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# Street-level bureaucrats as policymakers in the implementation of information system in social services

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the policymaking agency of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) through public service ecosystem (PSE) framework. The study addresses the SLBs' role in policy implementation and the conditions influencing the SLBs' policymaking agency at individual, organizational and institutional spheres. Empirically, the focus is on the SLBs' experiences of an information system's (IS) implementation in social services. Findings suggest that the SLBs can utilize their policymaking agency at the individual sphere. However, the structural conditions at the organizational and institutional spheres limit the SLBs' policymaking agency and the intended outcomes of the policy implementation.

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## Introduction

Studies connecting street-level bureaucracy and information and communication technology (ICT) suggest that ICT does not have negative or positive consequences for street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) *per se*, but the consequences are dependent on context and implementation (Buffat 2015). Following this notion, this article addresses how SLBs implement ICT to their work practices in a meaningful and effective way, and how the implementation process is carried out within a certain context (Buffat 2015; Høybye-Mortensen 2019; Kuoppakangas et al. 2023).

As suggested by Lipsky (1980), SLBs' actions and decisions are crucial for and tend to bias the policy implementation. Likewise, Nothdurfter and Hermans (2018) underline the SLBs' political role. They state that '[s]ocial policies do not work automatically; their internal ambiguities permit and require considerable discretion for their implementation and street-level delivery' (Nothdurfter and Hermans 2018, 8). The SLBs, then, have considerable policymaking agency due to the discretion they exercise to concretize public policies in their everyday work (Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Evans and Hupe 2020; Rice 2013). This study contributes to the street-level

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bureaucracy literature specifically by focusing on the SLBs' policymaking agency in the implementation process of an information system (IS) software in the context of social services.

In social services, at the crucial policy cycle phase of an implementation, the policies aimed at improving human wellbeing are brought into practice by SLBs (Virtanen, Laitinen, and Stenvall 2018). As noted by Zhang et al. (2022), the need for discretion especially in social services' context derives from the conditions of public service delivery: often, the SLBs need to cope with scarce resources, increasing demand for services and number of clients in need for services, conflicting demands and expectations of multiple stakeholders, performance that is difficult to measure, and non-voluntary clients. In addition, as Eriksson and Andersson (2023) point out, information technology can be seen as one contextual factor influencing street-level discretion.

The professionals in social services are also highly committed to a service orientation, and discretion allows the SLBs to deliver services and make decisions based on their clients' needs (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Zhang et al. 2022). Indeed, the dynamics of the implementation process are complex, and the success and failure of the implemented policies are dependent on the context, nature of the implemented policy, the organizational and institutional settings as well as the SLBs responsible for the policy implementation (Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Dean 2006; Eriksson and Andersson 2023; Lipsky 1980; Pressman and Wildavsky 1984).

Previous literature addressing SLBs as policymakers suggests that policymaking agency should be studied to increase understanding of the individual SLBs' role in policy implementation (Baviskar and Winter 2017). Moreover, we suggest that the decisions and actions the SLBs undertake while turning policies into practice are underlined by their individual institutional arrangements, such as values, beliefs, aims, assumptions, attitudes, and practices. These institutional arrangements, in turn, affect discretion (Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). In addition, Lipsky (1980) focuses on exploring the structural conditions shaping the SLBs' actions and decisions in the implementation process, and as Eriksson and Andersson (2023) noted, more empirical research is needed to understand which conditions influence the agency of the SLBs.

We propose that it is crucial to address the SLBs' experiences about the implementation process to better understand the policymaking agency of SLBs and the conditions enabling and constraining the utilization of the policymaking agency. To meet this aim, we employ a framework of public service ecosystem (PSE) (e.g. Kinder et al. 2022; Osborne et al. 2022; Trischler et al. 2023). For analytical purposes, policymaking agency as well as the conditions impacting the policymaking agency are addressed at individual (micro level), organizational (meso level), and institutional (macro level) spheres of the PSE. The request for PSE theory-building, as well as its utilization as an analytical framework has recently sparked interest in public management and public service scholars (Osborne et al. 2022; Petrescu 2019; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021; Skälén, Engen, and Jenhaug 2024; Trischler et al. 2023). To our knowledge, street-level bureaucrats' policymaking agenda has not been linked to the public service ecosystems, underlining the pioneering nature of our approach to combine the SLB literature with the analytical framework of PSE. The implementation process of an information system provides an exceptional context to analyse the issue.

Against these backdrops we ask, *what kind of conditions does the public service ecosystem framework reveal about the policymaking agency of street-level bureaucrats?*

Empirically, we focus on the experiences of social service frontline workers in the implementation process of a client information system (IS), called *Apotti*, a large-scale, technology-driven development initiative in the Helsinki-Uusimaa region in Southern Finland. The contribution of this article highlights that the SLBs can extensively utilize their policymaking agency at the individual sphere of the PSE during the implementation, yet the conditions at the organizational and institutional spheres of the PSE limit the policymaking agency both during and after the implementation process.

### **Street-level bureaucrats as policymakers in public service ecosystems**

Michael Lipsky's (1980) classic study of street-level bureaucracy focused on frontline work in public organizations. Defining SLBs as 'the people who make decisions about other people' (Lipsky 1980, 161), Lipsky drew attention to the discretion power of frontline workers. Indeed, frontline workers are seen as active protagonists in policy implementation (Chang and Brewer 2023; Hupe and Buffat 2014; May and Winter 2007; Meyers and Vorsanger 2003). While SLBs working in social services, police forces, schools or hospitals are often at the lowest hierarchical level of the organization, they do have considerable policymaking agency due to the possibility to exercise wide discretion (Eriksson and Andersson 2023; Evans and Harris 2004; Evans and Hupe 2020; Lipsky 1980).

In everyday work and interactions with citizens, SLBs implement the public policies into concrete actions (Brodkin 2012; Gershgoren and Cohen 2023; Tirronen, Kinder, and Stenvall 2020). In this study, we focus on the SLBs' policymaking agency in the implementation process of an information system in social services' context. Our focus is not on the negative or positive consequences of the information technology for SLBs' work as such. There are conflicting views on such consequences: some researchers assume that technology has negative effects on SLBs, which often relate to decreasing levels of discretion. However, according to de Boer and Raaphorst's (2023) study, empirical evidence does not support the assumption that automated information systems curtail SLBs discretion. Although the nature of implemented technology surely has an impact on SLBs' and the policy implementation's success and failure, the context and special conditions of the implementation process more accurately define the impact on SLB work (e.g. Buffat 2015, 158).

### **Policymaking agency through the analytical framework of public service ecosystem**

Lipsky's (1980) pioneering work about SLBs focuses on understanding the structural conditions shaping the SLBs actions and role in implementation. In addition, Baviskar and Winter (2017) call for an understanding of the individual conditions such as attitudes of the SLBs to be considered to better understand the crucial policymaking role of the SLBs. In this study, we utilize public service ecosystem (PSE) as an analytical framework to address both individual as well as structural conditions shaping the policymaking agency of SLBs. As adequately noted by Trischler et al. (2023), the purpose of PSE framework is not to suggest that the studied phenomenon should be assigned to a single level but instead 'to stress that a phenomenon studied at one level can only be adequately understood by accounting for the influence of other levels as well' (Trischler et al. 2023, 19).

Then, the analytical PSE framework allows us, first, to ‘zoom in’ to the individual sphere with a focus on experiences and institutional arrangements of the SLBs’. Second, we can ‘zoom out’ to the organizational and institutional spheres to explore what the individual experiences and conditions reveal about the structural conditions shaping the SLBs policymaking agency. As highlighted by Trischler et al. (2023), the PSE multilevel analytical framework allows us to reveal those structural aspects that could not be reached from a dyadic or micro-level perspective. In this article, the PSE framework maintains a bottom-up perspective (e.g. Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). With a focus on the micro level experiences of the SLBs, the framework allows to explore the meso and macro level conditions hindering and enabling the SLBs’ policymaking agency, thus contributing to a holistic understanding of the studied phenomenon.

### ***SLBs and policy implementation: micro level view***

Gaining understanding of the SLBs’ policymaking role, street-level bureaucracy literature has often focused on exploring the structural determinants shaping the SLBs’ discretion. However, as for example, Baviskar and Winter (2017) and Winter et al. (2022) suggest, SLBs’ own evaluations of the implemented policies and their individual factors, such as attitudes, aims, assumptions, beliefs, values, and practices have an important impact on their behaviours and decisions, highlighting the importance of individual SLB’s policymaking agency.

Another stream of literature that addresses the policymaking agency of the SLBs at the micro level is street-level policy entrepreneurship (e.g. Arnold 2015; Cohen 2021; Edri-Peer et al. 2023). In their systematic literature review, Edri-Peer et al. (2023) recognized different street-level policy entrepreneurs’ characteristics, motivations, and traits. In addition, consistency over time, learning from others and seeking legitimacy were identified as unique strategies for street-level policy entrepreneurship.

As policy entrepreneurs SLBs employ specific characteristics: their space for utilizing discretion as well as access to information can be limited due to their (relatively lower) position in the organizational hierarchy; they need to deal with competing, often contradictory or even conflicting demands, sometimes with scarce resources and time; and they are often not included in the formulation of policies. However, because SLBs are at the frontline, they know what their clients need, their professional training helps them to identify policy gaps and find solutions, and because they are working closely with the citizens, it is possible for SLBs to suggest solutions and find ways through the contradictory or even conflicting demands saturating in their everyday work (Edri-Peer et al. 2023.).

Thus, in the individual sphere, as Arnold (2015) summarizes, SLBs hold power because they have the possibility to make decisions and follow practices based on their individual institutional arrangements that help them cope with their everyday work. Yet, SLBs are also ‘helpless’ in a sense that they need to take into consideration the competing and even conflicting demands and accumulate these with the needs of their clients with often limited time and resources (Arnold 2015; Edri-Peer et al. 2023). To overcome the challenges faced in public service delivery in the context of social services, learning from practice and from others is needed (Edri-Peer et al. 2023; Tirronen, Kinder, and Stenvall 2020; Zhang et al. 2022). In addition, previous research suggests that discretion is not an isolated act but rather

the SLBs are group actors. This approach illustrates that discretion exercised by an individual SLB both requires and benefits from peer support given by their colleagues (Arnold 2015; Zhang et al. 2022).

### ***SLBs and policy implementation: meso and macro level views***

Moving from the micro level to include the structural organizational and institutional conditions at the meso and macro levels, Rice (2013) illustrates different layers influencing the policy implementation processes. These include the professional identity and ideas on the worthiness of clients (of which can be associated to the micro level), organizational characteristics (meso level), and wider political, economic, cultural and social developments and institutions (macro level) that frame and/or restrict actions and decisions that are relevant, appropriate or permitted in certain situations.

As Carson, Chung, and Evans (2015) state, frontline discretion is indeed a complex phenomenon encompassing also interorganizational rules, policies, and governance frameworks at meso and macro levels of the PSE. As an example of governance frameworks, SLBs often need to balance, for example, with expectations and demands such as public values and relationship-building, closely associated with the New Public Governance (NPG) paradigm, with New Public Management (NPM) paradigm's tools such as measurements and control (Eriksson and Andersson 2023) when utilizing their policymaking agency. Importantly, SLBs do not merely respond to implemented policies but, rather, create their own practices that may differ from the ones policymakers and managers intended (Eriksson and Andersson 2023). Thus, managerial influences and institutional structures can, for example, enhance learning as illustrated by Zhang et al. (2022) and affect policymaking agency of the SLBs at meso and macro levels.

### **Context of the study**

This study focuses on the implementation of a social and healthcare information system commissioned by the Hospital District of Helsinki (HUS) and the municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, Finland (Helsinki-Uusimaa region) in 2016. The IS implementation took place between 2018 and 2022. One crucial promise of the IS was that it would enhance the integration of social and healthcare services by creating an electronic client and patient record system integrating social care and healthcare data into 'a single, unified record' (Apotti, n.d.). The implemented IS was developed by the Epic Systems Corporation.

Denmark and Norway also have Epic Systems healthcare software and thus have their own Epic versions. The Danish version was ratified in late 2013, and the implementation took place in hospitals in two regions between 2016 and 2017 (e.g. Hertzum, Ellingsen, and Cajander 2022). Norway's version of the Epic software, 'Helseplattformen' was introduced in Trondheim in Central Norway in 2022. However, Norwegian healthcare stakeholders have strongly resisted the IS (e.g. Ellingsen et al. 2022). Importantly, unlike in Denmark and Norway, the Finnish version of the Epic software, Apotti, was not restricted to hospitals, but also included both primary healthcare and social care. As part of the Helsinki-Uusimaa region, the city of Vantaa implemented an Epic based software to aid its social services in 2019.

## Data and methods

The interview data of this study was collected through narrative interviews in 2021, approximately 18 months after the implementation of Apotti started. Working in the city of Vantaa's social services, the informants' everyday work concerned delivering social services and preventative support for families with children, although the Child Protection Services Unit's frontline workers did not participate to this study due to research licence matters. Almost all informants were social workers in Units of Family Services, Youth Services and Child After-care Services. It should be emphasized that the implementation was still in progress at the time of the data collection. However, the informants had already experienced what the new IS meant for their work and were able to provide sufficient knowledge about the phenomena under study. This kind of experience was also a selection criterion for the informant.

Purposive sampling was used to select informants who had experienced the IS implementation (Oliver and Jupp 2006). The quality of the data was ensured by selecting informants (1) who were at the time of the interviews working at the social services aimed at families with children at the city of Vantaa, (2) who had experienced the implementation phase and (3) were therefore able to narrate their experiences. Due to these selection criteria, and the notion that staff turnover in the social services sector can sometimes be quite high, the target group remained rather limited. Instead of generalizability, the data is aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the frontline workers' experiences about the implementation process.

In this study, the empirical data and its analysis derive from the hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition of studying experiences, where behaviour, actions and events are not merely recorded. This way the analysis provides a 'thick description' about the informants' experiences: their feelings, actions, intentions, and meanings behind the observable events within a specific context (Ponterotto 2006; Rossi 2021). Narrative interviews, where the informants make sense of their experiences about the implementation of the client IS, are particularly useful as they allow the researchers the opportunity to explore beyond the implementation process as such. In addition, in narrative interviews the hidden aspects, emotions and thoughts underlying the meanings felt and the lived experiences that ordinary discourse sometimes fails to engage with can be addressed (Allen 2017; Charmaz 2006; Ponterotto 2006).

In practice, the aim of the narrative interviews is to give voice, time, and opportunity for the informants to express their experiences of the studied phenomenon and reflect on them, connecting the past, present, and future at the point of telling (Hyvärinen 2016; Rossi 2021). To achieve this aim, the interviewer – one of the authors of this article – asked open-ended questions to guide the informants to reflect on and make sense of their implementation process experiences during the interviews. The informants, then, provided examples of real-life situations and how they thought, felt, reacted to, and reflected on the implementation process of the IS (Charmaz 2006; Hyvärinen 2016). Data consists of ten narrative interviews which lasted approximately 65 minutes each, varying between 47–89 minutes. All interviews were fully transcribed, and the transcriptions comprised 94 pages of text.

The quality of the data analysis is ensured by selecting appropriate methods for analysis, being transparent with the analysis process and by closely following the procedures of the selected analysis method. Next, the analysis method and analysis process are described in-depth. To ensure transparency of the process,

**Table 1.** Example of third- and second-level categories.

Second-level category	Third-level categories
Choosing to use the IS for the benefit of the clients	<p>All the recordings made in the IS should be for the client</p> <p>Those features of the IS were used that affected work practices for the benefit of the clients</p> <p>Structured form for recording is beneficial for reportage but not suitable for the individual needs and situations of the clients</p> <p>Using the free text function allows the voice, situations and needs of the clients to be heard</p> <p>Using the IS can encourage clients to participate</p> <p>Clients can participate in the service through the IS, which increases openness to social care work</p> <p>Clients can send messages to the frontline workers through the IS and see all the recordings and decisions concerning themselves.</p> <p>Frontline workers must be aware of the visibility and security issues of the data when making recordings</p> <p>Frontline workers need to be sensitive and respectful towards their clients when making recordings</p> <p>Sometimes, frontline workers had to choose a different way of using the IS over the benefit of the client because of time restrictions</p> <p>Individualized recordings are important for the clients, but they are time consuming and often incompatible with colleagues' data demands</p>

the findings section includes illustrative extracts from the data. To analyse the interview data, a phenomenon-driven interpretive analysis method was utilized, and the analysis method was aimed to increase understanding of the SLBs' experiences. Accordingly, a five-step coding scheme was utilized to systematically describe the meaning of the qualitative data (Gläser and Lauder 2013; Rossi 2021):

- (1) In the first data-driven step of the analysis process, the relevant and meaningful passages from the transcribed data are marked to capture the meaning of the told experiences.
- (2) These meaningful passages are paraphrased in the second step, staying close to the original expressions of the informants in to ensure data-driven analysis.
- (3) In the third step, the third-level categories are formed by summarizing similar paraphrases. This step can also be regarded as clustering the meanings of the relevant paraphrases. Maintaining the informants' original experiences without interpretation is crucial during the analysis process.
- (4) In the fourth step, the second-level categories are generated by clustering the third-level categories based on their similarities. In this step, theoretically informed concepts can be utilized to interpret and understand the lived experience.
- (5) The fifth and final step is structuring the recently formulated second-level categories under the first-level categories. Instead of testing theories, this final step focuses on understanding the experiences related to the phenomena under study and then exploring what may be helpful to further develop the theoretical and analytical framework.

In the analysis process described above, 148 third-level categories, 22 second-level categories, and four first-level categories were generated. Table 1 provides an example



**Table 2.** First and second-level categories.

First-level categories	Second-level categories
Maintaining institutional arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Familiarizing oneself with the new IS to reduce uncertainty</li> <li>Learning the functions of system which is implemented at the training sessions</li> <li>The trainings did not serve the implementation in practice</li> <li>Comparison of the operational logics caused uncertainty and frustration</li> <li>Different operational logics created a need to unlearn old and to learn new practices</li> <li>Terminology of the old IS guided the practices of everyday work</li> <li>Negative atmosphere affected the implementation process and frontline workers' expectations towards the new IS</li> <li>Uncertainty towards new IS and about own skills affect the attitudes</li> <li>Own positive attitude towards new technology and learning</li> </ul>
Making individualized choices during everyday work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of support from the managers on how to use the IS in practice</li> <li>Learning the features and logic of new IS requires time</li> <li>Support from colleagues was crucial</li> <li>Choosing the features used lead to individualized practices</li> <li>Developing shared practices and mutual ways of using the IS are needed</li> </ul>
Foregrounding the client-centred work practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The characteristics of social services impacted on how to use the IS in practice</li> <li>In everyday work the focus is on engaging with the clients, not in using the IS</li> <li>Choosing to use the IS and its features for the benefit of the clients</li> </ul>
Meeting the technical, structural and legal limitations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>IS helps to govern the workload</li> <li>Too complicated IS</li> <li>Terminology of the IS should derive from social services</li> <li>Operational logic of the IS and access to information is dependent on the organizational structures and work roles</li> <li>Data Protection Act limits the use of IS in practice</li> </ul>

of the formation of third- and second-level categories, and [Table 2](#) summarizes the first- and second-level categories.

Next, to address the research question of this study, *what kind of conditions the public service ecosystem framework reveals about the policymaking agency of street-level bureaucrats*, the analysis focuses on the experiences of frontline workers in the implementation process of a client information system. The analysis is clustered around four first-level categories: (1) maintaining institutional arrangements; (2) making individualized choices during everyday work; (3) foregrounding client-centred work practices; (4) meeting technical, structural, and legal limitations. After the findings section, we proceed to analyse what these experiences reveal about the policymaking agency of the SLBs through the analytical framework of PSE.

## Results

### **Maintaining institutional arrangements**

Months before the implementation of the IS in the Spring 2019, training sessions were held. The version of the IS used at the training sessions was not complete, causing frustration and a lack of trust in the IS. Overall, the frontline workers' experience was that the training sessions were too abstract, and it was difficult for them to understand how they would be using the new IS in practice during their everyday work. The interval between training and implementation was marked by

uncertainty and anxiety concerning the new IS on the part of the frontline workers. When implementation finally occurred, the renewed IS seemed complex, and the frontline workers had already forgotten what they had learned in training. The frontline workers stated they lacked motivation to learn the intricacies of the IS during the training sessions.

Just because we were the first group [who implemented the new IS in social services] and none of us knew. That was not what the second and third groups had; they already knew that someone had used it and that they had survived, and that group would also survive. . . We didn't know what to expect. . . although we had used the test system during training, but then, it was just not the same as using the actual system (H2).

Accordingly, there was uncertainty about how the new IS would change the work and the current practices. Frontline workers were uncertain about their learning capabilities and fearful of making mistakes. A lack of courage and skills thus cemented negative attitudes to the implementation. The frontline workers' impression was that a successful implementation of the new IS required both technical skills and a positive attitude to the new technology. The successful implementation of the system relied heavily on the individual's capabilities, attitude, and willingness to learn to use the new IS and technology in general:

And somehow, this colleague said that it [the implementation] is not a big deal for her, it's like starting a new job where you have a new system that you need to learn, it was not that big of a deal (H3).

Overall, attitudes to the new IS and its implementation and the frontline workers' ability to learn were more positive after they had experienced successful implementation processes or learnt to use different information systems. The frontline workers also wondered whether new recruits had an advantage in learning to use the new IS because they had no experience with the previous IS and, therefore, had no need to unlearn old practices, that is, to disrupt institutional arrangements.

A: I think that it might just be that. . . when you have used a certain system for tens of years, it is then difficult to give up, like I said that it [the old IS] affected even the language they used and the ways one made sense of their work. And this relates to the old IS.

Q: It [the implementation] might have been more difficult for those who have unlearned the old. . . ?

A: Yes. Versus me, who came in as [a new hire] and took over the new IS. (H7)

The overall impression was that the previously used IS did not shape work practices and was far simpler and easier to use because workers knew how to navigate the system: 'our old system was, like, really old [laughs] and really simple. You couldn't do anything with it' (H5). Nevertheless, abandoning previously learnt practices was difficult for the frontline workers because they did not know how to operate with the new, more up-to-date, and nuanced IS.

Curiosity, courage, and the ability to learn new ways of working and unlearn old ones were necessary mostly because the frontline workers felt that the new IS was profoundly different than the previous one. Importantly, the frontline workers felt that they had not had an opportunity to influence the IS, which made it difficult to accept. During the implementation phase, the frontline workers were focused on questioning the functions of IS:

I noticed that people are extremely cautious with Apotti, there are all kinds of arrows and stuff, yet people are afraid to open or click on them, people are super cautious about utilizing all that you could do with it (the IS) (H5).

Although the frontline workers had to cope with the new IS, they used terminology derived from the previously used IS, whether that use was conscious or unconscious, in everyday discussions. Evidently, accepting and adopting the software as part of the work practices takes time. By the time of the interviews the new IS had been in use for approximately one and a half years, the frontline workers had noticed changes in attitudes: 'I think that people only noticed Apotti's positive aspects after using it for some time, when I was in the middle of the chaos in the beginning, the talk was negative, and people got stuck to the negativity' (H1). As the workers incrementally learnt to use the new IS in practice, attitudes improved, and the IS became a common tool supporting routine work.

### ***Making individualized choices during everyday work***

The frontline workers talked little about their managers' role in the implementation of the IS. When they did talk about the managers, their role was seen as minimal:

And it was just bypassed [by the managers] like, 'Don't use it then, as long as you do something'. Or that you don't need to use it. Or just try. . . this was the conversation. And of course, if you give your employees the option of doing something difficult if they want to, they obviously won't do that and will take the easier way. Perhaps in some units, the managers have stated more clearly that this is how we do things, everyone does this, and there are no other options. And when people start doing it, that is when you learn, and it becomes a routine (H5).

Importantly, the frontline workers did not appreciate the IS's potential for statistical and reporting purposes, and they felt that it was the managers' responsibility to ensure that these requirements were sufficiently met. Managerial support and vision for the practical implementation of the new IS were simultaneously lacking *and* required.

The frontline workers needed sufficient time and motivation to use the IS in a manner that ensured the continuation of work practices. The learning process was time consuming and sometimes hindered everyday work. When the frontline workers had no time to concentrate on using the new IS, or when the IS's features seemed too complicated and untrustworthy, they simply bypassed the IS and continued their practices as usual. These time restrictions limited the use of the IS to only the features necessary for everyday work practices.

I have to say that the more work I have and the busier and more clients I get, the less I will. . . Like then you just use the IS the way you have learnt to use it, and you think that . . . well, this is the way I have done things so far, I will just try to learn the new things later (H1).

As everyday work continued, those features that seemed most suited for practices were adopted, and others that seemed too complicated or difficult were omitted. The frontline workers also blamed their busy schedule, explaining that they did not even have time to check the IS's instructions, and when they did, the instructions were interpreted from the individual's perspective, only strengthening the individualized ways of using the IS: 'I think that during the everyday work, people just don't remember or have time to check the instructions, and they will just do something [laughs]'. (H8)

When they encountered problems with the IS or did not know how to use the system, the frontline workers turned to their colleagues for support and advice.

But then, after the first few weeks, when people more actively returned to do their own work, travelling and stuff, we were quickly in a situation where we did not necessarily meet our colleagues so often. And after that, it was like you first tried to figure it out on your own and then tried to seek help... And always someone helps and ponders things with you. But when you do not have that colleague nearby, you try to figure it out by yourself... Or at least I think we have all started to enact many things in our own way (H2).

However, the frontline workers often did not have either the time or the option to appeal for help from their colleagues, and therefore they made choices of how to use the IS individually. To some extent, the individualized way of using the IS was caused by the IS itself, which enables the same procedures to be conducted in different ways. Ultimately, when the co-workers had already learned the different ways of using the IS, confusion emerged:

Perhaps there was this uncertainty because we did not have any shared practices or understanding of how to do things [use the new IS] within the city or within the units, like how we will do the recordings or how, if we meet our clients, how we will record the meeting to the system... Previously, it was just that people did whatever they wanted to do [laughs]; everyone just did things how they knew. And perhaps that also created resistance; we did not have shared practices; one did this, and another did that (H1).

In the course of the 18 months following the start of the implementation process, the frontline workers recognized the need to develop and learn shared practices and ways of using the IS. They felt that standardizing usage and instilling a mutual understanding of why the IS was used in a particular way were crucial for its successful implementation. However, it was stated that it is difficult to change the practices when people have established their individual ways of working with the IS. Again, time was needed to facilitate learning and unlearning.

### ***Foregrounding client-centered work practices***

The frontline workers emphasized that their work in social services was not as urgent as that in healthcare services, and the characteristics of social services enhanced the frontline workers usage of the IS in practice. They explained that the everyday work in social services did not rely on the IS. For example, it was possible to first use MS Word – or a pen and paper – to document the necessary information about the clients and their situations instead of using the IS: ‘I don’t do registrations during the phone calls; there are such strong emotions, agony and needs that I find it silly to start typing, then, in my work, one must concentrate on the client’. (H8)

Indeed, in everyday work, the frontline workers felt that it was more important to focus on engaging with the clients than using the IS. Especially in client meetings, the issues dealt with were sensitive and required them to be present. Thus, the frontline workers chose not to use the IS for real-time registration. Instead, they relied on their capability to remember the necessary information to ensure that their focus remained on clients. From the frontline workers’ perspective, using technology interferes with client interactions.

Then, my focus is on what I write and what my fingers are doing and not on what the client says and what facial expressions and gestures they communicate with me. That is the reason I do not

use [the laptop] at all. I find it easier to write one or two words in a notebook, and that does not take me away from the interaction. But the laptop in between cuts off the connection with the client (H10).

It was commonly acknowledged that the frontline workers chose to use the IS and its features for the benefit of their clients. They stated that all the recordings made in the IS should be done for the client and not for statistical purposes or for the sake of the IS's technical features. For example, one crucial feature of the new IS, a structured form for recording, was considered beneficial for statistical purposes but not suitable for recording the individual situations and needs of the clients. Instead, the frontline workers preferred to use the IS's free text feature, which, from their perspective, better catered for the clients' life situations and their need to be heard:

I think that the most important features are the ones with free text where the voice of the client is written and what he or she talks about their life within that particular moment. For example, one thing that has been seen as problematic within our team is substance abuse. There is 'yes', and there is 'no'. It is rarely either-or situation. If I click 'no', there will be no open space for text to be written; it is just 'no'. And then, you must write it down somewhere else that the client has previously used intravenous drugs but has been clean for a year. Or something. That does not always serve its purpose (H8).

The frontline workers felt the IS could also encourage their clients to participate in the service processes. Doing so could benefit their wellbeing and increase the transparency of social services. Client participation was enhanced through a client portal called Maisa, which permitted clients to message frontline workers and view their recordings and decisions. The frontline workers using the IS had to remain aware of data visibility and security issues when formulating records. They also had to ensure they maintained a sensitive and respectful attitude to their clients. Nevertheless, time restrictions often meant the frontline workers had to choose how to use the IS, which ran counter to the focus on client benefit. For example, individualized recordings were considered important for the clients but often incompatible with their colleagues' data needs and too time-consuming to carry out.

We work in the Family Services Unit . . . my criticism is that we must [decide] for each family member. Because that takes an awful lot of time, I think it's clumsy; there are sometimes seven, even eight children in the family, it really is a terrible [laughs] waste of time. But then again, I couldn't use the same text because all these children are individuals . . . It feels like doing assembly line work; the child's own personality is not necessarily made visible, and it feels wrong, I guess. But this is required, so shortcuts are needed (H9).

As another example of the frontline workers' client-centred orientation towards the IS, they expressed that the IS needs to be so reliable that work could be carried out without the need to test the system with the clients. In addition, immediate support was called after when encountering problems with the technology to ensure that work tasks such as decisions could be concluded without delays.

### ***Meeting the technical, structural, and legal limitations***

The technical aspects of the IS helped govern the workload of the frontline workers: the IS notified them when their clients' recordings were incomplete and provided easy access to an overview of their workload, especially the tasks requiring their attention and the information on each client. Nevertheless, the new IS was seen as too complex.

The frontline workers' impression was that the IS had complicated their work practices because it offered too many options for the same functions. To reduce the complexity of the IS, the frontline workers hoped, for example, that they could modify the so-called *smart text* options and reduce the choices available in the structured recording function. The frontline workers generally agreed that the terminology used in the smart text and structured recording functions of the IS should reflect social services rather than healthcare services practice to mitigate complexity and confusion.

The IS complicated collaboration between units of the social service organization as well as inter-organizational collaboration. Consequently, the frontline workers' access to clients' information was dependent on the organizational structure and their work role, rather than on the needs of the client or even the individual worker using the IS. The situation was especially problematic when a street-level worker had multiple organizational roles because depending on the role, the functions available and access to client information within the IS varied. Changing the work role when accessing the IS was complicated and felt frustrating: 'Yes, because that just takes time. If this were a Formula 1 car, its speed would drop . . . It would be in for a pit stop' (H6). Although the access to client information depended on the organizational structure and worker's role within the social services, neither the practices of the work nor the needs of their clients were limited to those factors. It seemed that the IS was designed according to the organizational structures and legislative parameters and that caused difficulties in accessing information and delayed routine work:

It doubles the amount of work, the information is there [in the Child Protection Unit], but you don't get to use it [in the Family Services Unit]. The biggest issue is that we cannot see their recordings. Yes, this is based on the law, but of course, it disturbs our work a lot. Especially now. . . There is a new limit of 35 clients [for one social worker] in the Child Protection Unit, and it means that many of their current clients will transfer to us in Family Services; their background [data] remains there, and we do not have any prior information, we do not see any of it, and we still have to continue their work, like, start from the middle (H9).

Along with the technical and organizational aspects, the Data Protection Act limits the use of IS. Frontline workers' access to data, especially of those involved in social and healthcare services, is heavily constrained by Finnish data protection legislation. The IS incorporates client data, but the law restricts who has the right to access it. Therefore, the frontline workers needed to be very aware of which data they have access to, what they can register, and who else has access. Confusion about access rights sometimes spurred a fear of making mistakes. From the perspective of coherent everyday work, overcoming the organizational and role-related boundaries to access a client's data can sometimes be well justified, but the law restricts access. Understandably, the frontline workers did not want to risk breaking the law even if they would have needed the data.

## Discussion

In the social services' context, characterized by scarce resources and time, increasing service demands, competing or even conflicting demands, non-voluntary service users and difficult-to-measure performance, the need for SLBs' discretion increases (Zhang et al. 2022). One special characteristic of the social services context is that the professionals are highly committed to a service orientation, and discretion allows the SLBs to deliver services and make decisions based on their clients' needs (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Zhang et al. 2022). Indeed, the

SLBs have the possibility to exercise wide discretion (Eriksson and Andersson 2023; Evans and Harris 2004; Evans and Hupe 2020; Zhang et al. 2022), and thus utilize their policymaking agency.

The findings of this study confirm that in the everyday work the policymaking agency is utilized to meet the needs of their clients, bend the rules, and apply policies to match the SLBs existing street-level practices. Through their policymaking agency, the SLBs influence the implementation processes in the organizational context and beyond. Next, we proceed to analyse *what kind of conditions does the public service ecosystem framework reveal about the policymaking agency of street-level bureaucrats*. The conditions affecting the implementation of the IS from the SLBs' perspective through the analytical framework of PSEs are summarized in [Figure 1](#).

### ***Policymaking agency at individual sphere***

Changes, whether technology-driven or others, occur when actors disrupt, maintain, and create institutional arrangements (Rossi and Tuurnas 2021). The individual SLB's institutional arrangement underlies their decisions and actions, therefore guiding the implementation process of the IS. For example, the SLBs' personal history, abilities, and willingness to learn, experiences concerning the previous IS' they had used as well as their attitude towards technology affected the SLBs' decisions and actions and, ultimately, how they evaluated the implemented policies and exercised their policymaking agency.

As the findings suggest, the SLBs were keen to avoid disruptions to the 'status quo' in order to ensure their working conditions during the implementation process by *maintaining individual institutional arrangements*. Although the literature concerning street-level policy entrepreneurship focuses on SLBs ability to use discretion to create innovative practices (e. Arnold 2015), the resistance, for example, towards learning the new ways of working, avoidance of changing the practices and continuing to use the outdated language of the previously used IS, however, can be considered as a determined act to utilize the policymaking agency in the individual sphere. As Edri-Peer et al. (2023) note, one unique strategy street-level policy entrepreneurs use is consistency over time. Thus, maintaining institutional arrangements can be seen as an attempt to ensure this consistency.

Another unique strategy for SLBs at the individual sphere is learning both in practice and from others (Edri-Peer et al. 2023; Tirronen, Kinder, and Stenvall 2020; Zhang et al. 2022). Indeed, the findings demonstrate that the SLBs put a strong emphasis on learning to use the IS in practice during their everyday work. Related to the characteristics of the social services context, the lack of time and workload of the SLBs, however, led the SLBs utilizing their policymaking agency to ensure their everyday work meaning that with no time to learn, the SLBs used only the mandatory aspects of the IS.

As highlighted by Arnold (2015) and Zhang et al. (2022), discretion is not an isolated, individual act, but rather the SLBs are group actors who both need and benefit from support given by their colleagues. Learning from and with others, then, is crucial for policy implementation. Based on our findings, the experiences of the SLBs underline how working alone with lack of possibilities to learn from and with colleagues during the implementation process led to SLBs *making individualized choices about how they used the IS during everyday work*. These choices guided the SLBs to use



**Figure 1.** Conditions influencing the policymaking agency of SLBs in individual, organizational and institutional spheres.



individualized practices, and, again, can be considered as an illustration of how SLBs utilize their policymaking agency at the individual sphere.

Importantly, the findings foreground the need for the SLBs to *foreground client-centered work practices* during the implementation process. Indeed, particularly in the studied context of social services, the SLBs seemed to be highly committed to service orientation (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Zhang et al. 2022), allowing the SLBs to make decisions based on their clients' needs (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Zhang et al. 2022). This was the case also in the studied implementation process: the SLBs utilized their policymaking agency by choosing not to use, for example, real-time registrations or structured form of recordings, if doing so did not benefit their clients. The SLBs thus utilized their policymaking agency to make 'citizen-friendly' decisions as opposed to 'state-friendly' (Gershgoren and Cohen 2023).

Moving towards the organizational and institutional spheres, it should be noted that the acts of policymaking agency can be conflicting (e.g. Rossi and Tuurnas 2021) with the organizational and societal aims of the policy implementation. Not using the structured form of recordings, for example, hinders the possibilities for gathering data for organizational and population level purposes and, instead, enables individualized practices.

### ***Policymaking agency at organizational and institutional spheres***

The policymaking agency of the SLBs is a complex phenomenon encompassing not only individual conditions but also intra- and interorganizational rules, policies, and governance frameworks at organizational and institutional spheres (Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Carson, Chung, and Evans 2015). As an illustration of the holistic nature of policymaking agency, it is important to stress that although the experiences of SLBs are located at the individual sphere, the individual, organizational and institutional spheres do overlap. Or, as Andreotti, Coletto and Rio (2023, 3) frame it, the practices of discretion (at the individual sphere) are 'embedded in institutional spaces' which, in turn, influence the discretionary practices. For example, when SLBs are utilizing their policymaking agency for the benefit of their clients, they do so at the individual sphere based on their institutional arrangements which derive from a wider organizational and institutional settings.

Different contextual and organizational characteristics in the organizational sphere as well as political, economic, cultural and social developments and institutions at the institutional sphere influence the policymaking agency of the SLBs by informing about relevant, appropriate or permitted choices and actions in specific contexts (Rice 2013). In the findings, the conditions such as intra- and inter-organizational structures, siloed service system and services regulated by law mainly hinder the SLBs policymaking agency.

However, the lack of managerial support enabled the SLBs to utilize their policymaking agency when making decisions about how to use the IS. Thus, the lack of managerial support created space for the SLBs to utilize policymaking agency, then, why not take the role? What happens in practice of the implementation process can conflict with the intended policy outcomes. As Zhang et al. (2022) have emphasized, through enhancing organizational learning managers and leaders can influence SLBs' discretion. Consequently, there is a need to rethink the interconnections between SLBs'

everyday practices and the influence of leadership and managerial models in the public sector, as Torfing, Sorensen, and Roiseland (2019; see also Taylor 2014) have argued.

Indeed, when utilizing their policymaking agency, SLBs do not merely respond to implemented policies but create their own practices that may differ from the ones policymakers and managers intended (Eriksson and Andersson 2023). Thus, managerial influences and institutional structures are important to address because these can, for example, enhance learning as illustrated by Zhang et al. (2022) and affect policy-making agency of the SLBs.

The SLBs' opportunities to practice their policymaking agency and foster multi-actor, interorganizational, or even intra-organizational collaboration for the benefit of their clients were delimited by organizational structures, the siloed social services service system, and Finnish law. These conditions are associated with the organizational and institutional spheres. Whereas SLBs exemplified an active and influential policymaking agency at the individual sphere, we suggest that the legal, structural, and governance frameworks finally limited the policymaking agency at the organizational and institutional spheres (Andreotti, Coletto, and Rio 2023; Carson, Chung, and Evans 2015; Rice 2013).

Relatedly, Eriksson and Andersson (2023) argue that although the research on public services is built on a service logic, the SLBs, in practice, are required to address the ideals about active citizens, interorganizational collaboration and collaborative forms of value creation with NPM logic and tools of measurement and control. Here, the intra- and interorganizational structures provided what Eriksson and Andersson (2023) describe as 'institutionalized NPM' guidelines for the SLB on making decisions about the implementation and practices of the new IS.

## Conclusions

The article contributes to the street-level bureaucracy literature by exploring the concept of policymaking agency through a public service ecosystem analytical framework. Through zooming in to micro level experiences of the SLBs about an implementation process of an information system in social services, we explored the context-specific conditions informing about the SLBs policymaking agency at individual, organizational and institutional spheres.

The holistic approach of this study increases both theoretical and practical understanding of SLBs' policymaking agency and the importance of understanding the context-specific conditions of policy implementation processes. While the SLBs in the studied context of social services could extensively utilize their policymaking agency at individual sphere through maintaining institutional arrangements, making individualized choices during everyday work and foregrounding client-centred work practices, the technical, structural and legal limitations at organizational and institutional spheres considerably limited not only the policymaking agency but also the intended political and managerial outcomes of the implemented policy.

The study shows that if the implemented policies conflict with the SLBs' institutional arrangements or other individual conditions, the organizational structures, managerial models or institutional conditions such as laws and regulations, it becomes difficult to foster a successful implementation process. In this case, the key factor for successful implementation from the viewpoint of the SLBs was their ability to engage in the implementation through utilizing their policymaking agency: by meeting the needs

of their clients, bending the rules and applying practices that were in line with their existing ones.

Finally, as a noteworthy limitation, this study does not offer generalizable knowledge about the conditions that shape the SLBs' policymaking agency because of its context-specific nature. Rather, through conceptual and theoretical exploration, the study aims to increase understanding about the topic and provide pathways for future research. Further studies could, for example, address SLBs' policymaking agency through PSE analytical framework in different service sectors and contextual settings.

## Disclosure statement

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