

Street-level netocracy: rules, discretion and professionalism in a network-based intervention

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to analyse the meaning and extension of discretionary power of social service professionals within network-based interventions.

Design/methodology/approach – Empirically, the paper is based on a case study of a network-based policy involving private and public organisations in the Northeast of Italy (Province of Trento).

Findings – The paper identifies netocracy as a social policy logic distinct from bureaucracy and professionalism. What legitimises netocracy is neither authority nor expertise but cooperation, the activation of connections and involvement, considered “good” *per se*. In this framework, professionalism and discretion acquire new and problematic meanings compared to street-level bureaucracy processes.

Research limitations/implications – Based on a case study, the research results cannot be generalised but pave the way to further comparative investigations.

Practical implications – The paper reveals that the position of professionals in netocracy is to some extent trickier than that in a bureaucracy because netocracy seems to have the power to encapsulate them and make it less likely for them to deviate from expected courses of action.

Originality/value – Combining different literature streams – street level bureaucracy, professionalism, network organisations and welfare governance – and building on an original case study, the paper contributes to understanding professionalism in welfare contexts increasingly characterised by the combination of bureaucratic, professional and network logics.

Keywords Street-level bureaucracy, Netocracy, Network-level bureaucracy, Network-based interventions, Welfare governance, Professionalism, Discretion

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The study of professionalism (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972) and of street-level bureaucracy (SLB) (Lipsky, 1980) originated in the United States and developed in the Anglo-Saxon and Northern European contexts, where both perspectives addressed the role of professionals' discretionary power in the implementation of (a.o. welfare) policies within large bureaucratic organisations. In the past two decades, a revival of these approaches occurred, reflecting on changing professionalism and discretionary power due to the introduction of new policy ideas and goals – namely activation – and of new management approaches – e.g. new public management (Freidson, 2001; Duyvendak *et al.*, 2006; Northdurfter and Hermans, 2018).

Social service professionals (SSPs) and street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) working in weaker welfare states have hardly been studied, as in the case of Italy. This does not come as a



surprise: it is difficult to frame a limited number of SSPs with a relatively late and modest degree of professionalisation who manage territorially fragmented and uncoordinated services in a weaker bureaucratic and often particularistic environment as “professionals” or “street-level bureaucrats”. Yet, there has been an increasing attention to SSPs from a SLB (Saruis, 2015; Barberis *et al.*, 2019; Leonardi *et al.*, 2021; Perna, 2021) and a professionalism perspective (Da Roit and Busacca, 2021). The ongoing attempts to transform the Italian welfare state probably played a role in fostering interest for SSPs. The stepwise introduction of a national system of income protection (Jessoula and Natili, 2020) and of active labour market policies (Borghi and Van Berkel, 2007; Jessoula and Natili, 2020), and measures directed to migration flows have increased the scope of locally-implemented national and regional regulations and therefore the relevance of SLB processes (Giacomelli, 2021; Dallara and Lacchei, 2021). At the same time, these new policies also fostered the emergence of new professional profiles and the transformation of existing ones (Da Roit and Busacca, 2021).

The type of questions addressed through a SLB framework in the Italian context are similar to those characterising the new wave of SLB studies in stronger welfare states: do professionals allow, support or obstruct the implementation of welfare reforms? and, in doing so, how do they contribute to (re)shaping public policies, on the one hand, and professionalism, on the other? (Cohen and Klenk, 2019). However, the application of the SLB framework to weaker welfare systems has hardly considered differences across contexts. As argued by Schott *et al.* (2016), the sociology of professions, strongly focussed on professional knowledge, autonomy and norms, has traditionally paid little attention to the relationship between professionalism and context in terms of organisational and societal pressures. On a similar vein, the rising debate on SLB has largely overlooked how different institutional contexts shape the interaction between policy reforms and professionals’ strategies.

This article aims at contributing to recent and developing scholarship that, applying SLB to the Global South, draws attention to the different meanings of SLB in social and political environments characterised by weaker democratic traditions, higher inequalities, diffuse clientelism and corruption and limited efficacy of public policy implementation (Lotta *et al.*, 2022; Leonardi *et al.*, 2021; Peeters and Campos, 2022).

In particular, the ways in which professionalism and discretion take shape in a context like the Italian one requires a reconsideration of “bureaucracy” as the environment in which professionals act. First, welfare institutions are traditionally less bureaucratic than in stronger welfare states: social service policies and implementation are territorially fragmented and unequal, are little standardised, and can count on limited (organisational) resources (Kazepov, 2010). Second, the recent introduction of “networks” as the basic organisation of welfare interventions provides a different context for the deployment of professional action and discretion. Consistently with European trends (Kazepov *et al.*, 2022) and in an attempt to overcome the structural lack of resources, territorial social policies have increasingly embraced “welfare mix” strategies (Borzaga and Fazzi, 2022) including the involvement of local communities, the activation of private actors, co-planning and co-design (Iaione, 2016) and innovation (Busacca, 2019). “Network-based local social interventions” have emerged as an attempt to combine local government’s planning and design with that of third sector and grassroots organisations. Here, SSPs are responsible to activate, e.g. neighbours, associations, cooperatives, municipalities, enterprises in order to design and deliver interventions.

Interestingly, the transformations that are now taking place in the Italian context have been identified by the social work literature already since the 1980s (Whittington, 1983) and thematised from a welfare governance perspectives (Jessop, 1999; Rummery, 2006; Fimreid and Laegreid, 2009). However, there is still a missing link between these two types of analyses, which a SLB/professionalism approach can help fill.

The article aims at contributing theoretical and empirical knowledge on the contextualisation of discretion and professionalism within network-based interventions. Building on the SLB approach, it contends that a network set-up provides specific sets of opportunities and constraints for social service professionals to interpret and implement policies. Empirically, the paper is based on a case study of a network-based policy involving in the autonomous Province of Trento (in the Northeast of Italy, a context that can be considered “advanced” within a weak welfare state). Besides offering contextualised knowledge of how social policies and professionalism develop in understudied welfare systems, the article provides insights into “street-level netocracy” – as opposed or complementary to “street-level bureaucracy”. The findings are relevant for understanding the implications of the re-organisation of the welfare state (Kazepov *et al.*, 2022) and the shift from bureaucracies to networks or their coexistence well beyond the studied context.

2. From street-level bureaucracy to street-level netocracy: analytical framework

Discretion represents the key link between the logic of professionalism and the SLB approach (Noordegraaf, 2007; Evans, 2010). According to Freidson (2001), bureaucracy and professionalism are distinct and sometimes conflicting logics. Bureaucracy is characterised by standardisation, rules and procedures designed to achieve efficiency and control. Professionalism is based on autonomy and expertise. Discretion makes it possible for the two logics to coexist insofar as professionals are allowed to interpret rules and regulations according to expert knowledge, ethical and moral standards. The SLB approach emphasises the importance of frontline workers who are in contact with clients in applying public policies: social service professionals use their discretionary power to interpret policy aims and instruments, and they mediate between given rules and regulations, available resources and the clients’ (non) claims (Hupe, 2013). Thanks to discretion, SLBs interpret and apply rules in order to respond to beneficiaries’ requests, even when rules and requests conflict with each other (Leonardi *et al.*, 2021). Discretion refers to the ability of social service workers to make judgments and decisions based on the negotiation between rules and regulations and their ideas, values, knowledge and experiences. As a result, discretion may foster or hinder the reaching of given policy goals, and it may allow or impede responsiveness to the needs of the clients (Evans and Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980), depending on the interplay between professional values and beliefs, policy orientations and beneficiaries’ interests and resources.

Professional identities and room for manoeuvre are embedded in different institutional conditions (Nygren *et al.*, 2018). In particular, what happens to professionals’ discretion within organisations that do not resemble traditional bureaucracies and in which interventions take the form of networks?

In bureaucracies, orders follow a hierarchical line starting from nodes with greater power toward nodes with less power to control, evaluate and direct subordinates, based on specific policy directions. Professionals disregard, re-interpret or integrate these orders, applying the discretionary power “within norms” to facilitate the adaptation of interventions to the needs of the clients; “between norms” to fill gaps, inaccuracies or inconsistencies across rules and regulations; and “beyond norms” when they clash with professional standards (Barberis *et al.*, 2019).

In principle, bureaucracies are networks. Yet, from a governance perspective, network-based organisations differ from bureaucracies as they lack a clear central authority (Podolny and Page, 1998). In network organisations, goals, rules, tasks that make the object of professional discretion are not (exclusively) conveyed according to a hierarchical logic but by a heterarchy (Stark, 1999), where there is no single central authority that makes all the decisions or controls all resources. These features of network-based organisations are likely to change discretionary processes in several ways.

First, the object of professional discretion is not the same. In network organisations the rules that need to be interpreted are not equivalent to bureaucratic rules, as organisations featuring more decentralisation and diversity require professionals not simply to implement policies, but to produce them, together with other actors. This opens up as a key theoretical and empirical issue concerning professionals' discretion.

Second, if functions, roles and power are distributed, different actors may have the possibility to define the rules and interpret them. Social service professionals acquire managerial functions alongside their traditional caring roles (Postle, 2001) that allow them to participate in decision making while maintaining implementation and caring roles. Yet, other actors, that are not traditionally considered as SLBs, may compete (or cooperate) with SSPs to interpret the clients' needs. As a result, understanding professionalism and SLB requires a study of a whole network and not just of professionals within it.

Third, there is a need to address the guiding principles of the application of discretion. Social service professionals apply discretion within the boundaries of professional knowledge and ethics. Yet, while professionals appear to share common traits across organisations and countries – a common professional ethos and understandings of their role (Nygren *et al.*, 2018) – their practices do develop within organizations (Muzio and Kirkpatrick, 2011) and welfare regimes (Rush and Keenan, 2013). SSPs are constrained by regulations and are subject to oversight, review and evaluation by the organisations and agencies in which they operate. Network-based organisations are internally interdependent and tend to display specific values and dispositions, e.g. a “trusting ethic” as a specific feature that distinguishes it from bureaucracies (Podolny and Page, 1998). Professionals act based on a specific professional ethic in mediating between the decisions of the organisation and the (perceived) needs and claims of the clients. In network-based organisations, this puts them in the challenging position to strike a balance between a professional ethic and the network's ethic.

Finally, as much as not all (welfare) bureaucratic organisations are the same and they provide different institutional contexts for professional action, not all networks are the same. The form of the network and the type of ties and of that characterise it (Granovetter, 2017) likely influence all the above mechanisms shaping professional discretion.

Within this framework, addressing “street-level netocracy” entails investigating which rules form the object of discretion, how they are defined and by whom and how they reach professionals; which actors – including professionals – exert discretionary power in implementing policies and based on which ideas and norms; how professionals juggle between their own expert and ethical standards and the ethical norms that characterise the network; which features the network-based intervention shape, enhance or limit the discretionary power of professionals.

3. A case-study of network-based interventions

The research is based on a study of the Territorial Family Districts (TFDs) of the autonomous province of Trento, in the Northeast of Italy.

Without the ambition of being representative of the Italian welfare policy implementation, the TFDs represent a suitable case for several reasons. First, they are embedded in an “advanced” context within a weak welfare state: the province displays the highest per-capita social spending in Italy (Istat, 2018), is endowed with a high level of social capital within the Italian context (Sabatino, 2019), and is one of the richest social economy systems in the country. As such, the case does share several weaknesses with the Italian welfare state, while presenting sufficient professional and welfare resources to make the dynamics of professionalism and SLB more explicit and observable. Second, the case study provides a good example of network-based local interventions as it is founded on local networks of individuals and public and private organisations that aim to establish initiatives, services

and interventions for families (Malfer, 2018; Agency for Social Cohesion, 2019). Third, network-based interventions are particularly developed in the area (Sacchetti and Tortia, 2016) allowing us to observe processes of professionalism, SLB and discretion in a context that has structurally incorporated this approach. Fourth, since, in the Italian welfare panorama, the province of Trento is generally considered as a model to look at, it is likely to represent an influential reference point for the development of social policies in other areas.

The research activities were carried out between September 2020 and May 2022. During the first phase (October 2020–February 2021), we analysed policy documents issued by the Agency for Social Cohesion in the Province of Trento, the public body responsible for the coordination and implementation of social policies at the provincial level. To understand the policy framework, we selected relevant documents from an online repository (<https://www.trentinofamiglia.it/Documentazione/Pubblicazioni>) focussing on annual reports, work programmes, guidelines and proceedings of meetings and events organised by the TFDs.

The second phase consisted of an online survey with key informants involved in the network. The Agency provided us with the contact details of two key informants per District – one institutional representative and one coordinating professional. We conducted an online meeting with 26 of these key actors, during which we illustrated the purpose of the research and of the survey, and we asked them to indicate other key actors in the network. The survey aimed at investigating the actual network's activities, the different roles of the nodes and the relationship among them, and the provision of services and initiatives for the beneficiaries. A total number of 79 key informants (between 3 and 5 per District) completed the questionnaire through Mentimeter.

The third phase of the research consisted in an ethnographic study. We observed meetings, seminars, events, and training courses (23 sessions for a total of 70 h over a period of 12 months). After a first period of observation, we organised focus groups with key figures from the TFDs to explore attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and experiences. We held six online focus groups that lasted about two hours each, composed of six to nine participants. Overall, 39 participants were involved in the focus groups: 30 professionals with coordinating and/or operative functions – e.g. social workers, psychologists, educators – and 9 institutional representatives involved in the network.

The selected policy documents, the field notes and the focus groups transcripts were coded and subsequently analysed according to the emerging topics, using Atlas.ti.

4. Findings

In what follows, we present the findings: the setup and functioning of the networks, the professionals' position within them and their possibility to exert professional discretion.

4.1 *The policy context and the network*

The Agency for Social Cohesion has a wide-ranging mission and plays a key role in the Province's social policies. Founded in 2011 with the aim of coordinating and implementing initiatives to support the wellbeing of families, to foster natality and prevent the abandonment of mountain areas, it has progressively acquired key functions in other policy areas (e.g. active labour market policies, youth programs). Municipalities remain responsible for social interventions. Yet, the Agency has developed a legitimacy through fostering and coordinating social interventions, specific programs, training and organisational support in favour of local public bodies and a vast range of non-profit providers, and the involvement of stakeholders – universities, foundations, social enterprise – in the design, implementation and evaluation of social projects. One of the assumptions at the basis of the Agency is that networks are generative of resources and capacities (Malfer, 2018). Within this framework, the Agency facilitates the relationship between public and private organisations, across the different territorial levels.

The TFDs fully reflect this approach. Defined as “economic, cultural, educational locally-based circuits in which there are organisations different in nature” (Agency for Social Cohesion, 2019), their goal is to create a strong sense of community and provide opportunities for families. TFDs are responsible to organise and supply services with the aim of increasing birth rates and the (re)population of mountain territories through improvements in the economic system and in the quality of life and local welfare innovation.

TFDs are territorially defined, based on administrative, identity, historical and economic criteria. The scale of interventions is at the level of the Valley community, a geographical and administrative perimeter between the Province and the Municipalities. There are 16 TFDs corresponding to 15 Valley Communities (only one Valley Community is split into two networks).

Diverse organisations constitute the TFDs. According to data from 2021, of the 879 organisations involved 15% were municipalities and 13% other public entities – e.g. schools, public libraries, museums, social service agencies. Private organisations (78%) included non-profit organisations – e.g. social cooperatives, cultural and sport associations – and for-profit organisations – e.g. farms, hotels, restaurants, commercial services (ca 20% of the total) (Agency for Social Cohesion, 2021). Yet, the single TFDs are rather heterogeneous in terms of number of members (from 20 to 137) and their diversity.

Individuals in different capacities participate in the networks. First, each Valley Community mandates one institutional representative (IR), alongside one “Territorial Manager” (TM), chosen from a list of professionals trained and certified by the Agency to activate, animate and support the TFD. Second, several public and non-profit organisations entrust their participation in the network to professionals including social workers, psychologist, youth workers, and community workers. Third, there are representatives of local political organisations, such as municipal council members. Finally, individual delegates represent the participant for-profit organisations.

As a result, professionals in different capacities (TMs and representatives of public and non-profit organisations) interact with policymakers and representatives of commercial organisations in designing and implementing interventions, such as training programmes, events, management of support centres and counselling services. At the same time, they also have an operational, street-level role, as they are in direct contact with the beneficiaries during implementation. Furthermore, professionals do not have an exclusive role in either function: they share the definition of policies with policy makers, and both policy making and implementation with non-professional commercial actors.

Participants hold frequent coordination meetings (from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 30 times each trimester across the Districts) and co-design meetings (an average of 12 across the different districts, with a maximum of 31 meetings per year). They also organise numerous events (from a minimum of 6 to a maximum of 150, with an average of 27 each year) where the network’s members reach out to other local actors.

The TFDs exert an indirect influence on local social policies. In the Province there exists a vast range of services and cash benefits directed to families (in particular but not only with small children) administered by the Municipalities based on own or earmarked funding. In the early implementation of the TDF model, the link between the Districts and local policies was weaker as TFDs were supposed to “influence” municipal policies. More recently, the Districts have acquired the responsibility to “certify” municipal policies as “family friendly” under a logic of peer pressure, benchmarking and nudging.

4.2 Networking as professional work

The professionals active in the TFDs are seen and see themselves, primarily, as network creators and developers. This is the main mission of the TMs, but also of many social workers, educators and psychologists representing public and non-profit organisations. Not

only policymakers but also professionals active in the networks appear to have fully internalised the perspective that networks are an effective strategy to cope with complex problems when scarce resources are available and entail an almost automatic link with innovation. According to many of them, a diversified and high-quality group of local actors can bring new perspectives, ideas and resources to the network, which leads, in turn, to the emergence of new and innovative practices and solutions:

Any type of project could really be activated because the subjects are public, private, belong to the world of culture, catering, hotels. This is the key characteristic of the TFDs. (Focus Group n.1; Institutional Representative)

The ability, influence, skills of the TM, of the IR and of leading nodes in animating the network are seen as key for the effectiveness of the Districts:

The functioning of the networks depends on key figures – especially Territorial Managers, Institutional Representatives and other local leaders – who play an animating role. (Focus Group n.5; policy maker).

Yet, all professionals are asked to and do create, organise and facilitate offline social networks. Their role is to bring people and organisations together through community events, volunteer opportunities or support groups, in order to build relationships and foster a sense of community. They may act as facilitators, helping to connect people with similar interests or needs, or organise events and activities that bring people together. They may also act as a resource themselves: they provide information, tools and resources that can help individuals and groups to build and maintain their own networks. They interact with a variety of local organisations, such as community centres, schools, churches, non-profit organisations and enterprises. Largely, they function as brokers:

I try to keep the TFD members updated on what is happening. I also meet frequently to motivate the TFD representatives so that they feel a certain responsibility to create a real community (Focus Group n.3; Territorial Manager).

Professionals tend to see their interactions with clients as part of their networking responsibilities as well. They focus their attention on their own ability to attract, include, potential clients and foster their “participation” in the network’s activities, more than on the interventions themselves:

Where people [clients] do not participate it means we have communication problems because we have failed to capture their attention and attract them. So we have to be able to contact people, understand what they need, share information with them . . . (Focus Group n.2; Territorial Manager)

In this framework, professionals – which we label “netocracts” – spend most of their time and energy navigating through one-on-one, small group and large-group meetings, their planning, implementation and assessment. The more time and effort professionals devote to involving and activating network members, the greater the results in terms of new memberships and initiatives promoted. In a way, creating, maintaining, enlarging the network becomes an end in itself and is seen as an indicator of the effectiveness of the intervention:

Being there, seeing each other is the only real way to create a network that is not just theoretical. Seeing each other and being there in this sense is the real role of TMs (Focus Group n.2; Territorial Manager).

Hence, the main “rule”, objective, aim these professionals have to implement is not a content-related intervention, but rather a networking imperative. It is within this general framework that professionals may use their discretionary power: how to direct their networking effort,

how much and what to invest in it and into which direction. Being a qualified and careful networker is a requirement for all involved professionals; it provides a measure of their expert knowledge and allows them to exert a certain degree of discretionary power:

You need to pay attention when you try to involve a local actor, meet them many times, explain the opportunities the TFD offers, how they could contribute to the TFD . . . if you are too quick and don't put in the energy needed to get them involved, the actors don't participate (Focus Group n.5; Territorial Manager)

The decision to invest more or less time to prepare a network event or to consider a network member inactive and thus to gradually leave them out of decision-making and planning processes are ways through which professionals exert discretion and therefore influence the network membership and the implementation of single initiatives.

Yet, professionals share their discretionary power with other professionals and with non-professionals, i.e. policymakers and other actors of the network. Political and economic actors are "necessary" parts of the networks, as illustrated by this IR of a TDF:

To make a plan work you need a good orchestra director. I feel sorry when I hear that the aldermen are not there, in the partnership. If they are not there, I do understand the difficulties. It is necessary to make associations understand the opportunity of joining. The network works a bit like a tree: you look for public and private alliances, agreements; you see if there are associations and municipalities that want to invest time into the projects (Focus Group n.3; Institutional Representative)

These public and private actors have intertwined interests that clearly emerge in the observations, and in many instances are able to reorient the course of action of the networks. In many occasions, we observed how influential commercial companies were able to condition decision making and the design of interventions. For instance, an important food-producing company taking part in one TFD represented a relevant source of income for social cooperatives that are part of the network as well, which they contract for carrying out agricultural work in the area. Furthermore, the company regularly sponsored the network's events. Thanks to their position, the company representatives were consistently able to "suggest" courses of action that all other network members would accommodate without much discussion. As a result, the network strategically chose to develop activities, e.g. employment promotion, in the area of food production rather than in alternative economic areas reorienting the social economy of the District. Furthermore, in several other Districts, we found that commercial actors – as in the case of large scale tourist companies employing a large number of workers in the area – represented important political resources for policymakers in the network.

4.3 Netocrats between policy design and implementation

While networking absorbs a great proportion of the professionals' energies and occupies a major role in their narratives (and in policy objectives), TFDs also have substantive objectives and deploy resources and soft power to reach them. From this perspective, professionals embedded in participating public and non-profit organisations find themselves in a double role, which they openly acknowledge. On the one hand, they participate in the networks' decision-making processes – e.g. the formulation of plans, programs, guidelines, budgets. Interestingly, they often refer to their contribution to policy design as "bureaucratic" work. Subsequently, in the interventions' implementation phase, they are involved in direct relationships with clients. The observations revealed a double pressure that the professionals' reflections in the focus groups confirmed. They need to face the needs, requests and demands of the individuals and families they take care of, on the one hand. Yet, in doing so they have to take into account the expectations of the network:

As far as I'm concerned, there is a bit of a split in the activity. On the one hand, [there is] the bureaucratic role, planning, preparing the guidelines and programme of activities of the TFD with the strategic group, which are then shared through the calendar and promotion. And then [there is] another part, that of support, of meeting with groups and families . . . In this role I have to be very careful to respect the desires and ideas of the members of the TFD and the Valley Community (Focus Group n.5; Territorial Manager).

As a specific type of pressure, professionals need to deal with the competing time demands of the network and the clients. The large amount of time spent on networking and on the planning the activities reduces considerably the time and energy professionals can devote to clients. This contradiction raises frustration and makes them perceive their work as inefficient and draining professional energy:

. . . a lot of meetings aimed at setting up the TFD . . . also continuous exchanges and discussions to maintain this network. However we can't dedicate sufficient time to actually doing things [implementing the measures] because we have so much to do and so little (Focus Group n.1; Territorial Manager)

Bureaucratic work takes occupies most of the time and reduces the human aspect. (Focus Group n.5; Territorial Manager)

Furthermore, the professionals feel a discrepancy between the policy and administrative set up in terms of resources and planning and the perceived needs of the clients. In particular, they argue that the rules – in this case the *bureaucratic* rules concerning budgeting and the amount of available resources which they do not have control over – do not match needs:

Provincial funding is yearly funding, but we cannot work with yearly funding. It would be important to get a budget for two or three years, like the Municipal budget. [. . .] If they do not give us legs to walk on we can only delude people. Because we do not have legs ourselves. (Focus Group n.6; Territorial Manager)

In addition, especially TMs experience a tension between the policy network logic and their professional logic. They feel that the individual interests of the network's nodes animate and orient the TFDs' activities pushing them away from designing and implementing more universalistic interventions that would better fulfil their professional ethic.

It is very tiring when I tell the partners or new potential participants what the meaning of the District is. They hardly understand it because what prevails is a logic of economic return. (Focus Group n.1; Territorial Manager)

Finally, there is a clash between the professional logic and the political logic. While professionals claim to be acting based on objectives that are inherent with their professionalism, they see a threat in the potential discontinuity in political representation. For instance, a TM illustrates the "problem" of elections:

It is like Sisyphus labour: every time we need to start from scratch when local policymakers change. Of course, it is a necessary price to be paid, because political representation is important and change is necessary. But they should be more aware, more responsible. When they make the [electoral] lists or when they name an alderman, they should explain to them that taking part in the District's network is not just occupying a chair, it is not just a matter of being there. There is a need to maintain the previous commitments and to keep up with them for four or five years. (Focus Group n.5; Territorial Manager)

This double pressure from the "policy" – i.e. the network, the limited resources, time constraints, political orientation – and from professional standards – attention to the clients, to needs, to professional ethics – is typical of professionals working in bureaucratic organisations. The way professionals deal with it is at the core of the SLB approach. Also here, we did find professional strategies that go beyond, feel the gaps and go against policy mandates.

First, with respect to the “bureaucratic burden”, we observed a strategy of self-reduction of paperwork enacted by the TMs in accordance with the IRs. Since they perceived an excess of administrative work hindering their ability to relate to clients, some TMs decided to cut on the production of minutes, reports and other internal communication. TMs explain this going against the rules as a way of reaching the policy goals. Interestingly, the justification of their action is more based on a bureaucracy vs network opposition, rather than bureaucracy vs professionalism:

There is a weakness in hierarchy [...] There is the Valley Community and there are the Municipalities. And the approach is that typical of the public sector. Top-down. There is a rigid protocol that limits our communication, the spontaneity of our proposal, our ability to reach the people we need to reach . . . This is the problem. (Focus Group n.6; Territorial Manager)

A district emerges by nature from below. It works only if bureaucracy is limited. Because bureaucracy limits creativity. I do not believe a District entangled in bureaucracy can ever work properly. (Focus Group n.6; Territorial Manager)

Second, we could spot instances where professionals went beyond and to some extent against the rules in order to reach professionally-relevant goals. A telling example refers to a project directed to the repopulation of remote areas where public institutions made available housing for young families. Successful applicants should meet a number of socio-economic requirement and be available to engage in the project. Professionals had to face a shortage of qualified applications (according to the rules) and applications that were formally suitable, but, according to their professional expertise, would not match the project’s final aims – the applicant families would not be able to adapt to the context. Against this background, professionals went “against” the rules by discarding non-adapted applications and “beyond” the rules by actively seeking interested families also outside the provincial boundaries.

4.4 Professional discretion and netocracy

While the above examples testify a potential conflict between the rules established by the network and the possible strategies to reinterpret them that recall the dynamic of SLB, our findings also point to sharp differences. In our network-based intervention, discretionary power appears to take a different shape, at least for two intertwined reasons.

First, professionals have to comply with policy expectations that originate in a process where they have played an active role. Taking part and investing a lot of time and energy in defining the rules they are expected to apply puts them in the contradictory position of having to cope with and interpret something for which they are co-responsible. Interestingly, many professionals try to legitimate their sometimes-awkward position by underlining their role in giving voice to the clients and the communities in those very processes. Their participation in decision-making finds justification in their ability to give voice to the clients:

We want to be a medium to build occasions for people and for the community to grow, to improve themselves. We bet on participation, we listen to citizens and their needs and what they would like to become. (Focus Group n.4; Territorial Manager)

Second, the designed network-based interventions tends to be seen as positive *per se*, because they are the result of the shared beliefs, values, ideas, resources and routines of the local community and its actors represented in the network. The network itself is perceived as the most positive and strongest feature of the policies in which they are involved.

Our strength is the network that we created throughout the years. We worked on our relationships with the municipalities, the schools, the associations. (Focus Group n.4; Territorial Manager)

Cooperation is crucial. We are a District with [number] participants. We have a bit of everything. This way you can create new things, we are open to each other and we want to create new things. (Focus Group n.3; Territorial Manager)

In our particular case, this process is also enhanced by the features of the networks, which are closely knit and display strong ties. Professionals, policy makers and economic agents spend a lot of time together in the framework of the districts' activities, but they also know each other well and meet outside office hours as part of their private life. As our observations reveal, these close relationships strengthen a sense of "community" and enhance trust, on the one hand, but also makes it difficult to raise problems, to oppose existing power relations, to question the outcomes of decision-making processes.

Professionals sometimes do see limitations in the "moral worth" of the network. For instance, they raise the issue of diverging interests and particularism across the network:

Partners need to obtain an immediate advantage, and the other point of weakness is linked to the territory, and is the very strong parochialism. There is little awareness of being able to do something outside one's own municipality (Focus Group n.1; Territorial Manager).

Yet, to an extent, the moral characterisation of the intervention makes it difficult to challenge it from a professional ethical perspective. Even when the interventions are not working – e.g. the initiatives do not meet the needs of the clients and resources could be better directed elsewhere – it is difficult for them to identify different beneficiaries, criticise the network-based interventions as non-functional, highlight particularism and parochialism.

Both mechanisms limit the possibility to critically assess the policies from a professional ethical and expert knowledge perspective and reducing the possibilities for "interpreting" policies and going beyond it.

Even when professionals attempts at deviating from the rules, policies and behaviour established by the network, it is the network itself that activates mechanisms to limit their autonomy. In several cases where the TDFs had decided to invest resources primarily in specific economic areas – e.g. tourism or agriculture – we have observed some TMs trying to implement the interventions by reconnecting them with youth policies. This happened for several reasons: the idea that they would be closer to needs, the integration of resources, even practical motives given that many professionals are involved in the implementation of youth policies as well. Overall, the processes we observed led, after a phase of negotiations between professionals and other nodes of the networks, to professionals giving up. This failure to deviate from the policy derived from the fear of losing important nodes of the network. Therefore, while not possessing a coercive power, the network with its internal balance of power, influence and leadership functions as a powerful regulatory mechanism limiting professional autonomy.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The case-study presented above aimed at investigating the role of discretion and professionalism within welfare organisations that do not take the traditional shape of welfare bureaucracies, but of networks. Before discussing our results, we would like to point to the limitations of the study, which also indicate possibilities for further investigation. The research operations suffered from the restrictions imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic that obliged us to redirect most observation to networking activities rather than to the actual implementation of the measures. Strong cooperation with the Agency allowed us to enter the field and supported us greatly in data collection. Yet, it may have biased the (self) selection of the participants in the initial meeting and in data collection. Possibly due to a combination of these conditions, the voices that are mostly represented in the study are those of the Territorial Managers and of the IRs. Moreover, our findings mostly focus on the network

models, while bureaucratic processes remain very important within each organisation. In this research, we did not specifically focus on how bureaucracies and networks interact. Notwithstanding these limitations, we believe the evidence and analysis provide a relevant contribution to the literature and potentially useful reflections for professionals, policy makers and stakeholders.

Our case study shows the emergence of a different social policy logic, netocracy, which coexists with bureaucracy and professionalism. While bureaucracy features standardisation, rules and procedures hierarchically organised and enforced to achieve efficiency and control, and professionalism is founded in autonomy, discretion and expertise (Freidson, 2001), netocracy is based on the belief that social policy goals can best be reached by involving diverse actors which define policy goals and instruments, administer and exchange resources, evaluate the outcome of their activities. What legitimises netocracy is neither authority nor expertise but cooperation, the activation of connections and involvement, which are deemed as “good” *per se*. The social policy governance literature has touched upon the development of network-based social interventions that form the premise of netocracy (Jessop, 1999; Kazepov *et al.*, 2022). Yet, it has not fully developed an understanding of its implications for social policy design and implementation and, in particular, for the position and role of social service professionalism. In our case study, the network becomes a policy objective in itself: social policy actors – among these professionals – engage and invest time and resources in creating, enlarging, maintaining a network. Established goals, measures, instruments, schemes are positively assessed *because* they emerge from the network. The participants in the network do see the unbalances in power, the influence exerted by specific political and economic actors, but they hardly do anything about it because those very actors make the network and the related policies viable.

Networking becomes a constitutive part of social service professionalism, in more extensive ways than the literature observed earlier (Whittington, 1983; Fimreite and Laegreid, 2009). The professionals’ participation in the network entails their partaking in decision-making processes alongside non-professional political and economic actors, which produce the rules they will have to implement. Apparently, all this increases their margin of autonomy and the influence of their expert knowledge on policy design. Yet, the netocratic practices also absorb considerable time and energy, which are subtracted to other professional tasks and responsibilities. In addition, the policy design process appears strongly influenced by the political and economic equilibrium of the network. As a result, within this netocratic logic, professionals experience typical SLB competing pressures between following the rules and adapting, integrating, interpreting them so that they can best meet (in their view) the needs of the clients and of the community (Leonardi *et al.*, 2021). However, their position in netocracy is to some extent trickier than that in bureaucracy. Netocracy seems to have the power to encapsulate them and make it less likely for them to deviate from their expected course of action. In our case, this happens based on two mechanisms. First, professionals are part of the decision-making process and are therefore less likely to be able to distance themselves from it. Second, the moral worth assigned to the network seems to de-legitimize going beyond and against the network’s rules. As such, netocracy provides an efficient regulatory mechanism that limits rather than enhancing professional autonomy. We therefore make the hypothesis that the more the network is characterised by strong ties and frequent interactions, the more it acts as a constraint on professional discretion. Within of a weak network, it is likely that hierarchical orders from within each organisation tend to prevail, re-establishing more classical SLB processes.

Our case study is obviously not representative of the Italian context nor of any network-based intervention and does not allow generalisation. The network-based intervention we studied is embedded in a very specific territorial context featuring a relatively strong local social policy system within a weak welfare state. Close-knit relationships between social,

political and economic actors are reflected in the design of the policy itself (Malfer, 2018; Sacchetti and Tortia, 2016). Yet, the study does point to a number of relevant mechanisms and allow the elaboration of working hypotheses that could be further investigated based on a comparative strategy of either bureaucratic vs network-based interventions in a homogeneous context or of network-based interventions in different welfare and social contexts.

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