

Original Paper

Street-Level Bureaucracy and the Over-Standardization of Policy Implementation: An Analysis of Urban Management through the Destruction of Merchant Couplets

Liufei Meng¹

¹ Guangxi Normal University, School of Politics and Public Administration, Guangxi Guilin, 541000, China

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Abstract

In grassroots governance, standardization not only serves as a fundamental component of an efficient bureaucratic system but also functions as a crucial mechanism ensuring that frontline personnel are accountable to both superiors and the general populace. However, in certain regions, there is a trend towards "over-standardization." From a macro perspective, this is primarily attributed to internal bureaucratic logics and external pressures. From a micro perspective, it often arises from strategic choices made by a minority of street-level bureaucrats. To address the issue of "over-standardization," interventions should focus on enhancing the scientific level of goal-setting, refining the precision of accountability mechanisms, and rectifying the goal-oriented nature of performance evaluations.

Keywords

Grassroots governance, Street-level bureaucrats, Formalism, Over-standardization

1. Introduction

The concept of "street-level bureaucrats" was initially proposed by American political scientist Michael Lipsky. According to Lipsky's definition, "street-level bureaucrats" encompass roles such as police officers, public school teachers, and social workers, among others (Lipsky, 1980). In China, urban management (commonly referred to as "chengguan") personnel, as frontline law enforcement officers, fall into the category of civil servants responsible for administrative enforcement.

In the Western context, this position is considered a quintessential "street-level bureaucrat," primarily tasked with carrying out social governance and market regulation functions at the grassroots level of government. In practice, street-level bureaucrats operate on the frontlines and engage with the public

most frequently and closely among government personnel.

However, street-level bureaucrats also face numerous challenges in reality. Particularly in recent years, due to the implementation of certain one-size-fits-all policies and the accumulation of social conflicts, street-level spaces have gradually become focal points for disputes and conflicts. In most cases, street-level bureaucrats are confronted with a range of practical dilemmas in carrying out their duties, such as the balance between "doing more and making more mistakes," "doing less and making fewer mistakes," and "doing nothing and making no mistakes." They also grapple with decisions like "to intervene or not to intervene," "to intervene more or less," and "to enforce strictly or leniently." Under such pressures, "over-standardization" has become a strategic choice for a minority of street-level bureaucrats.

2. Literature Review

As of January 2023, a search using the keyword "street-level bureaucrats" in the "CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure)" database has yielded a total of 556 relevant articles, with 121 articles published in core journals. After reviewing the literature on street-level bureaucrats in China, it can be observed that current research in this area can be broadly categorized into three main types: (1) The first category involves introductions and explanations of street-level bureaucrat theory and its evolution (Ye & Ma, 2003). (2) The second category comprises theoretical research and reflections on topics such as the discretionary powers of street-level bureaucrats and policy execution (Zhao, He, & Tang, 2022). (3) The third category utilizes street-level bureaucrat theory to explain and address existing issues in policy execution in China and challenges faced by grassroots civil servants (Li & Yang, 2017).

It is worth noting that current research on street-level bureaucrats in China is primarily concentrated in the second and third categories, with rich research outcomes related to effective policy execution and specific issues among grassroots civil servants. In contrast, research in the first category, which explores the development of Western street-level bureaucrat theories, remains relatively scarce. Through case analyses, domestic scholars have identified key behavioral characteristics of street-level bureaucrats in China. In terms of policy execution, street-level bureaucrats, as the terminal link in policy execution, possess the ability to reinterpret and adjust policies significantly (Zhu & Liu, 2014). Specifically, the professional competence and empathy of urban management personnel significantly influence how they exercise discretionary powers to achieve a certain "balance" (Liu 2018). Additionally, within the specific context of China, the discretionary powers of street-level bureaucrats are also influenced by factors such as the "hierarchical pattern" (Liu, 2017) and the political system they operate in, including power distribution in an authoritative system (Zhou, 2011), responses to pressure in a pressure-based system (Yang, 2012), and promotion incentives in a promotion tournament model (Zhou, 2007). Taking these factors into account, the policy execution characteristics of street-level bureaucrats exhibit typical passive logic and reactive responses.

3. Case Introduction

On February 7, 2023, the removal of couplets (春联) by urban management (城管) authorities in Wuwei, Gansu, and other cities sparked controversy (City Management Clears Damaged Couplets in Many Places, Media Calls for Restraint on Excessive Interference, 2023)). The Liangzhou District Urban Management Bureau in Wuwei responded by stating that it was a routine urban beautification operation. In fact, not only Wuwei but also other cities conducted similar clean-up activities. On the same day, the official WeChat account of the Urban Management and Administrative Enforcement Bureau of Yanji City in Jilin released a message stating that many couplets in front of street-side businesses in the city had faded and become dilapidated, significantly affecting the urban landscape. To further enhance urban appearance management, the bureau conducted a centralized cleanup of damaged couplets, banners, and other urban "blemishes." Additionally, in cities such as Yingkou in Liaoning, Huai'an in Jiangsu, and Jiaozuo in Henan, urban management authorities also conducted clean-up operations for damaged couplets after the Chinese New Year holiday. Commentaries from Central Broadcasting Network (央视网) pointed out that the removal of couplets revealed the simplistic and heavy-handed governance thinking of certain functional departments that excessively pursued a "uniform and orderly" approach. Some individuals also stated, "In my 12 years of urban management work, I and my colleagues have never done such a thing" (Jiangsu Peixian Reports 'City Management Tears Couplets House by House': Relevant Responsible Persons Disciplined, 2023).

The occurrence of the above-mentioned events indicates that in some regions, the principle of "practical service to the people" is not adhered to in grassroots governance. It highlights a tendency towards "over-standardization" in policy execution. While standardized management is fundamentally aimed at improving efficiency and quality of work through a series of clear regulations and standards, in the actual implementation process, some areas have an overly rigid and inflexible interpretation of the word "standardization" (Yan, 2020). These regions overlook the diversity and complexity of real-life situations and excessively pursue a one-size-fits-all approach. Such "one-size-fits-all" practices often fail to address the root causes of problems and may instead lead to numerous unnecessary negative consequences. The act of tearing down residents' and merchants' couplets in the name of "urban appearance" is an example of this "over-standardization" phenomenon.

4. Causes of Over-Standardization in Street-Level Bureaucratic Policy Execution

The causes of the problem of "over-standardization" in policy execution by street-level bureaucrats are multifaceted. Firstly, from a macro theoretical perspective, the bureaucratic system itself, which emphasizes strict rules and procedural enforcement, is a fundamental root cause of "over-standardization." Secondly, from a micro-individual perspective, "over-standardization" often results from the strategic choices of a minority of grassroots public servants. Lastly, from the perspective of the interaction between organizations and systems, "over-standardization" is also the product of complex interactions and power struggles between different levels of governance.

4.1 Root Cause: The Logic and Pressure of Hierarchical Systems

4.1.1 Being Accountable to Higher Authorities

In China's administrative system, the concept of "being accountable to higher authorities" is a prevalent phenomenon, particularly in the working practices of street-level bureaucrats. According to Zhou Xueguang's theory of "control rights," this primarily stems from the strong control exerted by higher-level governments on lower-level authorities in areas such as goal setting, inspection and acceptance, and incentive distribution. In practice, street-level bureaucrats tend to prioritize the implementation of directives and goals from higher authorities, even when they foresee that certain actions may have negative consequences for others, in order to align with the will of their superiors. This phenomenon is prominently reflected in the "administrative contracting system" and the "promotion tournament." Firstly, the "administrative contracting system" refers to a contracting relationship between higher and lower-level governments, which grants lower-level bureaucrats a degree of autonomy in the execution process through a results-oriented management model to enhance governance efficiency. However, this autonomy has its limitations. As long as lower-level bureaucrats can complete the tasks assigned by their superiors, superiors often turn a blind eye to certain misbehaviors during the process. Secondly, the "promotion tournament" is a competitive promotion mechanism that relies on measurable metrics and performance evaluations. Since the interests of street-level bureaucrats do not always align perfectly with the goals of their superiors, they may adopt high-risk, high-reward strategies to advance their careers, further exacerbating incentive distortions and goal substitution phenomena. As both of these mechanisms are rooted in the logic of "being accountable to higher authorities," we can identify vertical contracting and horizontal competition as contributing factors to the issue of "over-standardization" in the work of street-level bureaucrats.

4.1.2 Mismatch of Authority and Responsibility

Street-level bureaucrats often find themselves in a dilemma where tasks and responsibilities are mismatched, with their tasks and responsibilities coming from higher authorities and different departments, resulting in an "inverted pyramid" work structure. Although they bear significant responsibilities, street-level bureaucrats' actual authority is typically limited to policy execution, and they have very limited channels for effective communication with superiors. Constrained by limited power and communication channels, street-level bureaucrats find it challenging to make flexible adjustments based on the on-site situation when executing tasks. Additionally, these tasks and work often have no direct bearing on the interests of street-level bureaucrats, leading to a lack of intrinsic motivation in their work. Furthermore, some complex and cumbersome tasks may involve multiple stakeholders, potentially causing conflicts of interest or exacerbating existing social tensions. In such a context, street-level bureaucrats exhibit unique administrative thinking and action logic, including actively pursuing achievements, passively dealing with issues, and strategically taking actions. Within this framework of authority and responsibility, "over-standardization" evolves as a natural response of street-level bureaucrats seeking balance and development in a complex administrative environment.

4.1.3 Pressure Sensing

Higher-level authorities promote effective policy execution by setting development goals, assessing indicators, and exerting pressure. However, the multi-tiered pressure system leads to the superimposition of pressures from different levels, causing street-level bureaucrats to bear an overwhelming burden of pressure. Among these pressures, political pressure, as a primary driver of a pressure-based system, significantly impacts street-level bureaucrats. This pressure perception is jointly constituted by principal-agent and authority-obedience relationships and is bidirectional. On one hand, positive pressures such as promotion and economic incentives can enhance the motivation and goal efficiency of street-level bureaucrats. On the other hand, negative pressures may hinder goal achievement due to discrepancies between goals and actual needs or mismatches between goals and the capabilities of the executors. In this pressure-based system, pressure perception has a sustained impact on the administrative behavior of street-level bureaucrats. When the structure of pressure transmission becomes imbalanced, strategic responses shift from "lower-level" to "higher-level." This imbalance ultimately leads to the phenomenon of "over-standardization," restricting the flexibility of street-level bureaucrats in responding to complex issues.

4.2 Strategy: Factors such as Traits, Resources, and Abilities

The government faces challenges in comprehensively controlling social affairs and penetrating into grassroots life in its governance. On the other hand, the diversity and fluidity of street-level activities result in constantly changing governance information, making precise management difficult. Street spaces serve as stages for social relationships and purposive social practices, constituting not only physical spaces but also closely linked to the social environment. Therefore, situational behavior in street spaces does not simply exist in the form of rulers and the ruled but is more akin to a form of "game" between actors (Lyu, 2019). As representatives of the government, street-level bureaucrats need to use "strategies" to shape social order in this context.

4.2.1 Personality Traits

"Official Personality" is a sociological concept that originates from Max Weber's analysis of the bureaucratic system. According to Weber's argument, the structure of the bureaucratic system itself determines the distinctive spirit and personality of officials. A more in-depth study of the "official personality" was conducted by Robert K. Merton. Merton identified four main characteristics of the "official personality" (Goodsell, 2007). (1) Inadequate Adaptation due to Specialization: Officials may struggle to adapt to changes because of the limited scope of their work. (2) Overreliance on Procedures: Officials may excessively rely on institutional procedures, sometimes losing sight of the original intent, leading to a mismatch between goals and implementation. (3) Excessive Caution for Job Security: Officials may become overly cautious to secure their positions, avoiding risks and innovation. (4) Overuse of General Principles: Officials may excessively apply general principles in handling individual cases, overlooking the emotions and characteristics of the individuals involved. In urban beautification and maintenance operations, street-level bureaucrats have significant discretion,

especially in determining the nature, scale, and quality of punitive measures. This is because they often need to make on-the-spot decisions. Enforcement actions in such work environments are highly individualized and immediate, involving a face-to-face enforcement model that makes standardization challenging. Instead, they must flexibly apply various enforcement techniques to different enforcement situations. This also means that there are higher demands on the life experiences, handling skills, and communication abilities of street-level bureaucrats in the enforcement process (City Management Law Enforcement Training Material Development Team, et al., 2006).

4.2.2 Resource Endowment

Being at the very end of the policy execution chain, street-level bureaucrats have extremely limited resources at their disposal. When faced with complex tasks, these grassroots workers tend to rely on personal experiences, skills, values, and beliefs to make judgments and decisions under conditions of limited information and time resources. This constraint often puts them in a difficult position where they cannot fully meet the needs of citizens. What's even more challenging is that street-level bureaucrats not only act as policy implementers but also serve as the government's public image representatives. They have a responsibility and obligation to provide quality services to citizens. In general, the imbalance between the tasks faced by street-level bureaucrats and the resources they can access is evident at two levels: (1) Limited Resource Level: The governance tasks carried out by street-level bureaucrats often lack the support of complementary policies. (2) Resource Mismatch Level: The macro and general policies formulated by higher-level governments often have ambiguities, leading to a mismatch in resource allocation for specific task objectives. Especially in China's grassroots social governance system, the beautification and maintenance of urban spaces are seen as key tasks in building civilized cities. As the implementers responsible for the "last mile" of these tasks, street-level bureaucrats must make rational decisions based on the actual situation regarding what they consider the most important work.

4.2.3 Administrative Capacity

As Lipsky mentioned, street-level bureaucrats are not just passive implementers but rather "strategists" in their own right. This preference can be viewed from two angles: On one hand, even though street-level bureaucrats have a top-down perspective, they prefer to engage in work that is expressive and visible. "Over-standardization" represents this type of work that is highly visible and requires relatively less effort. In the case mentioned, instead of individually promoting policies to each merchant, coordinating policy compliance, striving for precise and personalized policy execution, they choose to directly tear down the items on the spot. This ensures the visibility of their task execution and avoids the "additional" communication costs that come with dealing with merchants. On the other hand, "over-standardization" is a self-protective measure employed by some street-level bureaucrats to passively evade responsibility. Due to the complexity and diversity of grassroots work, some street-level bureaucrats may use apparent busyness to mask their actual policy implementation.

5. The Strategies to Alleviate Excessive Standardization in the Policy Execution by Street-level Bureaucrats

5.1 Enhancing the Scientific Level of Goal Setting

First, it is necessary to eliminate one-size-fits-all and rigid assessment requirements to encourage personalization and innovation in policy execution. This can elevate the importance of "individuality scores" and "innovation scores," thereby stimulating vitality in grassroots work. Second, in terms of assessment, there is a need to shift to a results-oriented evaluation model. Assessment should not solely rely on a single criterion but should comprehensively consider the actual effectiveness of grassroots governance, the extent of problem-solving, and the genuine feelings of the people. This way, assessments can better reflect the actual outcomes of policy execution. Third, the evaluation system should incorporate the evaluation of service recipients, i.e., the public. Since the public is the ultimate beneficiary of policy execution, they are best positioned to identify which governance measures are substantive and which fall under "over-standardization." Through this bottom-up evaluation approach, stronger incentive mechanisms can be generated, and it can drive grassroots governments to more effectively implement various policies. Only through such grassroots evaluations can strong incentives be generated, prompting grassroots governments to truly implement various policies.

5.2 Enhancing the Precision of Accountability Mechanisms

To enhance the precision of accountability mechanisms, the first step is to streamline power and responsibilities at the grassroots level. Within government institutions, the similarity of duties and structures has created blurred lines of rights and obligations between superiors and subordinates, as well as between different departments. This ambiguity often allows higher-level authorities to shift tasks and responsibilities onto lower-level or grassroots units. Therefore, we should take the guidance of promoting the modernization of the national governance system, with breaking the similarity of responsibilities as the breakthrough point. This can be achieved by clarifying the connections and boundaries of powers between various levels of government and departments, using legal means to optimize the allocation of government powers. As a result, governments at all levels will no longer be responsible for all matters but will focus on specific tasks and areas. Secondly, it is essential to further clarify the responsibilities and authority relationships between grassroots governments and functional departments. It should be made clear that tasks not listed in a specific and explicit catalog should not be included in the work responsibilities and assessment scope of grassroots governments. This prevents higher-level departments from, under the guise of accountability, indiscriminately delegating tasks to the grassroots without distinction or screening, taking advantage of the convenience of territorial management.

5.3 To Rectify the Goal Orientation of Acceptance and Evaluation

To correct the goal orientation of acceptance and evaluation, we should promote a "bottom-up" policy orientation. Grassroots governments have inherent advantages in being close to the people, understanding their needs, and swiftly addressing their difficulties. Their primary task is to provide

public services to the people. However, in practice, the existence of fallback provisions such as "other tasks assigned by higher authorities" has led to a change in the responsibilities of grassroots governments. General Secretary Xi has emphasized the need to oppose formalism and bureaucracy and to focus on addressing the issue of work not being solid. Under a performance-oriented view of achievements, grassroots civil servants should consider solving real problems and improving public satisfaction as the fundamental criteria for performance evaluation. To achieve this goal, grassroots civil servants should not only continually improve themselves in terms of political loyalty, professional ethics, and ethical autonomy but also strengthen their identification with their positions and roles. This way, they can serve the grassroots people more responsibly and build a truly accountable administrative model.

6. Conclusion

This article examines the phenomenon of "excessive standardization" in grassroots governance from the perspective of street-level bureaucrats, using a specific case of urban management tearing down merchants' couplets as an illustration. The study investigates this phenomenon from both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, the research finds that excessive standardization is directly linked to the logic and pressure of the bureaucratic hierarchy. On the micro level, it often results from the strategic choices made by street-level bureaucrats themselves. This over-standardization not only erodes the government's image and credibility but also severely impacts the overall quality of grassroots governance. Therefore, the article suggests that addressing the issue of excessive standardization requires several key actions: (1) Enhancing the scientific level of goal setting to ensure policies are more operationally feasible in reality. (2) Deepening the precision of accountability mechanisms by clarifying the power and responsibility relationships in policy execution to improve the quality of law enforcement. (3) Rectifying the goal orientation of inspection and evaluation to avoid the neglect of substantive effects, ensuring that the assessment focuses on actual outcomes rather than superficial compliance. The governance of street-level bureaucrats should not be rigidly guided by standardization but should pay attention to the various complex issues that may arise during specific implementation processes. In the context of advancing the modernization of national governance, it is essential to strike a balance between institutions and human nature, regulations, and flexibility, ultimately achieving the optimal solution for social governance.

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