to be exhaustive, a review of the literature of areas most closely related to the study of street-level bureaucracy reveals three contributions and three shortcomings.

First, social theory literature has contributed to understanding citizen agency in the form of agency models. For instance, Le Grand (1997; 2003) distinguishes passive ('pawns') from active agency ('queens') to analyze public service motivation. Hoggett (2001) proposes a model in which citizens can be seen either as objects or subjects, and act in a reflective or non-reflective way. Finally, Lister (2004) identifies four types of agency in welfare clients: 'getting by'

(informal coping), 'getting back at' (resistance), 'getting organized' (political action), and 'getting out' (education or work). However, these and other conceptualizations of citizen agency are often static and leave out the dynamic nature of agency. As Hoggett (2001) himself acknowledges, agency is neither unitary nor fixed. Instead, it is dynamic and malleable (Wright 2016, 240). Moreover, it is a relational phenomenon, both in social and temporal ways (Emirbayer, 1997). The crucial element of time in prolonged street-level interactions requires us to adopt a more dynamic understanding.

Second, empirical fieldwork has demonstrated how bureaucracies and SLBs impact citizens' lives, expectations, and attitudes. However, these studies highlight the citizen as a primarily passive actor, with little room to maneuver or influence a bureaucracy's machinery. For instance, ethnographic studies have studied in detail the way citizens experience street-level interactions, with a specific interest in vulnerable citizens: the poor (Gilliom, 2001), the homeless (Stuart, 2016), the addicts (Goffman, 2014), and the marginalized (Auyero, 2011). These studies are consistent with this article's focus on street-level interactions with power asymmetry between citizens and frontline workers. However, ethnographic studies have tended to stress the citizen's image as an object of intervention rather than as an active agent, whose participation is required for policy success. Citizens may express resistance to interventions (Gilliom, 2001) but are usually not active players in implementing a policy.

Elsewhere, the policy feedback literature shows how citizens' experiences with the government can cause negative "orientations toward the institutions and policies of government" (Mettler & Soss, 2004, p. 62; cf. Campbell, 2012; Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Watson, 2014). The same happens with service delivery interactions, which expose citizens to how government works (Bruch et al., 2010; Wichowsky & Moynihan, 2008) and teaches them lessons about (in)effectiveness, trustworthiness, corruption, flaws in the application of the rule of law, and the way citizens are treated (Soss, 1999; Mettler, 2002; Heinrich, 2018, 9). Moreover, the bureaucratic socialization literature shows how contact with bureaucracies makes citizens more competent to deal with bureaucratic organizations by learning relevant knowledge and information about bureaucratic functioning (Danet & Hartman, 1972; Danet & Gurevitch, 1972). Exemplary here is the literature on administrative burdens, which studies people's "experience of policy implementation as onerous" (Burden et al., 2012, p. 741), but where the analysis of dysfunctional organizational factors has been dominant (Moynihan et al., 2015;

Peeters, 2019b). Despite evidence that people with less human, social, and financial capital are 'administratively disadvantaged' (Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010, p. 828; Danet & Hartman, 1972), there is less attention on how people's resources, attitudes, and motivations influence their willingness and capacity to engage in bureaucratic encounters (Heinrich & Brill, 2015; Heinrich, 2018) and participate in social programs (Bhargava & Manoli, 2015; Barnes & Henly, 2018).

Third, studies that focus on more active forms of agency are rarely situated in service delivery domains or contexts with a significant power asymmetry between citizens and bureaucracy. Instead, active citizens are commonly empowered. For instance, the literature on coproduction challenges the idea of citizens as passive recipients of services (Osborne & Stokosch, 2013; Bryson & Crosby, 2014; Howlett et al., 2017), but in a different way than activation policies do. Moreover, most of the coproduction literature tends to be prescriptive, which is evident in how studies find coproduction as a virtue or value in itself (Voorberg et al., 2015). In activation policies, the bureaucracy includes citizens into their own policy schemes and maintains a strong power asymmetry towards them. In coproduction, citizens participate from their own motives, and the distinction between service providers and recipients is blurred (Bang, 2009; Bovaird, 2007; Meijer, 2016). Coproduction is also characterized by prolonged interactions between citizens and street-level bureaucrats, but the focus here is less on compliance and more on collaboration and public entrepreneurship (Aschhoff, 2018; Durose, 2011).

Something similar can be said about the literature on negotiated compliance (Gofen et al., 2019). Perhaps this is the area that comes closest to the argument made in this article. Building on the responsive regulation and compliance literature (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; May & Wood, 2003; May & Winter, 2011), the focus here is on the "*daily interactions* of the inspectors with the regulated" (May & Winter, 1999, p. 626; own emphasis). Rather than focusing on a regulator's enforcement style, the literature on cooperative regulation (Nielsen, 2005), motivational postures (Braithwaite, 2009), and negotiated compliance (Gofen et al., 2019) explicitly recognizes the agency of regulated organizations and citizens. For instance, in their study of noncompliance with routine childhood vaccination, Gofen & Needham (2015) highlight the importance of personalized, improvised, and negotiated compliance mechanisms at street-level. However, power asymmetry is a crucial characteristic of most frontline work

(Mik-Meyer, 2017). Notwithstanding, compliance literature usually deals with more powerful, resourceful, and less dependent citizens and organizations than public services and social programs' clients (Nielsen, 2015, p. 119).

Furthermore, most of the literature sees citizen agency through the eyes of frontline workers, uses static agency concepts, or focuses either on domains where citizens are passive objects of a disciplining bureaucracy or where citizens are empowered and able to challenge public organizations towards creative forms of implementation. Thereby, a large part of everyday frontline work is not captured. Education, reintegration, activation, and welfare work are examples of areas where citizens are key actors in the success of frontline work, where prolonged street-level interactions occur, and where there is an interdependency between vulnerable citizens and frontline workers. In the following, the importance of citizen agency is demonstrated through a study of a Mexican activation policy, where disadvantaged beneficiaries go through a learning curve and, in time, start to use their agency to deal with street-level discretion and strict compliance criteria.

3.2.2 One-Shot Versus Repeated Street-Level Interaction

Even though the distinction between one-shot and repeated interactions in public encounters was recognized since 1981 by Charles Goodsell, most studies have only focused on the effects of repeated interactions on regulation (Boyne et al., 2012; de Boer & Eshuis, 2018; Etienne, 2013; Pautz, 2009; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012). According to this stream of literature, repeated interactions between inspectors and inspectees produce closer relationships (de Boer & Eshuis, 2018), which can explain regulatory capture (Boyne et al., 2012; de Boer & Eshuis, 2018), trust (Etienne, 2013; Pautz, 2009; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012), and cooperation (Pautz, 2009; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012). However, despite this interest, most studies have focused on the outcomes of repeated interaction (e.g., capture, trust, cooperation) instead of on the repeated interaction itself. Therefore, it is unknown what that distinction between one-shot and repeated interaction implies for street-level interaction in general and citizen agency in particular.

Closer to the aim of this paper, recent studies that focus on how citizens acquire bureaucratic knowledge (Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021) that allows them to commit welfare fraud (Kim & Maroulis, 2018), and react to bureaucratic encounters (Nielsen et al.,

2021) and the burdens imposed by them (Masood & Nisar, 2021), also mentioned the relevance of repeated street-level interaction. In that regard, Masood and Nisar recognized that the medical doctors they studied "became proficient in understanding how bureaucratic processes work, how to navigate bureaucratic spaces, and [...] how to behave while dealing with frontline workers." because of their *repeated exposure to bureaucracy* (2021, p. 66, own emphasis). But what remains unexplored is the process through which repeated interactions between citizens and SLBs help citizens become administrative literate (Döring, 2021) and to cumulate administrative capital (Masood & Nisar, 2021) and, through this, activate their agency.

To establish the distinction between one-shot and repeated street-level interaction and its influence on citizen agency, I draw theoretical insights from two sources: Goffman's studies on interaction (1961; 1963; 1983) and organizational analysis (Ancona et al., 2001). Organizational activities follow different temporal patterns (Ancona et al., 2001); one of these patterns is repeated activity. When these activities include the presence of two or more individuals, they turn into what Goffman calls a social occasion —"a wider social affair, undertaking, or event, bounded in regard to place and time" (1963, 18)—. These repeated social occasions produce a structuring context, through which face engagements between individuals turn, with time, into acquaintanceship (Goffman, 1963), which is the basis for relationships. Moreover, this structuring context is what Goffman calls an interaction order (1983) that establishes expected roles and rules for the participants during the focus interaction (Goffman, 1963).

Repeated interaction differs from one-shot interaction in the sense that it produces social relationships. Moreover, repeated interactions socialize individuals to the expected roles and rules pertinent for a specific interaction order (Goffman, 1983). Therefore, this socialization process is the basis for that a particular order succeeds according to the specific interaction's rules. However, given the social nature of interactional order, this is not fixed but open to being determined by interaction participants. That means participants can negotiate roles and rules, even in the most rigid institutions like prisons or mental institutions (Goffman, 1961). Participants can also try to fool the other party regarding their image or role (Goffman, 1969). To the extent that human agency has a temporal dimension, meaning that an agent engages with past, present, and future to exert control on structure (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), repeated

street-level interactions become the basis for citizens to exert control on policy and interaction structure.

The latter discussion gives us insights into what to expect from the particular interactional order established during social policy street-level implementation. First, that both citizens and SLBs are subject to roles and rules specific to that interaction. Furthermore, the policies to be implemented define those roles and rules (e. g., Mik-Meyer, 2017). Second, repeated interactions socialize citizens into their expected role. Socialization provides citizens with information that reduces the uncertainty common to bureaucratic encounters (e. g., Raaphorst, 2018). Third, due to frequent contact and the information received, citizens and SLBs became acquaintances, strengthening their social relationships.

The consequences of this interactional order are ambiguous. On the one hand, knowing the behaviors and outcomes policy expects from them could result in citizen compliance and cooperative relationships with SLBs (e. g., Murray, 2006 and Rossi, 2016). On the other, the result could also be fraudulent or manipulative behaviors as citizens learn how to "act" according to policy to get what they want independent of policy goals (e. g., Tuckett, 2015 and Scheel, 2017). Another possible consequence is to alter one of the main features of bureaucracy, which is impersonality (Weber, 1978, pp. 987-989). Impersonality has been one of the reasons for criticism to the bureaucratization of social life because of its alienating and dehumanizing nature (McCabe, 2015; Merton, 1968). The development of social relationships between SLBs and citizens can subvert that dehumanization. But, at the same time, this could bring conflictive reactions from other citizens who can see personalization as a form of favoritism (Merton, 1968; Lispky, 2010).

3.3 Research Design and Methodology

3.3.1 The Case of Prospera

Conditional Cash Transfer programs (CCTs), adopted in more than 70 countries around the world (Parker & Todd, 2017), are an example of conditional welfare (Watts & Fitzpatrick, 2018). In exchange for financial benefits, the beneficiaries of these programs are obliged to send their children to school, have regular health checks, participate in vaccination schemes, and attend training sessions to generate better habits and human capital (Cookson, 2018). This way,

CCTs aim to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty. Even though most of the literature is focused on program design (Sandberg, 2015; Papadopoulos & Leyer, 2016) and targeting mechanisms (Fiszbein & Schady, 2009), scholars have also pointed out that beneficiaries' behavior is crucial for the achievement of the program objectives (Molyneux, 2006; Molyneux et al., 2016).

Mexico introduced its CCT in 1997 and went – at the time of research (early 2019) – by the name of Prospera. In return for a financial benefit, it introduces the following conditionalities for beneficiaries: 1) children must be enrolled in elementary school or high school as well as regularly attend classes, 2) beneficiaries must register at a health center and attend scheduled appointments twice a year accompanied by all family members included in the program, and 3) the head of the family must attend Community Workshops for Health Self-Care (*Talleres Comunitarios de Autocuidado de la Salud*) every two months. In addition, beneficiaries must attend bi-monthly sessions with program promoters. These meetings are called the 'Oportunidades Personalized Attention Desk' (MAPO), and their objective is to provide information about the program procedures and to process beneficiaries' complaints.

The monitoring of compliance with the program's conditionalities is carried out by the health centers' staff and the schools where the beneficiaries are registered. In schools, social workers are in charge of keeping daily records for the program. In clinics, the most frequent interaction happens with health promoters. These health promoters can be medical professionals or social workers in charge of beneficiaries' attendance registries for both the health check-ups and the workshops. The health promoters are also in charge of the training lessons in the workshops. Besides compliance issues, beneficiaries also have to deal with capacity problems. The limited capacity of the health centers often requires beneficiaries to attend health centers more than once for a single appointment because not all scheduled appointments can be handled on a single day.

Besides these formal street-level interactions, the program also seeks to contact beneficiaries through 'Community Promotion Committees'. In each locality or neighborhood, there is such a committee for every 200 beneficiary families. These committees are made up of five beneficiaries called *vocales* - which can be translated as 'spokesperson'. These spokespersons are selected from the communities to exercise the role of representatives to

coordinate the Prospera program. Their primary responsibility is to link the beneficiaries of their community and the authorities for the transmission of information about the program.

The Prospera case presents an excellent opportunity to study citizen agency in the context of repeated street-level interactions because 1) the interactions designed into the program are frequent and prolonged, 2) there is a clear power asymmetry between beneficiaries and street-level bureaucrats, and 3) there is a lot at stake for beneficiaries when demonstrating program compliance. These factors increase the likelihood of citizens actively expressing their agency in interaction with street-level bureaucrats.

3.3.2 Data and Methodology

The case of Mexico's conditional cash transfer program is analyzed to answer how repeated street-level interactions affect citizen agency and, consequently, *the implementation of an activation policy*. The research was carried out at urban and rural localities in Aguascalientes, a state in the center of Mexico whose socio-economic characteristics represent a non-extreme case of the variety present in the country. A total of 46 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with beneficiaries of the Prospera program.

The contact with the beneficiaries was established through secondary schools according to the following process. First, a list of the schools with the largest number of enrolled beneficiaries was created. Schools in rural towns were included in the list to cover geographical variation between beneficiaries since previous research indicates that this may affect compliance levels (Mir et al., 2008). The final list consisted of 15 secondary schools distributed in five municipalities in Aguascalientes. Field visits to these schools were made in the period March-May 2019. Second, interviewees were selected based on the schools' beneficiary registers according to the logic of range maximization (Weiss, 1994, pp. 22-24). Third, to study the impact of time and prolonged street-level interactions, mothers with different levels of 'seniority' were selected, covering a range from 1 to 17 years as program beneficiaries.

Each interview lasted between 30 and 70 minutes. A script with a list of topics was used to conduct the interviews. The interviews began by asking beneficiaries to trace their process and history as Prospera beneficiaries. This opening question led to a conversation about topics regarding their relationships with street-level bureaucrats in charge of the compliance

monitoring, mainly: 1) their experiences over time, 2) how often they interact with the same bureaucrats, 3) what kind of difficulties they experience with them, and 4) which mechanisms they use to try to influence the decisions regarding compliance with the conditionalities. Most of the interviews were recorded on audio, except for 4 because beneficiaries did not consent. Detailed field notes were made of all interviews, in which non-verbal communication was included, such as reactions, gestures, feelings of discomfort, and interruptions in the room where the interviews were carried out. During the interviews, privacy was secured to allow beneficiaries to speak freely.

All recorded interviews were transcribed for analysis. The data were analyzed using the grounded theory principles of constant comparison and open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Extracts from the interviews related to the use of agency by beneficiaries in their encounters with bureaucrats were coded and compared to each other in search of patterns. These patterns were subsequently grouped into categories. This way, two phases of street-level interactions were inductively identified that allow for the analysis of citizen agency as a dynamic phenomenon: 1) internalization of rules and 2) agency activation. Not all beneficiaries follow this entire path, and, therefore, they come to express their agency differently over time. Two aspects were found to be crucial for understanding this process: the way beneficiaries learn the formal and informal rules during the passing of time and the type of street-level bureaucrat with whom they interact. Although the product of an inductive research strategy, the phases identified are in line with other authors' findings concerning citizens bureaucratic knowledge acquisition (Döring, 2021; Gustafson, 2011; Masood & Nisar, 2021; Mik-Meyer & Haugaard, 2020; Weiss, 2016), their use of social networks (Lang, 2019; Lens, 2009), or their past experiences (Seefeldt, 2017; Stewart, 2015) as sources of agency.

3.4 Findings

In line with policy feedback (Metler & Soss, 2004) and bureaucratic socialization (Danet & Hartman, 1972; Danet & Gurevitch, 1972) literature, it is expected that repeated interaction between beneficiaries and SLBs produces citizen agency through a process in which citizens learn, gradually, the bureaucratic workings of Prospera and get used to it. Once this socialization has been in motion for a while, citizens develop their agency and are able to make decisions

regarding Prospera rules and their interaction with street-level bureaucrats. This section presents the two phases through which beneficiaries of Prospera developed their agency during street-level interaction.

3.4.1 Phase One: Internalizing Rules and the Routinization of Compliance

During the first year, beneficiaries become familiar with the health check-ups and workshops. Especially in the beginning, this can be a stressful experience given the number of compliance criteria:

"They gave me a set of documentation and then made an appointment for picking up [the bank] card. [The bank] also gave us instructions on how to use it. Two months later, I went to the MAPO, and the Prospera promoter explained everything to us. I didn't know anything. It was like this every two months [...] because I urgently needed the money for my children. I always marked the date for the MAPOS on the fridge, as well as the dates for the medical appointments". (Alejandra, 2 years in the program)

Over the next two to three years, beneficiaries internalize the formal workings of the program. This implies the organization of the times of appointments and the bureaucratic burdens that these include. Two factors are crucial for this process of routinization. First, beneficiaries learn from other beneficiaries – even though every individual's learning curve is personal:

"I found out about the program because it was around for some time, and the neighbors told me: 'go and sign up, it's good for your daughters, they give you money for your girls in school' [...]. In the beginning, it was difficult for me; I forgot appointments and had to write down the dates because there were a lot of dates. Something difficult for me was the fact that when my *comadre*, who lives across the street, attended the workshops at the health center, they worked differently than in mine". (Monica, 7 years in the program)

Beneficiaries get helpful information from other beneficiaries that they might not get from the program itself – a sign of the opacity and complexity of the program that beneficiaries must manage:

"I realized that my daughter was registered in elementary and not in secondary school because of comments from other beneficiaries who said: 'my daughter or my son is in secondary school and he or she gets one thousand pesos'. But I was receiving only seven hundred, so I thought: 'what about my daughter in high school?' and that's why I said, 'I'm going to ask'". (Jessica, 3 years in the program)

A second important factor for the routinization of compliance is the information provided by the Prospera staff, especially in MAPO's bimonthly meetings.

"I always wrote down the MAPO dates on the fridge, the dates of the workshops, so I did not forget [...]. I was very careful with everything because I needed the money, and that way I wouldn't forget any MAPO or any medical appointment or any workshop or document. Because that's the way I am, I feel pressured, [...] I have to follow the rule as it is, I have to comply, [...] I like to be careful [...]". (Fernanda, 1 year in the program).

Most of the beneficiaries state that it took them between six months and a year to fully understand the program. However, it can be said that beneficiaries took around two to three years to see the program operation as a routine. Peer support and information provided by street-level bureaucrats are key factors for Prospera's formal workings internalization. In terms of agency, the focus in this phase is on compliance or 'getting by' (Lister, 2004), and it is expressed in a mostly non-reflective (Hoggett, 2001) and passive way (Le Grand, 2003). However, after this initial phase, a distinction emerges between, on the one hand, beneficiaries that will continue to exercise a more passive and routine-based agency and, on the other hand, beneficiaries that start to follow a path of developing a more active agency.

3.4.2 Phase Two: Learning to See Compliance as a Game and Active Agency

The second phase is where the repeated and prolonged interactions with street-level bureaucrats take on significant relevance for the agency of a large group of beneficiaries. By now, a beneficiary already knows the routine and has been in the program long enough to start becoming aware of two things: the informal rules that shape the program's operation and closely related to this, the different types of street-level bureaucrats with whom they interact. The knowledge about these two elements is what allows them to exercise their agency more actively. This learning process begins with personal experiences about the difference between formal procedures and street-level practices:

"I take [my daughter] to the health clinic, but there is no point in this. They do not even check her as they are supposed to. They don't check anything, they just weigh and measure her, and that's it. That's something I can do at home and just tell them her weight and height". (Ruth, 14 years in the program)

"The first time we arrived, I said [to the health promoter], 'Listen, I have been here since 4:30'. She said: 'Here it does not matter if you arrive at 3:00 in the morning. What matters here are the sick people, and Prospera beneficiaries come last'. That is how I know that Prospera beneficiaries have their own turn, so we always leave home early". (Silvia, 7 years in the program)

Around the third year, many beneficiaries realize that there is a human and personal dimension to the whole process. Prospera does not only function because of or according to the formal rules they were taught, but also hinges upon personal relationships, particularly with the street-level bureaucrats, and upon the personal traits of these bureaucrats. Repeated interactions give beneficiaries information to identify types of street-level bureaucrats and identify the level of flexibility with which they can conduct themselves with respect to compliance rules. Most of the interviewed beneficiaries describe certain street-level bureaucrats as more or less 'available' – *'se prestan'* in Spanish, which literally means that the bureaucrat lends himself or herself for something.

"It [...] happened to me once that I couldn't go to the medical appointment because I wasn't... because I was sick. [...] I talked to the doctor: 'Doctor, I couldn't make it to the appointment, but I don't like my benefit to be cut because it's my children's money [...]. Do you think I can make another appointment?' He and the nurse talked to each other and then told me: 'Can you come back in two days?'. [...] You see, at least with me, they lend themselves all the time."

Interviewer: Do you know of others that didn't have the same luck as you?

"People often complain because they forget to go to the workshop [and then don't get the stamp]. That happens with other promoters. I mean, not in my group because the [health promoter] always lends himself, whereas others are more like: 'you didn't come, not my problem, wait until the next workshop in two months.'"

Interviewer: Do you think the result would have been different if you had talked to the doctor in a different way?

"I believe that in the way I speak and address them, they will address me. If, for example, I talk aggressively [...] they will maybe say to me 'Well that's not our problem, you already know how this works'. I mean, the way you ask is the way they answer to you". (Enriqueta, 6 years in the program).

When beneficiaries become aware of the personal nature of the implementation, they begin to use their agency to 'play the game' - either by negotiating with street-level bureaucrats or by using more subversive ways to gain leverage over them.

"There is a lot of cheating, for example, the spokesperson helps other mothers to enter the program. [They] are even told what to say [in the survey] to enter the program easily. [...] In the health center, it is more difficult to cheat [...]. It all depends if you can befriend the spokesperson and the health promoter". (Itzel, 3 years in the program).

"What I complain about is the convenient way [the health promoter] treats us. For example, two beneficiaries had a [food stall] where they sold *gorditas*. So, the promoter was very lenient with them because she [...] used to have lunch for free". (Elena, 1 year in the program)

"There are cases of beneficiaries who want to give something with the intention [to get a free pass]. Not all of them are treated the same way". (Diana, 7 years in the program)

As beneficiaries stay longer in the program, many of them start to express their agency more actively and reflectively (cf. Hoggett, 2001; Le Grand, 2003). Due to their prolonged exposure to the program, beneficiaries learn that what governs obligations and sanctions are not the formal, impersonal, and bureaucratic rules but the discretion of the officials with whom they interact on an almost daily basis. Moreover, they also learn that the rules and their compliance can be made more flexible and approached as a 'game' (see Goffman, 1969). Similar to what Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) state about street-level bureaucrats not talking about their work in terms of rules or laws, many long-time beneficiaries of the Prospera program also stop focusing on the formal rules that govern the program. Empirically, this 'game' is triggered when beneficiaries learn from their own experiences and other beneficiaries' behavior how to 1) identify the more lenient street-level bureaucrats and 2) negotiate or use gift relations to gain leverage over them. Disadvantaged as they may be, beneficiaries use their skills and the little resources they have to exercise their agency strategically.

3.5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how beneficiaries of a conditional cash transfers program develop their agency as a result of repeated interactions with the SLBs in charge of implementing the program. As a policy structure feature, time is one factor that determines the nature and dynamics of bureaucratic encounters. Specifically, my study shows that time, in the shape of repeated interactions, allows citizens to acquire relevant knowledge about how policies and street-level organizations function. By knowing the internal workings of policies, the beneficiaries from my case study overcame their role as outsiders from bureaucratic

organizations and knowledge, which allows them to act for their benefit. Furthermore, the results of this study imply that time is a highly relevant variable because it defines the rhythm, duration, frequency, and intensity of interactions between SLBs and citizens. Therefore, scholars will benefit from including time as a variable to more fully understand public encounters.

Despite being incidentally mentioned in the literature, many authors have obviated the distinction between one-shot and repeated interactions. Therefore, these authors take many of the arguments they make for granted regarding the consequences of repeated interactions. However, given the complex ways in which time structure bureaucratic encounters, the effects of repeated interactions are not as straightforward as the literature states.

For example, the results from this study are consistent with previous literature focused on how citizens acquire knowledge and information through repeated bureaucratic exposure that helps them navigate bureaucratic encounters (Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2021). However, they also contradict other arguments concerning the positive effect of repeated interactions on cooperative behaviors from citizens and trust in public authorities (Etienne, 2013; Pautz, 2009; Pautz & Wamsley, 2012).

The latter implies that the possible consequences of repeated interactions are several and heterogeneous. In my view, there are three effects of repeated interactions. Furthermore, the three effects can have either a positive or a negative impact on interaction or policy. It is particularly salient the contingent effect of repeated interactions on promoting either cooperative or opportunistic citizen behavior.

The first effect is the personalization of bureaucratic relations at the street-level. Ever since Lipsky's groundbreaking book (2010), one of the most frequent dilemmas faced by SLBs while doing their job is their clients' desire to be served in a personal way. In opposition to the Weberian ideal of bureaucracy, repeated interactions open a window to personalize bureaucratic encounters. On the one hand, personalization can improve how clients perceive SLBs and bureaucratic procedures (e.g., Ramírez, 2016; 2021). On the other, personalization can promote opportunistic behaviors, allowing citizens to leverage their position with the SLB in their favor. Therefore, it is far from evident that repeated interactions produce automatically cooperative behaviors because opportunistic actions are equally possible.

As a second effect, repeated interactions socialize citizens into their roles and policy rules. Likewise, socialization through repeated interactions can promote cooperative or opportunistic citizen behaviors. For example, citizens can completely understand how to behave according to policy goals by being socialized into what the policy expects from them. However, citizens can use that knowledge for gaming, particularly when this behavior aligns with SLBs interests.

The third effect of repeated interactions is uncertainty reduction. Uncertainty is one of the main features of one-shot bureaucratic encounters (Raaphorst, 2018). Moreover, uncertainty is at the heart of explanations about how SLBs interpret, make decisions, and use discretion while interacting with citizens (Raaphorst, 2018). Therefore, repeated interactions can transform street-level work completely. Furthermore, uncertainty reduction also affects citizen behavior by improving their capacity and ability to interpret and assess the SLBs' decisions directed towards them. This improvement will have significant consequences at least in three areas of policy implementation and bureaucratic encounters: first, the way citizens attribute responsibility for policy decisions (e.g., Barnes & Henly, 2018). Second is how citizens assess SLBs' competency (de Boer, 2020a; Hansen, 2021) or enforcement styles (de Boer, 2020b). And third, the reduction of learning costs attached to administrative burdens (Moynihan et al., 2015).

3.6 Conclusion

Two main conclusions can be drawn from the findings of this study on the impact of repeated interactions on citizen agency in Mexico's conditional cash transfer program. First, beneficiaries that remain in the program go through a learning curve – a form of agency as 'becoming' (Wright, 2016). Two phases were identified: a first phase in which beneficiaries learn to internalize the rules and procedures they need to comply with ('routinization of compliance'), and a second phase in which many beneficiaries move on to learn the informal rules of the game and how they can influence or manipulate the formal rules and procedures ('activation of agency'). Because of the multiple and prolonged street-level interactions, beneficiaries' agency can evolve from passive to active (Le Grand, 2003) and from non-reflexive to reflexive (cf. Hoggett, 2001, p. 48). Second, prolonged interactions between citizens and street-level

bureaucracy increase the chances of policy divergence (Gofen, 2014). The learning curve beneficiaries go through reduces compliance costs as they learn to internalize the rules (Masood & Nisar, 2021; Moynihan et al., 2015) and can also increase their resources – experience personal contacts – to influence compliance criteria and practices. In other words, their agency is not only reflexive but also performative. This can take on 'negotiated compliance' (Gofen et al., 2019) and more subversive ways of manipulating and gaming the system.

The case study serves as an example of a broader contribution: the importance of including the distinction between one-shot from repeated street-level interactions —as is the case in most forms of frontline work in the context of social policies— and its influence on citizen agency. Currently, there is a growing interest in the way SLBs deal with citizens (Djuve & Kavli, 2015; Gofen et al., 2019), but the way citizens express their agency and how that impacts street-level interactions is largely overlooked in studies of the 'discretionary chain' (Hupe et al., 2015, p. 16) of policy implementation. This evidence presented here demonstrates that citizen agency and what citizens learn about how policies and programs work (cf. Moynihan & Soss, 2014) can significantly impact the outcome of public policies and the nature of frontline work. Citizens engaged in repeated interactions, can master bureaucratic and administrative knowledge (Danet & Hartman, 1972; Danet & Gurevitch, 1972; Döring, 2021; Masood & Nisar, 2021), which enhances their chances to be successful in presenting persuasive appeals to frontline workers (Danet & Gurevitch, 1972; Nielsen et al., 2021) for getting preferential treatment (Masood & Nisar, 2021), negotiate compliance (Gofen et al., 2019) or to game the system (Peeters et al., 2020). Furthermore, repeated interactions put strategic knowledge about the SLB they are interacting with at the disposition of citizens, enhancing citizens' ability to make assessments about SLBs' competence (de Boer, 2020a) and attribute them responsibility for administrative failure (Barnes & Henly, 2018).

Future research on this topic should, first, focus on citizen agency in different domains and contexts. Given the limitations of a single case study, more research is needed to identify which elements are specific to the case of Mexico's Prospera program and which are not. For instance, the program's operations depended on SLBs not formally employed by the program itself (such as social workers at schools and health promoters at local health centers), which may impact the level of their discretion and the specific way in which they use it. Second, future studies should include direct observations of citizen agency. In the case study presented here,

findings were based on recollections of behavior by interviewees. Direct observations might also help understand why some citizens are more willing or capable than others in actively expressing their agency. Third and finally, future research should highlight the interactions between citizens and bureaucrats, rather than only focus on citizen agency or the agency of street-level bureaucrats. The findings presented here indicate that beneficiaries display specific behavior with the street-level bureaucrats they believe to be more flexible. This implies that agency should be understood as reflexive and performative and as a relational concept rather than an individual's possession (Burkitt, 2016). Even though policy implementation is an interactive process (Hill, 2003), very few studies have focused on the relational dimension of street-level bureaucracy (Lotta, 2020; cf. Siciliano, 2015; Nisar & Maroulis, 2017) and even less on citizen-bureaucrat relations (Siciliano, 2017). It is, however, in these relations and interactions that negotiations and divergence are shaped.

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4. General Conclusion

Citizens worldwide are constantly interacting with public officials to receive public services, welfare benefits, or even sanctions. These public officials are often street-level bureaucrats (SLBs), characterized by being at the frontline of policy implementation and public service delivery and having high discretionary power to make decisions (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). Street-level interactions are highly relevant in citizens' lives for three reasons (see Lipsky, 2010): first, these interactions are sometimes the only way citizens relate with the State. Second, since SLBs are gatekeepers for many public benefits, citizens, especially disadvantaged ones, depend on these interactions. And third, sometimes street-level interactions encompass a great deal of citizens' daily routines.

Given the relevance street-level interactions and particularly the SLBs have for citizens, it is logical to expect they will not remain indifferent. In that sense, citizens can react during street-level interactions (Hasenfeld, 2010). Citizens' ability to act is not problematic in itself. However, their actions can have effects not only on the interaction but also on policy implementation. Notwithstanding the relevance of citizens' actions for the outcomes of policy implementation, literature has only recently starting to pay attention to the citizen side of street-level interactions. What remains underdeveloped is a theoretical framework that captures citizens' actions during street-level implementation, its sources, and effects. Hence, my main research question was *How can citizen agency during street-level implementation and public service delivery be conceptualized, how does policy structure enable it, and what are its effects?*

4.1 Citizen Agency, and the Mechanisms that Enables It.

The chapters of this thesis followed a line of discussion centered around the concept of citizen agency. Each of these chapters focuses on a specific part of the phenomena going from a broad theoretical and conceptual perspective (chapter 1) to the more specific theme of repeated interactions (chapter 3) as a source of citizen agency. Thus, the first chapter provided a big picture concerning the theoretical study of citizen agency. By reviewing the literature and defining what citizen agency constitutes, this study established a framework that is the basis for subsequent chapters.

Even though Public Administration has not focused on studying the citizen side of citizen-state interactions (Jakobsen et al., 2019), there have been efforts in the literature to explain the role of citizens and the actions they take during policy implementation and public service delivery. However, one of the main characteristics of these efforts is their heterogeneous and disorderly nature. One indicator of this messy feature is no conceptual consensus on how to name citizens' actions and behaviors during street-level policy implementation. Instead, we can see many concepts in the literature that only refer to specific actions without sufficient abstraction to capture different empirical manifestations.

Recent efforts have tried to offer order into this messy literature (e.g., Nielsen et al., 2021). However, this effort has many limitations, particularly their lack of conceptual abstraction. Therefore, the systematic literature review conducted in this thesis contributes to having a conceptual framework to study citizens' actions and behaviors during street-level policy implementation and public service delivery. Furthermore, it defines the concept of citizen agency as an umbrella concept that captures different empirical manifestations present in the literature. In that sense, this thesis contributes to having a concept with construct clarity (Suddaby, 2010). According to Roy Suddaby, construct clarity allows having a common language through which to build knowledge, facilitate empirical analysis, and produce new theoretical insights creatively (Suddaby, 2010).

As a consequence of not having a single clear concept to capture the same phenomena, many authors have put a lot of effort into describing particular instances of citizen agency. While there is great value in this because it allowed me to have a lot of variety to construct the concept of citizen agency, it also prevented the advance of knowledge into different dimensions of citizen agency. For example, how citizen agency originates and what its effects are. In that sense, using the framework proposed in the first chapter, the second chapter was an explicit effort to explore how *policy sources* enable citizen agency.

Although other authors within PA had proposed frameworks to understand personal sources of citizen agency (e.g., Masood & Nisar, 2021; Döring, 2021), little was known about how the policy structure could promote or give rise to citizen agency. Making a distinction between policy, personal and social sources of citizen agency helped me understand that different contexts have different consequences for agency formation. Notably, it helps to understand that it is not only the individual and personal resources and schemes that contribute to developing

agency, but the policy itself has a role in promoting citizen agency. Knowing this will have practical implications, particularly relevant for policy designers who want to change or encourage specific policy target behaviors. In my view, to the extent that there is a great variety of types and sources of citizen agency, one could argue that just like it is impossible to eliminate SLBs' discretion (Lipsky, 2010), it would be challenging to try to eliminate citizen agency.

One of the more eluded policy sources among scholars has been the repeated interactions between SLBs and citizens. So far, we only know taken for granted arguments regarding the distinction between one-shot and repeated street-level interactions. The third chapter of this thesis has contributed to making explicit a distinction between one-shot and repeated interactions and understanding how they help citizens develop their agency. Perhaps, this is one of the most relevant contributions to the literature on street-level work because of its consequences regarding uncertainty reduction and citizen learning. Now, we know that policy designs that promote the existence of repeated interactions will establish a context in which citizens will develop a highly contingent agency.

Here there is an opportunity for a research agenda focused on knowing when in under what circumstances, repeated interactions will produce dissonance or consonance citizen agency. Another subject that we need to understand more is the temporal structure of bureaucratic encounters. By arguing that time defines the nature, frequency, and rhythm of bureaucratic encounters (see chapter 3), it is logical to think more than one pattern or time dimension is at play. Thus, we need to push forward a research agenda based on the intersection of time and interaction.

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