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Institutional vulnerability and trust in public agencies: Views from both sides of the street

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Abstract

This article seeks to contribute to the discussion of the dynamics of trust in street-level public sector work, especially in settings where relationships between agencies, frontline workers, and society are fragile. Data was gathered in different vulnerable areas of the city of São Paulo, Brazil using interviews with frontline workers and complemented with field notes from a five-year longitudinal study in one high-density area with a history of violence. Concern was to understand how, despite a lack of reciprocal trust, citizens and service providers create ways of meeting daily demands and how, in doing so, they see each other. Results show that in vulnerable settings, issues of inter-agency cooperation and territorial connectivity between different public sector services can be more important than individual agency performance in helping citizens find solutions to the problems they are facing. In the absence of an effective inter-institutional framework, trust is quickly eroded.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Being treated fairly and impartially by implementing agencies and their agents is a central component of the quality of government (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In translating policies, programs and norms into action, agency workers, especially those whose work involves direct contact with the public, play a major part in the everyday materialization of the state (Dubois, 1999; Lipsky, 2010; Siblot, 2002). In doing so, they will contribute to confirming or not, the existing views of the state that circulate in everyday conversations, maintaining, increasing or reducing its legitimacy (Pollitt, 2012). As they must exercise discretion in relation

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to the specifics of the setting and the different questions they face, they are inevitably influenced by a variety of social, political, organizational, and professional factors (Brodkin, 2012; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Zacka, 2017). Furthermore, the possibility of exercising discretion is not freely given, for they are also subject to different forms of legal, social, and professional accountability (Sager et al., 2020; Thomann et al., 2016).

As a result, their daily decisions about who gets what and how (Oorschot, 2006) have many implications, both for the policies they are required to follow and the citizens they are required to serve. As everyday policy translators, their decisions have impact on policy goals and as service providers their interactions have impact on notions of citizenship (Auyero, 2012) and will have distributive and symbolic effects (Dubois, 1999; Lotta & Pires, 2019).

Trust is an underlying theme in the theory of street-level work (Evans & Harris, 2004; Hupe & Hill, 2007). First, the idea of accountability is based on assumptions of the need for trust between the state, its bureaucrats and the society (Sager et al., 2020). Second, to exercise necessary discretion, government, through its agencies, has to trust frontline workers to be fair and honest representatives (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Third, street-level workers have to trust that the state and their agency will support them and provide them with policies, programs and norms that they can translate into action. Fourth, citizens have to trust that street-level workers are making and providing legitimate decisions. And last, but not least, citizens have to trust the state as a legitimate source of authority (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). To maintain trust, the state has to convince citizens that their agents can be trusted, and that policy, programs and norms can be implemented fairly: "If I don't trust frontline workers, whom can I trust?" (Rothstein, 2013, p. 1023).

Most scholars in the broad arena of street-level bureaucracy would recognize these different aspects as being formative for the field. However, few studies have analyzed how the general elements of trust influences street-level workers decisions and their willingness to implement policies (Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). In addition, most of the street-level bureaucracy literature was developed in contexts of liberal democracies with strong institutions and relatively effective agencies; where the proposal that street-level workers are the state in action would be considered almost as a normative requirement and a demonstration of trust. In these settings, a lack of trust is seen as a mistake that requires correction (Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). But what happens in settings where institutions are weak, reciprocal trust is inexistent, democracy is unstable, and the state's legitimacy is under question? That is where the incentives to generate cooperation are "simply undermined by shared expectations about other actors´ behavior" (Persson et al., 2013, p. 457). Would the very idea of street-level public agents make sense in anything other than minimally descriptive terms? This article aims to contribute both to the understanding of the importance of trust for street-level work and to knowledge about what happens to frontline workers in lower-trust settings.

Whilst seeking a reply to the above questions would require a major series of comparative studies, a start can be made by looking at a more intermediary zone where, to use Merkel's (2004) description, democracies are partially embedded, have institutions but seem constantly stalled in their position, moving neither forwards nor backwards. Fortunately, here there is a growing literature on street level work on which it is possible to build. Brazil is part of this intermediary zone; reciprocal trust is partially present, weaker rather than stronger, at a lower level but not low. In such a setting it is possible to ask: what is the importance of trust in street-level work and how do front line workers respond to demands? Equally, how do citizens go about resolving their urgent concerns? How do they navigate their way around the different agencies and their agents? What other solutions do they adopt?

The text is the result of five-years' work in lower-trust settings in some of the more vulnerable areas of the municipality of São Paulo, itself one of the most unequal cities in South America. It brings together two complementary research strategies: (a) an interview study of 180 frontline workers—community health workers, nurses, teachers, and social workers—in different vulnerable areas within an 18-month time frame and (b) qualitative interview data and observations from intensive engagement with citizen-based forums and their various outreach activities in one of the city's subprefectures. The first strategy helps to identify and provide consistency about more general themes, while the second helps to understand how these materialize in specific territories.

The text is organized in six parts. In the second, we extend this initial theoretical discussion around trust and street-level public sector workers, briefly comment on everyday dynamics of institutions and present our hypotheses. The third describes the settings in which the observations were made and the methodological approach, discussed in more detail in the Supporting Information. The fourth part concentrates on the empirical evidence, with extracts from research material; followed in the fifth part by the discussion of the hypotheses in the light of these findings. The sixth part contains the conclusions.

2 | STREET-LEVEL WORKERS AND TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

As public policy began to grow in importance both academically and professionally in the late 1960s and early 1970s, so did concern with policy processes in terms of formulation and implementation. Influenced by pioneering studies (Lipsky, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), the result, after some four decades of research, has been a heightened awareness of the many different ways in which policies become translated into actions and how workers at the frontline of public services can and often need to make decisions that affect policy outcomes (Hupe & Hill, 2015). The same awareness and concern can also be found in questions of program implementation, planning and various other ways in which governments are present in daily life. Their clarity or ambiguity is part of the explanation (Matland, 1995), but what happens on the ground is also a consequence of interactions, unpredictability and spaces for discretion (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Rather than being considered as mistakes or as the result of a lack of managerial control and oversight, these everyday decisions are increasingly being seen as a necessity imposed by the contextual moment (Hupe & Hill, 2015); what Colebatch et al. (2010) have described as "policy work"—a combination of official and non-official factors.

When Lipsky (1969) originally referred to them as street-level bureaucrats in earlier texts his concern was with the decisions they took. This later opened up, as did the field itself, to embrace the implications of these decisions for policy (Lipsky, 1980, 2010) and public service delivery performance (Brodkin, 2012; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

The decisions that street-level workers make are embedded in broader society, in governmental institutions, and in the specific territorial settings in which work takes place (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Møller & Stensöta, 2019). As they are embedded in welfare regimes, they are influenced by the cultural, political and social institutions that affect their willingness to respond, their perceptions about the citizens and the degrees of deservedness (Cohen, 2018; Møller & Stensöta, 2019; Zang & Musheno, 2017). Second, they are also embedded, as part of agencies, in contexts which may have varying degrees of multilevel governance (Enderlein et al., 2010; Hooghe & Marks, 2003), in which discretion and accountability are influenced by

the different levels of decision around them (Dörrenbächer, 2017; Hill & Hupe, 2002; Hupe & Hill, 2007). Third, street-level workers are also influenced by organizational elements: the plans, the incentives they receive, their peers' and superiors' behavior (Brodkin, 2012; Gofen, 2014) as well as their own beliefs, professional values and technical opinions (Evans & Harris, 2004; Gofen, 2014; Møller & Harrits, 2013). Finally, the interactive processes between them and citizens can also influence the use of discretion; for these encounters are complex dynamics in which different values and perceptions about the policies, the workers and the citizens are negotiated (Dubois, 1999; Harrits & Møller, 2014; Lotta & Marques, 2020; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020; Siciliano, 2015).

All of these different factors which shape the frame of street-level literature are, as mentioned before, influenced by a number of assumptions present in the societies in which they were developed. Hence, looking at street-level interactions is also a way of understanding broader elements of the state and the relationship between state and society (Brodkin, 2012; Lipsky, 2010). In stable liberal democracies, street-level workers are seen as representing the state in the way they translate policy, programs and other guidelines into action and, as they are held accountable (Sager et al., 2020), they are expected to develop the liberal ideal of fair and impartial treatment of citizens by government (Hill & Møller, 2019; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008). In short, they are to be trusted and, in order to treat people fairly, moral judgments, bias or stereotypes should be avoided or censured (Auyero, 2012; Harrits, 2019; Jilke & Tummers, 2018).

Trust joins fairness and reliability as key to a satisfactory state of affairs (Brodkin, 2012; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Hupe & Hill, 2015; Zacka, 2017). Social trust is an essential component for the existence of efficient formal institutions, such as the rule of law and the impartiality of civil services (Rothstein, 2013, p. 1017). It is expected that services perform the tasks they are "entrusted with" by government through policies and directives at different organizational levels and, in meeting public expectations, are seen by citizens as "worthy of trust." Trust is needed when the state delegates policy implementation and translation to street-level workers and when they themselves accept the role of representing the state and implementing policies. It is expected that their relations with citizens are based on notions of mutual trust and trust is an important basis for the idea of accountability (Evans & Harris, 2004; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). At the same time, trust is an everyday social tool, an informal institution and part of an extensive network of social meanings and beliefs (Uslaner, 2002). Trust is "the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior" (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26). Street-level workers are part of these community-based dynamics in various ways, both actively and passively, for they are themselves part of communities.

It is important to note that, even in countries with high levels of overall trust, there can be major differences between different population groups, as actions and experiences become translated into shared community-based views about justice and impartiality (Uslaner, 2012). At the same time, street-level workers may judge citizens, criticize their behavior and create evaluations of deservedness (Oorschot, 2006) that make some citizens more entitled than others. Sometimes they have evidence but many times they have to "trust" what people say. (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2020; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Tummers et al., 2015; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014).

Trust, then, becomes a way of looking at the everyday interactions between service workers and their clients from both sides of the street. If, as the literature suggests, this leads to doubts about the automatic assumption of fairness in countries with higher levels of trust, it is probably a good starting point for the study of such interactions in settings where trust between state and

society is at a lower level and local dynamics of trust move in other directions. Here, a number of studies in Brazil and Argentina, both intermediary democracies with lower levels of trust, have noted how street-level workers often have to act in very precarious settings in which they have to use their creativity to get things done and, in the absence of the state, can find themselves becoming gatekeepers to rights and citizenship (Auyero, 2012; Perelmiter, 2016). This can lead to practical partnerships with social groups of different kinds, including social movements, cultural collectives and faith-based organizations (Silveira, 2018; Spink, 2019; Spink & Burgos, 2019). The importance of beliefs and professional values and technical opinions has already been mentioned as part of general street-level theory. Here a number of Brazilian studies have shown that street-level workers are often deeply influenced by moral and social values, which can result in actions that may increase inclusion or, on the contrary, lead to greater exclusion (Castro, 2019; Eiró, 2019; Oliveira & Carvalho, 2019; Pires, 2019).

Finally, there is no doubt that the consolidation of democracies in a number of Latin-American countries has led to greater concerns with social progress, with poverty reduction and more equitable development. Institutions have been maintained and services have been strengthened in a number of areas, especially in the social field, and there is growing concern with the evaluation of government actions (Pires, 2019). At the same time, many countries in the region continue to have significant levels of inequality and there remain many urban and rural areas with high levels of social and material vulnerability (Baéz et al., 2017). In these settings, demands and issues tend to be multiple and cut across different agencies in very different ways. Inter-agency coordination may seem clear enough at a program and policy level but can be very different in street-level actions; especially when workers are also having to deal with their specific agency-based performance demands (Spink & Burgos, 2019). Which "performance" gets, or should get, priority?

There are various hypotheses that emerge when looking at trust both from general street-level theory in more developed countries and emerging research in intermediate countries which tend to have lower levels of trust. Some, as mentioned, would require more structured comparative studies but there are others that are amenable to the more qualitative in-country research of the type we have carried out. We start from the following four which will guide our analysis of street-level workers in lower-trust settings:

Hypothesis 1. In overall lower-trust settings, street-level workers also have lower trust in the state. As a result, they tend to disconnect from the policies and, at times, the agencies of which they are a part.

Hypothesis 2. In lower-trust settings, street-level workers are not seen by citizens as representatives of the state and, therefore, their actions are not part of state-citizen co-construction.

Hypothesis 3. In lower-trust settings, street-level workers and citizens do not fully trust each other, making effective policy implementation less likely.

Hypothesis 4. Hypotheses 1–3 directly affect individual agency performance in general, however, in precarious settings with high degrees of social and material vulnerability, people often face multiple issues that require inter-agency coordination and direct street-level inter-service action and intervention by front-line staff. The lack of an effective inter-institutional framework to resolve difficult issues (inter-institutional

vulnerability), can overshadow any minor gains in individual agency performance and considerably weaken trust.

These hypothesis will guide our analysis.

3 | SETTING AND METHODS

Brazil is a key site in which to study the implications of lower-trust settings for street-level work. First, it is currently the 7th most unequal country in the world (UNDP, 2019), continental in size with many regional, social and economic diversities and conflicting views about the state. Brazil is one of the lowest Latin American countries in the Interamerican Development Bank's ranking of citizen's trust in institutions (IADB, 2017). In 2017, 63% of Brazilian citizens did not trust their own community and 70% did not trust political parties. In 2018, only 25% of the population trusted the State (Ibope, 2018), whilst 71% trusted their churches (Datafolha, 2019).

Second, despite the low trust in government, the country has a big state, and a Federal Constitution (1988) that proposed a welfare state with many universal policies in areas such as health, education and social assistance, which led to widespread improvements. The Constitution was quite rigid in terms of the organization of sub-national government, specifying state, municipal and federal relations within a multilevel context (Wilson et al., 2008). However, it also went on over the following years to introduced different approaches for different policy areas. Health, for example within the Unified Health System (SUS) is considerably decentralized. Pre-school and primary education were to be a municipal responsibility, supported by the states, which would look after secondary education; but there are still many places where both states and municipal governments overlap. Still, policies are provided all around the country. Some 80% of children go to public schools; 70% of citizens use the public health system and 22% depend on public cash transfer policies coordinated through social services. Street-level workers in education, health and social work are a significant presence in the life of many Brazilians and the wellbeing of the country depends on how street-level workers implement and translate policies. (Police forces, another theme in the street-level literature are organized at state level, totally separate from municipal administration. For this reason, they are not included in this analysis).

The studies were carried out in the municipality of Sao Paulo, the biggest city in South America (population 12.2 million), which despite its wealth, follows the same pattern of contrasts of the country. Home to leading edge hospitals and universities, an internationally respected financial services sector and the regional headquarters of many international businesses, it is also a city where half the working population earns only 50% of what is considered by the independent joint trade union research institute (DIEESE) as a "fair wage" (equivalent to U.S. $1,000) and over a half of the total labor force gets by on informal work. As a result of rapid industrialization in the late 1950s and 1960s, its population increased fast with little or no effective lower income housing policies. As a result, many had to make do, using whatever space and resources were available. Human Development Index levels show extreme differences between different parts of the city.

The São Paulo municipal executive and legislative are separately elected with a mayor and a 55-seat council providing the institutional structure for city government. There have been numerous unsuccessful attempts over the years to create decentralized territorial coordination,

both with and without democratic governance arrangements. But while the current municipal law considers the 32 sub regions as "subprefectures" they have little direct budget allocation and even less powers of coordination (Grin, 2015; Tatagiba, 2008). Their basic activities are small scale public works and minor bureaucratic activities. Some of them, especially in the peripheral areas, can have populations of over 500,000 making them equal to some of the largest cities in State of São Paulo; but without any forms of representation or a guaranteed budget. On the surface, Brazilian public institutions could not be described as weak, but in the day to day they have considerable difficulty in reaching all parts of society both individually and collectively and the reactions to their presence can vary considerably.

Our study examined street-level service encounters from data drawn and recoded from two ongoing and complementary research programs which are outlined here and discussed in further detail in the methodological appendix (Supporting Information). In the first, interviews were carried out with 180 frontline workers from public service organizations in four most vulnerable east-zone districts of São Paulo (based on the district Human Development Index) as part of an ongoing research program on street-level workers in high inequality contexts in Brazil. The interviews included: 100 community health workers; 40 teachers; 20 nurses; and 20 social workers. They were asked to talk about successes and failures in their work; the easier and more difficult types of citizens they treat and how they deal with them in doing their jobs. All interviews took place during the same semester, were transcribed, and the material analyzed in NVivo software. The analysis followed a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2014) focusing on situations of trust and vulnerabilities in everyday life.

The second and complementary set of data was drawn from field study notebooks and case material from an inter-university urban field station that has been carrying out collaborative field research on questions of urban vulnerability since 2013 in two districts in the peripheral south zone of the city. In 1990s with a homicide ration of 98 per 100,000, one of these was considered the most violent place in the world, but since then investment in services and an even greater investment by activists, social organizations, cultural collectives and catholic parishes in social mobilization has produced significant changes. Still a working-class area with a number of small favelas and pockets of drug traffic, it is also home to many of the teachers, nurses and social workers who work in the area's hospitals, health units, schools and social service outreach organizations. Over the years, the station has built up links with forums, social organizations, cooperatives and activists concerned with the development of territorial based agendas (Spink, 2019).

4 | FINDINGS: UNPACKING TRUST—NARRATIVES FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

One of the most frequent comments made by activists when initial contacts were being made for the field station in 2013, was that the "state is absent." As researchers that seemed strange, there were public services and it was possible to physically map out locations and question what "absent" meant. There were problems with distribution, but there were a significant number of schools, health units, two hospitals and social service programs; the latter run by different territorially based non-profit social organizations a result of the municipality's practice of contracting out. Indeed, this region was considered by the municipal social services secretariat as one of the better equipped in the city. Yet the same expression kept cropping up in different conversations over the ensuing years and keeps on resurfacing in different forums, as in this comment

from an elderly activist: "We can do our part but if the state doesn't do its part we aren't going to go ahead and, worse, our youngsters begin to give up hope."

As it slowly emerged over the following years, this "state"—sometimes referred to by activists as "the public policies"—was a reference to the difficulty in finding solutions to everyday questions that often involved the interaction between different services and, at times, different levels of government. In the São Paulo south zone with its highly irregular physical geography, life is a very much a question of up or down. Travel between different services is difficult and usually on foot, either along winding roads or up and down huge staircases cut into the sides of hills. The more visible parts of the "state" apart from the São Paulo State police, with whom relationships are highly complicated, are the municipal community health workers who can be found in pairs with their distinctive bright blue cotton vests, their identity tags with photos and "community health worker" stamped on the back. They are much more likely than the police to stop by the various catholic parish offices and chat to the parish outreach workers, because being a member of the same territorial community is part of the selection process. The municipal social workers have very little external work and their contracted-out centers for children, young people and the elderly are also building bound although in this case contacts with parents and families are more present. The many schools can be found behind high walls with small gateways that are locked or guarded. Even if the staff of these different street-level activities had the time to "drop in" on each other, getting there would not be easy and there are few physical signs of it being welcome.

When comparing and contrasting the research material in the light of the guiding hypotheses, four interlocking themes were identified: fragile connections between street-level workers and agencies; fragile connections between citizens and agencies; prevalence of moral and social judgments in street-level workers' interactions with citizens; complexity and overload in work requirements.

4.1 | Fragile connections between street-level workers and agencies

The lack of practical connection between public agencies creates a scenario in which street-level workers feel that they are acting alone, powerless and with no support from the local government and little capacity of delivering services and solving problems. This concern with (dis)connection was present in over a quarter of the interviews carried out with frontline workers, as the following excepts show:

> We were taking care of two girls and we found out that they were being abused by their father. We managed to report this to the police. The girls told them everything that had happened; the father was arrested for a while and then he was soon released. We figured out that the mother and the grandmother knew, the evangelical church knew, and nobody did anything. They were protecting the father. As we are not part of the judicial process, we didn't have any more access to the case. He was released and went back home. We have to deal with these really difficult situations. (Community Health Worker)

In this case, frontline workers try to act, but they feel powerless and are not supported by the judicial system (state and federal) or even by the family and the local moral community, in this case the evangelical church. The feeling of the lack of connection and, at the same time,

the limit in their capacity of resolution becomes not only a source of frustration but can also lead to a lack of trust as these interview excerpts show:

> A girl was being abused by a family member. We had two options at that time. Either report it to the health authorities through the local health unit or go to the local bandits' den and say that such a person was abusing the girl. That would also work but I would probably be dead today If I had done that. But I wasn't going to just leave it and carry it around with me. I said, "Let's go to the right place" (the health unit), because I believed the network would work. When you work as a health agent you depend on the network, because otherwise your work is not properly done, it's only half a solution. We do such a beautiful job out there in the community. We may send someone to have a blood test at the health center and [for some reason] they come back without having made an appointment. If they are not well received and not made welcome, they go back to their communities and say they don't want to go there again. (Community Health Worker)

Midgley (2009) argues that the opposite of the conditions of social wellbeing is social "illfare," which exists when human needs (nutrition, health, shelter, security and income) are not met, social problems are not effectively managed and there are limited opportunities for improving life chances. Social problems mentioned are crime and delinquency, substance abuse, family violence and child neglect, some of which appear here:

> We have many stories of failure in the profession. When there are cases of violence against children, we try to trigger the statutory Guardian Council [Conselho Tutelar] for children and adolescents. It works? No. Cases of violence against the elderly we seek the advice of the councils for the elderly. It works? No. With cases of drug users in the family we tried with the special health centers for alcohol and drug addiction. It works? No. In the end we have to learn to deal with our anxiety and frustration, understanding that we will not solve these difficult family problems. (Community Health Worker)

One of the experimental research instruments of the field station is a list of sixteen public service agencies which have street-level workers in the region at both state and municipal level; running from the police through to pre-school day care centers (see Supporting Information). These are evaluated on an eight-point scale in terms of performance and interactivity. This runs from (1) "there is nothing in this area" through (4) "do their basic work with reasonable quality" to (7) "seek opportunities to talk about territorial actions with other units of other services" and finally (8) "participate in forums with other services and civil society to discuss how to improve their impact." In an initial test, this was answered by 26 different service professionals who were either team leaders or service coordinators, many of whom also lived in the region. Some 84% of all the ratings of the 16 service areas fell in the first four categories and only 5% in categories (7) and (8). A lack of connectivity seems to be a major issue in general, but in some key services it is highly critical. Discussing the results with the professionals confirmed the earlier concern with the "absent state." There are a good number of public services, but they are provided in different spaces (health clinics, social work centers, youth clubs, schools etc.), by different teams and are managed by different public structures and agencies (some state and some municipal) with different professional languages and priorities. This creates a general

feeling about disconnection, both for citizens and for street-level workers who feel themselves alone and, at times, in impossible situations where their decisions are not able to change vulnerable situations. As well as a sense of frustration and failure, there is a lack of trust in their own work and in the institutions they should serve.

4.2 | Fragile connections between citizens and agencies

Problems of connectivity greatly affect the capacity to solve urgent questions. Given the lack of a solid, transparent and relatively balanced relationship between the state and the citizens, the latter do not necessarily consider the former as their main reference when looking for access to rights or services and they may not recognize themselves (and their needs) in the offers being made. Youth services, for example, can often be type casted as being for "problem children." The following excerpts are from a study on the day to day of parents of children with different disabilities in the south zone, carried out by the field station to help one of the local forums raise questions about the lack of visibility of their demands within the general discussion on territorial vulnerability.

> I think that when it comes to children with special needs it should be made much easier—but it isn't. It's all complicated, we walk and walk, from door to door and people say "no." Take transport, to get the special pass you face a frightening bureaucracy, it's always difficult, nothing is easy. The free special bus pass is very difficult and when you get it you have to renew it every so often, and then it's the same thing. He has to go first to the neurologist (to get the declaration) and at times she is not available, and we have to wait, and I can't take him to his treatments because if I don't have the pass for him I can't get the pass for me as the person who looks after him. (Mother of an autistic child)

> (interviewer to another mother) But haven't you got the special bus pass?

> No, but I am going to apply for it because some other mothers told me what to do; these are things that we only learn through talking to one another—if nobody passes the news we don't know—this was something that I learnt from one of the mothers at the school gate when we talk together while waiting. You have to be prepared to run after these things, we don't know our rights because they are hidden...my daughter has the right to a lot of things that I don't know, but the little I know I chase after. Just now there was a special counter in the Shopping Center handing out those special parking permits [for cars carrying people with disability] but they didn't spread the information widely and I only knew on Saturday. By the time I got there it was too late, and I didn't have the proper stamp on the medical certificate—so I lost the card and will have to try again.

Information is the starting point for trust and the notion of collective rights. Following up these and other cases led to an analysis of information available for people with disability on the municipal web site—São Paulo is a city that prides itself on its digital connections. It was impossible to find anything of use without extensive searches which required inside knowledge of how the public sector talks to itself.

Here is another mother whose son was diagnosed at birth with cerebral palsy and there are suspicions of autism. They live in a small and simple house; his mother is working class and a church member.

> (Interviewer) What services does he need to use?
>
> He goes to the rehabilitation center for physiotherapy and sees the neurologist and the phono audiologist. They suspect he has autism but there is no diagnosis yet. He goes to the São Paulo Hospital (in the center of the city), but the consultations are very difficult to get, you have to keep going and checking: is the appointments agenda open? When they do it's for six months hence. Then I go by bus, it's three different buses to go and three to come back. When we get there, he is tired, the buses are full, and I have to stand up; at times he cries and shouts; people don't understand, and it takes time for someone to give him a seat. At the hospital it is the genetic specialist who deals with autism. He passed me a list of exams and said "This exam here, I need it, but I know that in the SUS (public health system) there is a long waiting list," I asked how long and he replied "currently two to three years, you have to get in the queue and when the exams are ready you bring them too me," "All that time doctor," "Yes all that time." I thought I had better see if there is another way and went to the rehabilitation center and the neurologist wrote out the list of exams (they are the same) and fortunately my husband had got a new job with a health plan included and we could do the exams that way with the new prescription; otherwise we couldn't afford them.

These excerpts show how citizens feel themselves disconnected form agencies and, therefore, from policies. They do not recognize the state as a reliable source of services and as a result they do not trust street-level workers and have no confidence in their ability to solve problems.

4.3 | Prevalence of moral and social judgments in street-level workers' interactions with citizens

Trust is key to social life but as mentioned earlier it can easily fall apart, especially in circumstances where nothing is very stable and moral choices place street-level workers way beyond the limits of normal discretion. The first excerpt is from an interview with a social worker where she emphasizes the widely used "unstructured family."

> What will you do when a teenager threatens you? There is nothing to do but try, change the strategies. We tried to do home visits, that didn't work; tried to talk to him get him to see sense, that also didn't work; let's try the social services center technical staff; and nothing worked. Unfortunately, afterwards, we heard that he had passed away. It was very sad because we tried so many alternatives. (...) [He] died at the age of 16. Like him as with other adolescents and children, it's a situation that the social services cannot handle... Because the family, his family wasn't structured, so he already had a family problem. Why was the family not structured? I think this has several elements. Health, education, if it had been possible for them to work together? I don't know. There are many hypotheses. (Social worker)

In this first situation the street-level worker was judging the family. In the second one, also from the East Zone, a community health worker was being judged by the citizens:

> There are many people who use drugs in the area I cover or who go there to buy drugs. But they know we don't get involved and don't talk about it, so they trust us. Once there was a rumor that I (yes me!) had taken a baby from a woman and thrown it in the bin. That part is really a shanty town (favela). So, the people were angry. I was doing my job that morning and didn't even know what was going on. When I got there, they showed me the photo on Facebook—"Look, see the photo of the baby." I replied that I didn't want to see that, that was not the right thing to do. Then the area drug dealer wanted to talk to me; he looked right at my face and said: "In this place people can talk a lot of bullshit, and you have to be careful. Did you do anything that made anyone think that you hurt that baby?" I said, "No, I vaccinate the dogs in the area and usually I have a syringe with me and a cooler for the vaccines. So, someone may have mistaken that. I would never do that." The drug dealer then said: "I can see it in your eyes that you did not do this." You see, they have a way of identifying what is right and what is wrong. (Community Health Worker)

These examples show how, in settings like these, official categories and formal procedures are not enough to categorize citizens and their needs. Street-level workers use their own moral judgments which are highly influenced by the views they have about citizens; both positive and negative.

4.4 | Complexity and policy overload in work requirements

Entry-level posts in many service agencies are also gatekeeper positions (Brodkin, 2012). As a result, those most in contact with the more complicated issues of service delivery are not the highly skilled back up teams in health, education and social work but those often at the beginning of their professional lives. In a setting where there are only a few complex cases, adequate supervision and time to discuss approaches, this can provide a positive learning curve. But in settings where every case is complex the reverse can be the case.

> I think that the idea of school is beginning to lose its meaning as an institution; schools became the panacea for all the social problems. We are being put in the position of having to solve all the problems that society has; people will say—it's a problem of education. We have problems of violence, of early pregnancy but it's not just the school, we can talk about violence and about sexuality, but the family is unstructured, falling apart. The schools will have to learn how to deal with this. Poverty is growing again, unemployment is increasing, and all the schools will have to change. (School teacher in the east zone)

> I have rights and duties, I have to do my part as an employee to help the population. But the population also has to do their part as a patient. And many do not, many like to fight, many like to curse, many speak ill of the health system and do not do their part. They just say "I want, I want, I want" but they don't want to know what they need to do right. (Nurse, in the south zone)

While the first interview illustrates well the complexity of the challenges being faced, the second brings in a different aspect of street-level worker community/citizen relationships; the expectation of what Weller (1999) described as coproduction. In contexts of overload in work requirement and lack of support, street-level workers make decisions based on what Jilke and Tummers (2018) call earned deservingness: they expect citizens to be committed and responsible for policy delivering and may even impose additional obligations when they do not trust the citizens.

5 | DISCUSSION

Quite a large number of service agencies and their frontline staff still manage to carry out their work, often under a lot of difficulty. Their agencies and services can be disconnected, creating an environment of multiple and overlapping policies whose delivery solves only part of the demands they face. Citizens, too, have to go to multiple services and comply with different rules in order to solve different part of their problems. Both can quickly become overloaded.

While some of the agencies are more visible to the population in the day to day, others more visible to specific groups. Collectively, the services and their street-level workers do not seem to make up a "state" from the point of view of citizens who are trying to solve their problems in precarious and vulnerable settings and often with a lack of key resources. The qualitative data in this sense reflects the survey data in the third part of this article. This suggests that, in these settings, street-level workers neither represent nor legitimize the state.

Relating back to the literature we see how street-level workers themselves feel powerless (Thomann et al., 2018), they do not trust the state and they do not feel themselves able to solve citizen's problems. They feel overloaded due to the size and complexity of the demand and find themselves introducing non official procedures and requirements and making moral judgments to justify decisions (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). Imposing additional obligations is also a reaction to settings in which they distrust both agencies and citizens yet seek to do their work as well as possible. In contexts like this, the use of moral judgments, rather than a mistake, is a constitutive part of policy delivery (Harrits, 2019; Rothstein & Teorell, 2008).

The findings are in line with the four hypotheses outlined in part two: first, the disconnection between policies, agencies and street-level workers who, in turn, second, are not seen by citizens as representatives of the state, which in turn, third, can lead to a lack of the mutual trust between citizens and street-level workers which is necessary for solving problems and effectively translating policy into action. Together this seems to create a vicious circle that maintains and justifies lack of trust.

If this shows something of the challenge to raise agency performance, the findings on the fourth hypothesis suggest that, at least in precarious settings characterized by high levels of social and material vulnerability, raising individual agency performance is not enough. Urban vulnerability is a product of multi-faceted circumstances that combine and conflict in different and at times highly complex ways for different households and families. Effective responses require not only inter-agency coordination, but the openness and skills for front-line staff to construct adequate forms of inter-service and street-level action and intervention. The lack of an effective inter-institutional framework to resolve difficult issues raises a very different form of institutional vulnerability from that normally associated with weak institutions. Here the institutions are not

weak, but they have great difficulty in working with each other both within the same jurisdiction and between the different tiers of federal arrangements; what have become known as questions of multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2003).

6 | CONCLUSION

This article set out to contribute to the general debate on the dynamics of trust in street level public service with a specific emphasis on lower-trust settings. Our focus were contexts in which reciprocal trust between public agencies and sectors of the population are in doubt and, more specifically, how this is present in everyday encounters of citizens and direct service providers or street-level workers.

Results show that taking the methodological perspective of street-level encounters is helpful in opening up many questions in the arena of trust and, by implication of governance. They also show how it is necessary to think beyond policy implementation and discretion and understand how frontline workers deal with moral judgments, as suggested by Harrits (2019), Dubois (1999) and Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003).

However, our findings also suggest that, at least in settings such as the one studied, the normally assumed central role of single agency performance as a lever for democratic change or as guarantor of everyday trust needs serious rethinking. Results point to the need to distinguish between the view, present in much of the literature, of the specific agency and its frontline agent as representative of the state and the view of the state as derived from the capacity of different agencies to work together in resolving the very specific problems present in the day to day of those facing social and material vulnerability.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All qualitative data are available in Portuguese under request for the authors.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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