Refugees, bureaucrats, and identity conflicts

Policy implementation when dealing with transboundary crises requires understanding of micro-level dynamics argues Katerina Glyniadaki

Imagine you are a case worker deciding on asylum applications. You have the situation of a young Syrian man who comes from a region that is a recognized war zone, but who is giving you obviously false information on the specific conditions for fleeing. Do you give asylum or do you reject him?

Imagine you are a feminist social worker dealing with domestic violence in refugee shelters. A victim of domestic violence speaks to you about her case, but is unwilling to make an official report, and asks you for confidentiality. Do you report it anyway, or do you follow her wish?

Imagine you are a volunteer guardian of an unaccompanied minor. One day he tells you he is going to travel outside the legally permitted area. Do you report this to his shelter, or do you advise him informally against it?

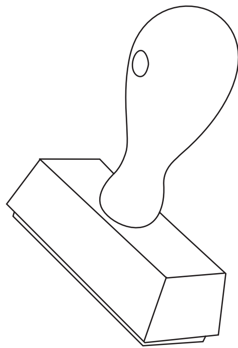
The multiplicity of dilemmas facing those working on the front line and the importance of human judgement have long played a central role in the study of policy implementation (Lipsky, 1980). Such dynamics have also been central to the current migration crisis, and their effects are even more salient given the social cleavages involved. In light of an unprecedented migration influx in the EU, an unprecedented response was needed to manage the 'crisis' situation. In this new arrangement where both migrants and migration service providers rapidly increased in number and heterogeneity, the micro-level interactions among them also increased in complexity, and so did the dilemmas of the workers at the street level. In this changing and challenging environment, it is worth turning our attention to three pressing questions: Who are the new street-level bureaucrats? How do they affect policy implementation? And, what are the new identity-related dilemmas they face?

Firstly, the 'welcome culture' at the peak of the EU migrant crisis, as well as the continuing engagement of the civil society in the effort to integrate the newcomers, call for revisiting the very definition of 'street-level-bureaucrats'. Apart from the traditional public servants, there is now a plurality of social actors working at the street level with asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants, including NGOs and for-profit company employees, as well as volunteers and activists. Think of an asylum seeker, who lives at a shelter run by a for-profit company, receives legal advice from a volunteer lawyer at an international organization, and attends language and recreation classes by an NGO that uses state-funds and is run by activists. As these different types of organizations work so closely together, it becomes increasingly difficult to draw lines between public, private and voluntary service providers. Therefore, there is a new amalgam of street-service providers which is larger, more complex, and more diverse than before.

Secondly, the high proportion of service providers who have self-selected into their roles has important implications for policy implementation, especially against the background of increasingly restrictive asylum policies. As many of these additional actors often have long-standing commitments towards supporting and promoting the rights of migrants, one would expect to see greater effort towards meeting the migrants' needs, such as asylum applications or integration, than if the same tasks were left in the hands of public servants alone. In an imaginary spectrum of attitudes towards migrants, where 0 stands for 'they should all be allowed to come and stay without any restriction' and 10 stands for 'no foreigner should come in and they should all be deported', most of today's service providers are likely to position themselves on the 0-5 side of the spectrum. Especially in 'grey zone' situations as the ones described above, this general predisposition matters the most, as discretionary behaviour is more likely to translate to bending the rules in a way that supports the rights of migrants.

Thirdly, along with the service providers, the population of newcomers is also more diverse than ever before. Indeed, the asylum seekers coming to the EU today are far from a homogenous group, in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status or educational attainment. Thus, at the street level where micro-interactions take place, any 'one-size fits all' policy represents a tricky balancing act for anyone expected to enact it. Here, the individual values and beliefs of the service providers, as well as the social groups they identify with, and their occupational role expectations, may lead to a number of internal conflicts, or conflicts with their colleagues, their supervisors, or the migrants themselves. More specifically, three sources of such identity-related conflicts may arise:

Ideological orientation may refer to political, religious or humanitarian values an individual holds, and which, in their perception, set them apart from others. According to this self-view, an individual may decide for instance whether and to what extent they should help those in need. In the context of street-level service provision, for instance, a passionate left-wing supporter who advocates for 'no borders', would be puzzled when the organization they volunteer for offers more and more immediate opportunities for integration to those



who have high chances for asylum recognition, versus those who come from the so-called 'safe countries'.

Social group identity, generally referring to the sense of self deriving from the membership in a particular social group (see Tajfel and Turner, 1979: 33–7), could translate to a range of potential conflicts for today's service providers. Think of a feminist activist who is called to serve a family whose sons enjoy more rights than their daughters, a Jewish NGO's employee seeing their services being rejected by Palestinian asylum seekers, or a homosexual lawyer who finds out that their client has highly homophobic attitudes.

Occupational identity, describing the particular role specifications and expectations, also comes with a number of potential dilemmas. How would a judge, who is expected to make fair decisions, deal with the case of an applicant who claims to having a mental health disorder but not enough time to prove it due to the new accelerated procedures directive? Or, what about a social worker caring for minors, some of whom exhibit delinquent tendencies, but if reported they could be jailed or deported?

As shown here, each of these categories of identity conflicts incubates a wide range of dilemmas, and an even wider range of coping strategies one may employ to resolve them. Needless to say, these categories are not mutually exclusive but exist in conjunction. That is, there could be a politically conservative, of migrant-background judge, a humanitarian, homosexual case worker, or an anarchist, upper-class volunteer. Not only are the grey areas facing each individual increasing, so is the array of dilemmas.

For the study and practice of transboundary crisis management, thus, it would be useful to enhance our understanding of the diverse nature of street-level service providers and the multiple dilemmas occurring in their day-to-day practices. Through their responses to such challenging situations, they substantially determine policy implementation, as well as the overall policy 'success' or 'failure'. Navigating the range of dilemmas is of course not just reserved for the workers at the street level, but it deserves wider recognition and debate.

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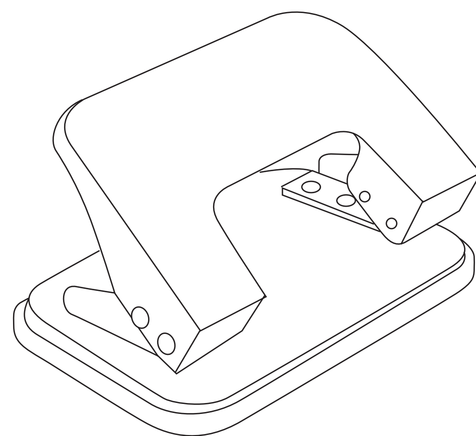
AUTHOR

Katherina Glyniadaki is a **carr** research student in the LSE's European Institute.



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