

Hassan, Mohammed Salah; Ariffin, Raja Noriza Raja; Mansor, Norma; Halbusi, Hussam Al

## Article

# An examination of street-level bureaucrats' discretion and the moderating role of supervisory support: Evidence from the field

Administrative Sciences

## Provided in Cooperation with:

MDPI – Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, Basel

*Suggested Citation:* Hassan, Mohammed Salah; Ariffin, Raja Noriza Raja; Mansor, Norma; Halbusi, Hussam Al (2021) : An examination of street-level bureaucrats' discretion and the moderating role of supervisory support: Evidence from the field, Administrative Sciences, ISSN 2076-3387, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 11, Iss. 3, pp. 1-14,  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11030065>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/240157>

## Standard-Nutzungsbedingungen:

Die Dokumente auf EconStor dürfen zu eigenen wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und zum Privatgebrauch gespeichert und kopiert werden.

Sie dürfen die Dokumente nicht für öffentliche oder kommerzielle Zwecke vervielfältigen, öffentlich ausstellen, öffentlich zugänglich machen, vertreiben oder anderweitig nutzen.

Sofern die Verfasser die Dokumente unter Open-Content-Lizenzen (insbesondere CC-Lizenzen) zur Verfügung gestellt haben sollten, gelten abweichend von diesen Nutzungsbedingungen die in der dort genannten Lizenz gewährten Nutzungsrechte.

## Terms of use:

*Documents in EconStor may be saved and copied for your personal and scholarly purposes.*

*You are not to copy documents for public or commercial purposes, to exhibit the documents publicly, to make them publicly available on the internet, or to distribute or otherwise use the documents in public.*

*If the documents have been made available under an Open Content Licence (especially Creative Commons Licences), you may exercise further usage rights as specified in the indicated licence.*



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

## Article

# An Examination of Street-Level Bureaucrats' Discretion and the Moderating Role of Supervisory Support: Evidence from the Field

Mohammed Salah Hassan <sup>1,\*</sup> , Raja Noriza Raja Ariffin <sup>1</sup>, Norma Mansor <sup>2</sup> and Hussam Al Halbusi <sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Department of Administrative Studies and Politics, Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia; rnoriza@um.edu.my

<sup>2</sup> Social Wellbeing Research Centre (SWRC), University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia; norma@um.edu.my

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Business and Accountancy, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur 50603, Malaysia; Hussam.mba@gmail.com

\* Correspondence: sala142@yahoo.com

**Abstract:** This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between the discretion of street-level bureaucrats and their willingness to implement as well as between discretion and client meaningfulness by testing street-level bureaucrat theory in a different context. The effect of discretion on willingness to implement and client meaningfulness may differ due to perceived supervisory support. Data from 241 bureaucrats (labor inspectors) in the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources indicated that discretion significantly influences bureaucrats' willingness to implement and client meaningfulness. Critically, the moderating role of perceived supervisory support augmented only the positive impact of discretion on client meaningfulness; for example, this relationship is more significant among bureaucrats who perceive high supervisory support. This study sheds new light on the notable role of supervisory support in ensuring that discretion enhances client meaningfulness and willingness to implement.

**Keywords:** discretion; willingness to implement; client meaningfulness; perceived supervisory support; street-level bureaucrats; structural equation modeling



**Citation:** Hassan, Mohammed Salah, Raja Noriza Raja Ariffin, Norma Mansor, and Hussam Al Halbusi. 2021. An Examination of Street-Level Bureaucrats' Discretion and the Moderating Role of Supervisory Support: Evidence from the Field. *Administrative Sciences* 11: 65. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11030065>

Received: 1 June 2021

Accepted: 26 June 2021

Published: 30 June 2021

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2021 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Street-level bureaucracy theory by Michael Lipsky (2010) has been an essential conceptual framework that examines the behavior of the frontline public employees (street-level bureaucrats) who experience direct interaction with citizens and exercise discretion to execute their duties.

Street-level bureaucrats consistently interact with the public and employ a vast amount of discretion. The decisions made by these bureaucrats in the discretionary space are likely to have a profound influence on citizens' lives (Hupe 2016; Lipsky 2010). The concept of discretion has received extensive attention from policy implementation scholars (Brodin 1997; Evans 2016; Hupe 2016; May 2003; Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Gofen 2019; Johannessen 2019; Zhang et al. 2020). However, willingness to implement and client meaningfulness have received little attention (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

According to Lipsky's theory, the willingness of street-level bureaucrats to implement a policy is vital. Past research has highlighted that when willingness to implement increases, the bureaucrat's ability to decide freely also increases (Meyers and Vorsanger 2007; Sandfort 2000). Moreover, based on the work of Tummers (2012), willingness to implement plays a critical role in shaping bureaucrats' discretion and client meaningfulness; as a result, the study added that street-level bureaucrats who experience a positive willingness to

implement are more likely to make decisions freely and be able to provide meaningful assistance to clients (Lipsky 2010; Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

According to street-level bureaucracy theory, during policy implementation, bureaucrats intend to aid and make a difference in their client's lives (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010; Musheno and Maynard-Moody 2009). In addition, when bureaucrats are more willing to implement a policy and experience positive client meaningfulness, it is due to their ability to make decisions when interacting more freely and effectively with the public (Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

The main question posed by this study is how discretion as the freedom to act freely directly shapes the street-level bureaucrats' desire to implement a policy (willingness to implement) and how it affects the desire of bureaucrats to provide meaningful assistance to their clients "client meaningfulness". Additionally, this study is set to understand how supervisory support plays a role in shaping the behavior of street-level bureaucrats during the implementation of public policy.

Hence, when examining the relationship between discretion and these constructs, it is essential to examine how perceived supervisory support may shape the relationship. The concept of supervisory support is well documented in the theory of street-level bureaucracy and policy implementation studies because the concept of supervision is intertwined with the study of bureaucrats. Lipsky has highlighted that frontline public employees' behavior and intentions are shaped by their supervisors, which results in fundamental changes to policy implementations and the decisions made by bureaucrats. Hence, this study provides information that will fill in the gaps in the literature by examining how discretion directly shapes willingness to implement and client meaningfulness and examining the moderating role of supervisory support, all to provide a comprehensive understanding of the bureaucrat's behavior when dealing with their clients (Bradley et al. 2010; Kadushin and Harkness 2014; Lipsky 2010).

The outline of this paper is as follows: First, we develop the theoretical framework based on Lipsky's theory and the classic work of Tummers and Bekkers (2014), which highlights the importance of client meaningfulness, willingness to implement, and discretion, with a specific focus on supportive supervision as a moderator construct to the relationship. Second, we discuss the methods, which will examine the operationalization of the construct and the research design of the study because this study is based on a nationwide survey among labor inspectors in Malaysia who are responsible for the implementation stage. We will then focus on the results section, which will discuss hypothesis testing, and we will conclude with a discussion of the importance of the constructs and emphasize the importance of perceived supervision support in the implementation literature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Discretion

The concept of discretion has been discussed widely, see Lipsky (2010), Saetren (2005), Durant (2010), Hill and Hupe (2014), Farazmand (2019). In this paper, the concept is understood based on the interpretation of Evans (2016), who noted that discretion encompasses the bureaucrats' extent of perceived freedom in choosing a set of actions during policy implementation. In addition, "a public officer has discretion whenever the effective limits on his power leave him free to choose among possible courses of action or inaction" (Black and Davis 1970, p. 4). Furthermore, Lipsky (2010) argues that discretion is the freedom to determine the quality and quantity of rewards or sanctions employed to implement a policy (see also Evans 2020; Hill and Hupe 2014; Hill and Varone 2021). Moreover, Tummers and Bekkers (2014) provided a conclusive definition of this concept as "the perceived freedom of street-level bureaucrats in making choices concerning the sort, quantity, and quality of sanctions and rewards on offer when implementing a policy" (Tummers and Bekkers 2014, p. 529). For example, discretion can be seen as the extent of freedom for teachers who feel they can decide what and how to teach their students (Berkman and Plutzer 2012). In this study, we concentrate on discretion as the per-

ceived freedom based on the bureaucrat's perception. This is fundamentally based on the Thomas theorem, which highlights individuals behave based on their perception of reality (Garrett 1939). Hence, street-level bureaucrats are likely to experience discretion differently during policy implementation.

The concept of discretion is vital in the discussion of the bottom-up approach (Ellis 2011; Hupe 2016; Erdeji et al. 2016; Ladany et al. 1999; Wilson 1887). In this approach, discretion is seen as the ultimate tool to implement regulations by street-level bureaucrats. Moreover, when facing the consistent problem of the bureaucrat's system, which is limited resources, street-level bureaucrat's discretion will assist them by prioritizing what rules are appropriate to follow, as it will ensure the success of the implementation process (Brodkin 1997; Durant 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, Lowe and Glanz 1992; Lipsky 2010; Mohammed 2021).

According to the bottom-up approach, street-level bureaucrats who experience a high level of discretion are likely to exert a high level of client meaningfulness (Barrick et al. 2013; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Client meaningfulness refers to the street-level bureaucrat's perception of the benefits and the value that policy brings to a client (Tummers and Bekkers 2014). For example, a labor inspector who focuses on the implementation of minimum wage regulation will generally focus on how to provide better services to their clients. Hence, experiencing a high level of discretion (freedom to decide) will empower the street-level bureaucrats to implement policies to meet the various needs of clients/citizens, which in turn will increase bureaucrats' perception of the benefits of a policy to the public (Harrits 2019). On the other hand, a high level of discretion will determine the level of willingness to implement a policy. According to the policy implementation literature, the bottom-up approach highlights that willingness of street-level bureaucrats is an essential factor that influences the success of the implementation of a policy and is seen as the extent of the implementation agency willingness and ability to delegate freedom in the decision-making process to the street-level bureaucrats (Meier and O'Toole 2002).

In conclusion, the literature debating the concept of discretion highlights its various effects. However, no previous study has focused on the direct effect of discretion on willingness to implement and client meaningfulness. Hence, this study analyzes the possible positive effects of discretion on willingness to implement and client meaningfulness and sheds light on the moderating role of supervision support on the relationship between the proposed constructs.

## 2.2. Client Meaningfulness

Client meaningfulness refers to "the perception of professionals about the benefits of them implementing the policy for their own clients" (Tummers and Bekkers 2014, p. 12). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) highlighted that street-level bureaucrat who experiences positive client meaningfulness can implement policy successfully, and according to Lipsky (2010) who has theorized that bureaucrats focus on helping their client to achieve policy implementation success.

Tummers et al. (2012) argued that client meaningfulness does to an extent shape discretion. This relationship can be explained as a schoolteacher who wants to provide the best teaching method, she or he is capable of, the teacher will do whatever is necessary using their discretion to implement new teaching methods that will improve the learning of the students. This example reflects how street-level bureaucrats when experiencing meaningfulness toward their clients, will implement the regulation and ensure that a positive impact on their clients for long-term success. Additionally, street-level bureaucrats theory argues that bureaucrats who experience more discretion will, for a certain degree, want to have a positive impact on their client's lives (Lipsky 2010; Palumbo et al. 1984; Kosar 2011).

The concept of client meaningfulness maintains that bureaucrats experience meaningfulness toward clients as they tend to feel that they are better able to help them by providing a wide range of assistance to the client. This, in turn, is a positive bureaucrat's behavior

(Hupe 2016). Additionally, an interesting study that was done by Sandfort (2000) illustrates that in the case of the United States public welfare employees, street-level bureaucrats who experience positive client meaningfulness, experience a healthy relationship with their clients.

Finally, the ability to employ discretion at will makes it likely that bureaucrats experience a positive client's meaningfulness during the policy implementation processes (Musheno and Maynard-Moody 2009; Hupe 2016; Tummers et al. 2012). Based on the literature, there is a profound connection between discretion as to the ability to decide freely and its impact on client meaningfulness. However, the relationship between discretion and client meaningfulness has not been addressed extensively.

### 2.3. Willingness to Implement

Willingness to implement policies can be defined as the “positive behavioural intention towards the implementation of modifications in an organization's structure, or work and administrative processes, resulting in efforts from the organization member's side to support or enhance the change process” (Metselaar 1997, p. 42). On the other hand, Tummers (2012) highlighted this concept as the real desire of the street-level bureaucrats to implement a policy.

The literature on the bottom-up approach (street-level bureaucracy) highlighted the willingness to implement as the extent to which the implementing organization is willing to delegate discretion to the street-level bureaucrats (Mazmanian and Sabatier 1989; Meyers and Vorsanger 2007; Tummers et al. 2012). The association between willingness and discretion can be understood as bureaucrats who enjoy more freedom to decide on the course of action to be taken when implementing policy. This will increase and enhances the willingness to implement. However, the examination of the direct effect of discretion on willingness to implement is missing from the literature (Durant 2010; Hupe 2016; Lipsky 2010; Tummers et al. 2012).

Willingness to implement is expected of street-level bureaucrats who see their clients as an essential part of the implementation process and want to make a difference in their clients' lives. Henceforth, when street-level bureaucrats demonstrate a high level of discretion (freedom to decide), it is likely to increase their willingness to implement a policy. This effect is often implicitly discussed and has yet to be examined empirically (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; Tummers 2012). Therefore, this study emphasizes that it is essential to analyze the willingness of street-level bureaucrats and examine how discretion plays a role in shaping the behavior of bureaucrats during public policy implementation. This will provide a better understanding of the implementation process and how discretion is intertwined with street-level bureaucrat's behavior.

### 2.4. The Moderating Role of Perceived Supervisory Support

The traditional understanding of supervisors and their role can be viewed as the system of monitoring subordinates' behavior and implementing formal mechanisms within the organization (Wood 2006). However, the supervisor role is seen as a critical element in the field of public administration and has roots in the earliest writings on the field (Goodnow 2017; Wilson 1887). Additionally, Weber's model of ideal bureaucrats focuses on a system of decision and control, where employees will follow the rules and procedures, and all the operations are overseen by supervisors who have the experience and the knowledge to adjust to any wrongdoing (Shafritz and Steven 2001). However, the traditional approach does not focus on discussing how bureaucrats view their supervisions, whether they motivate them or how supervisors convey an assumption of honesty, motivation, and integrity in the public sector rather than the supervisor's self-interest (Lipsky 2010; Wood 2006).

In the 1960s, the public choice school of thought directly challenged the traditional school's assumption. This school argues that the bureaucrats are divided into two kinds, principals and agents. The emphasis is that agents (street-level bureaucrats) are self-interest

and rational decision-makers, but to ensure their preferences and interests are harmonized with the policy objectives, this responsibility falls on the principals (supervisors). This school of thought argues that the combination of incentives or punishment is the essential tool used by supervisors to ensure that the agents who are the street-level bureaucrats continuously serve the public interest rather than their interests. Both schools also argue that by centralizing the decision-making system, standardizing rules, and procedures, monitoring behavior, and punishing deviators, supervisors will be able to manage street-level bureaucrats effectively (Lowe and Glanz 1992; Wood 2006).

On the other hand, new public management argues that the traditional view of supervision is inefficient in the 21st century. This school argues that the role of supervisors is to support street-level bureaucrats; supervisors play an essential role in shaping the behavior of these individuals, specifically during policy implementation. The primary function of supervisors in this approach is not to merely control or monitor street-level bureaucrats but also to educate, persuade, and coordinate street-level bureaucrats' decisions to ensure active service to the public. This approach also added that a positive relationship between the principal and the agent must be present, and there must be a will on both sides to negotiate and to learn from each other. Moreover, street-level bureaucrats must have a favorable view of their supervisors, and this is important for street bureaucrats' performance during a policy implementation (Bradley et al. 2010; Brewer 2005).

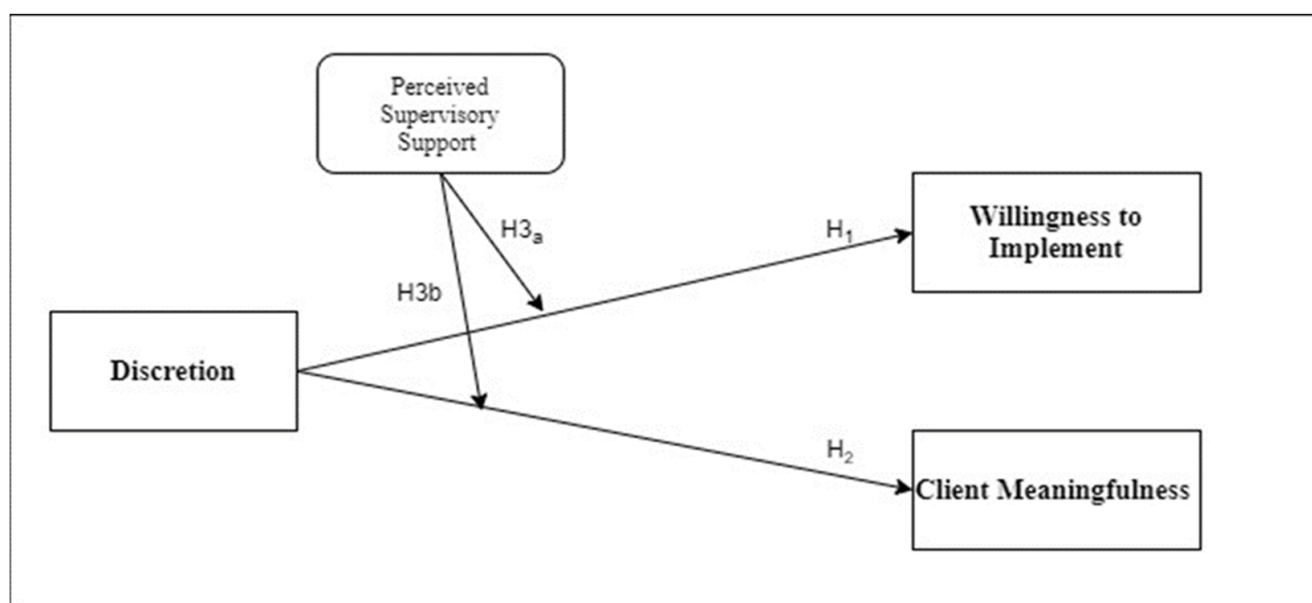
Kadushin and Harkness (2014) discuss the concept of supervisory support in the context of supervisor assisting the supervisee to manage job-related issues and stress, this a common aspect in the day-to-day life of street-level bureaucrats, which in turn will help develop feelings and attitudes that will increase their willingness and client meaningfulness as this can be seen by their job performance (Bradley et al. 2010; Hupe 2016; Lipsky 2010). Additionally, supervisory support is an influential factor in maximizing the accessibility and quality of additional sources of support to the street-level bureaucrats during the implementation stage. For instance, supervisor support is highlighted as a substantial supportive source available to bureaucrats. The supervisor can take an active part in enabling positive peer interaction through developing consultation opportunities, structuring a mentoring relationship, and leading regular staff meetings (Kadushin and Harkness 2014; Ladany et al. 1999; Wehrmann et al. 2002).

Perceived supportive supervision involves bureaucrats' perception toward their supervisor and how the supervisor values the work that the bureaucrats do (Eisenberger et al. 2002). Bureaucrats who experience support from their supervisors will be more committed to achieving job-related goals, specifically, ensure street-level bureaucrats are more engaged to freely employ discretion Lipsky (2010). Hence, a "strong supervisory support climate is likely to provide an important basis from which unit members can draw a key object, energy, and social resources" (Erdeji et al. 2016, p. 852).

Finally, supervisors play a critical role in addressing undesirable organizational and external factors through supportive supervision. Additionally, the supervisor can enthusiastically be involved while trying to improve the work environment through the enabling of better working relationships across teams which will ultimately improve the policy implementation and supervision support is likely to shape the willingness to implement of street-level bureaucrats and how they view their clients (Gustavsson and MacEachron 2012; Kadushin and Harkness 2014; Lipsky 2010).

In conclusion, how street-level bureaucrats perceive the support they receive from their supervisors is an essential factor contributing to how bureaucrat's implement regulation. Hence, understanding how this construct shapes the relationship between discretion and willingness to implement and client meaningfulness is crucial to the examination of the street-level bureaucrats' behavior during the implementation stage.

Based on the literature, the research hypothesis posted by this study are illustrated in Figure 1 and are:



**Figure 1.** Research framework.

**Hypothesis 1 (H1).** *Street-level bureaucrats who experience more discretion will significantly influence their willingness to implement.*

**Hypothesis 2 (H2).** *When a street-level bureaucrat experiences more discretion will significantly increase their client's meaningfulness.*

**Hypothesis 3a (H3a).** *The relationship between discretion and willingness to implement is stronger when street-level bureaucrats experience a high level of perceived supervisory support.*

**Hypothesis 3a (H3b).** *The relationship between discretion and client meaningfulness is stronger when street-level bureaucrats experience a high level of perceived supervisory support.*

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

To examine the hypotheses presented in this study, primary data were gathered from labor inspectors working in the Department of Labour of the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources. Permission to collect this data was acquired from the Department of Labour before distributing the survey questionnaire to the inspectors. The distribution of the survey was via the Google Form platform and sent to 350 labor inspectors in Malaysia. A total of 241 respondents answered the online survey.

#### 3.2. Demographic Analysis of the Respondents

The demographic information presented in this section was analyzed using SPSS version 25. Most of the participants were female (52.6% were female, and 47.4% were male). A plurality of the respondents (40.2%) was between the ages of 35 and 44 years; inspectors between the ages of 25 and 34 years constituted 27.8% of the sample, closely followed by those between the ages of 45 and 54 (24.8%). Only 3.7% of the respondents were 55 years old or older, while the fewest respondents (3.5%) fell between the ages of 18 and 24. Most of the respondents had bachelor's degrees (55.3%), followed by those with a high school diploma (25.3%). Only 14.5% had a master's degree, and 4.9% had a doctoral degree.

#### 3.3. Measures

Discretion was measured using six items adapted from [Tummers \(2012\)](#); this construct focuses on measuring the perceived freedom of the street-level bureaucrats when imple-

menting a policy. Client meaningfulness was also adopted from [Tummers \(2012\)](#) using five items scale. The willingness to implement was measured using a four-item scale adopted from [Metselaar \(1997\)](#). Finally, perceived supervisory support was adopted from [Kottke and Sharafinski \(1988\)](#) using a ten-item scale.

### 3.4. Data Analysis Method

This research employed the structural equation modeling via partial least squares (PLS) technique to assess the research model using the Smart-PLS 3.2.9 software ([Ringle et al. 2015](#)). This research followed the 2-stage analytical method suggested by [Anderson and Gerbing \(1988\)](#) and [Sarstedt et al. \(2017\)](#), beginning with the assessment of the measurement model (parameter reliability and validity), followed by the assessment of the structural model (hypothesis testing) ([Al Halbusi et al. 2019](#); [Khine 2013](#)).

### 3.5. Common Method Variance

Since the self-reported data were derived from the same source, we undertook many measures to minimize the risk of specific method bias ([MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012](#); [Podsakoff et al. 2003](#)). First, the participants were informed that there were no correct or incorrect answers to the questions and the confidentiality of their identities and responses, which can assist in the reduction of evaluation apprehension issues. In addition to these ex-ante procedural remedies, we performed multiple post-hoc experiments to determine the possibility that CMV will distort the results. While CMV cannot inflate our terms of interaction ([MacKenzie and Podsakoff 2012](#)), which are the core focus of the research, we decided to investigate this issue. The [Harman \(1976\)](#) single-factor test showed no problems; we checked with an exploratory factor analysis whether a single factor might explain most of the covariance among the sample items. The test showed six individual-value variables greater than 1 that accounted for 68 percent of the total variance, and the first-factor variance accounted for just 24 percent of the total variance. Thus, this test suggests that CMV is not a serious concern ([Podsakoff et al. 2003](#)).

### 3.6. Measurement Model

The measurement model assessment was conducted through parameter reliability and parameter validity (including discriminant and convergent validity). For the indicator's reliability, which a parameter indicates that the related indicators appear to have much similarity where it is captured by the parameter ([Sarstedt et al. 2017](#)). Thus, factor loadings higher than 0.50 were deemed to be very important ([Hair et al. 2019](#); [Sarstedt et al. 2017](#)). Table 1 displays that the loadings for each of the items exceeded the suggested value of 0.5 except for DISC3 and CLITMEAN1, which were lower than the determined value and were dropped. We also tested parameter reliability for the constructs by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and composite reliability, which also achieved the recommended values. Therefore, the values ranged from 0.705 to 0.961 and 0.818 to 0.966, respectively, which are greater than 0.7 ([Hair et al. 2019](#)), which were sufficient to indicate that parameter reliability is satisfied as exposed in Table 1. Moreover, for convergent validity, this research used the average variance extracted (AVE), and it specified that all values of AVE were greater than the recommended value of 0.50 ([Hair et al. 2019](#)). The research values are between 0.534 and 0.791. Therefore, the convergent validity has been effectively fulfilled and sufficient (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Measurement model assessment, items loading, reliability, and validity.

Variables	Items Labeled	Items Loading	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Discretion	DISC1	0.703	0.705	0.818	0.534
	DISC2	0.850			
	DISC4	0.565			
	DISC5	0.777			
	DISC6	0.766			
Willingness to Implement	WIITP1	0.874	0.914	0.936	0.745
	WIITP2	0.892			
	WIITP3	0.775			
	WIITP4	0.857			
Client Meaningfulness	CLITMEAN2	0.874	0.912	0.938	0.791
	CLITMEAN3	0.904			
	CLITMEAN4	0.883			
	CLITMEAN5	0.872			
Perceived Supervisory Support	PSUPSP1	0.874	0.961	0.966	0.719
	PSUPSP2	0.861			
	PSUPSP3	0.888			
	PSUPSP4	0.794			
	PSUPSP5	0.834			
	PSUPSP6	0.832			
	PSUPSP7	0.894			
	PSUPSP8	0.843			
	PSUPSP9	0.845			
	PSUPSP10	0.846			

Notes: DISC3, CLITMEAN1 were dropped because of the low loading.

For testing discriminant validity (the extent to which items differentiate among parameters or measure different concepts), it was checked by using heterotrait-monotrait Ratio (HTMT) standards. HTMT indicated there is no problem since the value of HTMT is lower than 0.85 (Hair et al. 2019), all the values as shown in Table 2 were lower than the suggested value which indicated that the discriminant validity had been successfully established.

**Table 2.** Discriminant validity (HTMT standards).

	Client Meaningfulness	Discretion	Perceived Supervisor Support	Willingness to Implement
Client Meaningfulness				
Discretion	0.37			
Perceived Supervisory Support	0.353	0.387		
Willingness to Implement	0.403	0.364	0.276	

### 3.7. Structural Model: Hypothesis Testing

The testing of the hypothesis gave the first sign of discretion's direct impact on the willingness to implement, which was predicted significantly as per ( $\beta = 0.305$ ,  $t = 4.29$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Thus, H1 is supported. Similarly, discretion is significantly related to client meaningfulness ( $\beta = 0.338$ ,  $t = 5.595$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Hence, H2 is also supported.

Importantly, in this research, we also examined the moderating role of perceived supervisor support on the relationship of discretion and willingness to implement as well as between discretion and client meaningfulness. Thus, the analysis outcomes showed that the interaction effect between discretion and perceived supervisor support on willingness to implement was insignificant as per ( $\beta = 0.055$ ,  $t = 0.808$ ,  $p < 0.210$ ). Therefore, H3a was

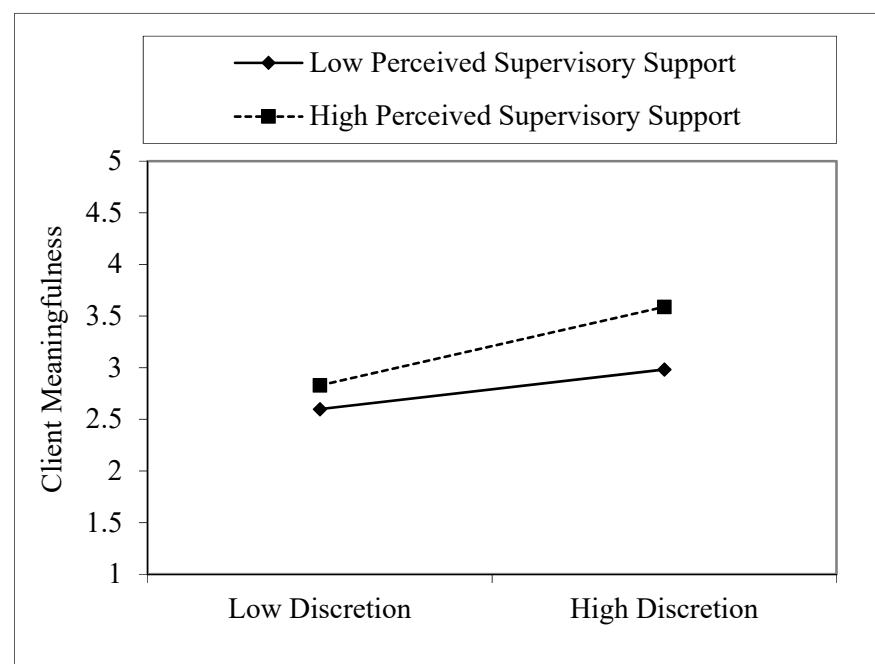
not supported. On the other hand, the interaction of discretion and perceived supervisor support towards client meaningfulness was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.094$ ,  $t = 1.690$ ,  $p < 0.046$ ). So, H3b was supported. All the mentioned results are given in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Hypotheses testing: direct and interaction effect.

Hypothesis	Relationship	Std Beta	Std Error	t-Value	p-Value	BCI 95% LL	BCI 95% UL	Decision
<b>Direct Effect</b>								
<b>H1</b>	Discretion -> Client Meaningfulness	0.305	0.071	4.290	0.000	0.153	0.400	Significant
<b>H2</b>	Discretion -> Willingness to Implement	0.338	0.060	5.595	0.000	0.213	0.418	Significant
<b>Interaction Effect</b>								
<b>H3a</b>	Discretion*PSSP-> Willingness to Implement	0.055	0.069	0.808	0.210	−0.061	0.157	Non-Significant
<b>H3b</b>	Discretion*PSSP -> Client Meaningfulness	0.094	0.056	1.690	0.046	0.084	0.187	Significant

Notes: N = 241. CI = confidence interval; UL = upper limit 95% bias-correlated CI; SE = standard error; LL = lower limit with a Bootstrap sample size = 5000.

Figure 2 is an illustration of Dawson's (2013) suggestion of the method to interpret the significant interaction, by plotting a high as opposed to low regression lines (+1 and −1 standard deviation from the mean). This phase indicates that the significant relationship between discretion and client meaningfulness is stronger (slope is more pronounced) when perceived supervisor support is high rather than low. In clear support of H3b, the relationship between discretion and client meaningfulness is strengthened at high levels of perceived supervisor support.



**Figure 2.** Interaction plot of discretion and perceived supervisory support on client meaningfulness.

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusions

The core purpose of this inquiry is to analyze the relationship between the discretion of street-level bureaucrats, client meaningfulness, and willingness to implement with an explicit emphasis on the moderating role of supervisory support. The study found that street-level bureaucrats' discretion positively and directly influences client meaningfulness, bureaucrats who experience this phenomenon can modify their decisions to tailor to their client's needs. The bureaucrat job's main objective is to ensure a successful policy implementation by working together with the client to overcome any obstacle. Hence, discretion provides bureaucrats with the ability to apply their judgments and implement what they think fits the needs of citizens (Hupe 2016; Joshi and McCluskey 2018; Lipsky 2010; May and Winter 2007; Lieberherr 2019; Visser and Kruyen 2021).

On the other hand, when bureaucrats experience a high level of discretion in the sense of unrestricted freedom to choose a course of action when implementing a policy, this will positively impact their willingness to implement that policy. Willingness to implement does enhance street-level bureaucrat's ability to engage with the clients and ensure a high level of effectiveness in terms of implementation (Tummers et al. 2012). This is per the notion that bureaucrats want to have a positive impact on their clients' lives (Hupe 2019; Lipsky 2010). Hence, willingness to implement is a critical factor that shapes street-level bureaucrats' behavior (Hupe 2016), both constructs have proven to be critical to the success of any policy implementation. However, the literature of street-level bureaucrats often does not mention their importance (Tummers and Bekkers 2014).

When considering the moderating role of perceived supervisory support on the relationship between discretion and willingness to implement the result reflects a no significant impact, this can be explained according to Lipsky's theory (2010) which argues that street-level bureaucrats' willingness to implement at times can be found to be at a minimum level and this is mainly due to organizational constraints that are caused by two main factors, the first being bureaucratic pressures within the agency and personal motivations of bureaucrats. He also added that because of the need to have unbounded discretion, the bureaucrats will struggle to determine how to implement and respond to citizen needs. However, constraints are fundamentally caused by the two factors, which ultimately reduce the responsiveness "discretions" and the willingness to implement street-level bureaucrats. Joshi and McCluskey (2018) added that bureaucratic pressures such as organizational rules and procedures guide the bureaucrat's everyday activities. The scholars argue that sometimes these rules might cause pressure on the bureaucrats by extensively pushing these individuals to do what they are not capable of doing. As a result, this will relate to the loss of personal motivation to achieve an implementation goal, which, in turn, reduces their discretion and, ultimately, their willingness to implement.

Joshi and McCluskey (2018) and Hupe (2019) have cited that personal motivations are caused mainly by internal administrative constraints within the agency that ultimately will shape bureaucrats' behavior, precisely the willingness to implement of the street-level bureaucrats toward the policy they are responsible for. The scholars pointed out that there are two sets of sub-constraints that may shape street-level bureaucrats' behavior, which are formal and informal factors. Formal constraints are official policies, rules, and operating procedures within the organization that are inherent within the street-level bureaucrat's behavior because of public service training and socialization, which makes bureaucrats more accountable to the bureaucratic hierarchies rather than the citizens or the client demands and needs.

On the other hand, informal constraints such as bureaucratic organizational culture, which may result in the existence of a limited supervisor's support, these factors contribute to the limitation of the willingness of street-level bureaucrats. These factors tend to prevent and limit the discretion of street-level bureaucrats. This is expected as the organization's environment will create an atmosphere where doing a good job is expected and is the norm. Hence, these factors directly influence the street-level bureaucrats' way of responding to

civil claims and the willingness of the bureaucrats to respond to these claims (Lowe and Glanz 1992; Kadushin and Harkness 2014; Lipsky 2010; Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019).

On the other hand, the result reflects that the supervisory support's moderating role strengthens the relationship between discretion and client meaningfulness. The concept of supervisory support was investigated by Lipsky (2010), who highlighted that supervisor support is essential to empower street-level bureaucrats to make effective decisions to implement a policy. Wood (2006) previously has concluded that supervision support is an important dimension that correlates with motivating bureaucrats to work productively. Additionally, to ensure the bureaucrats meet the organization's goals, the scholar added that supervision is not solely understood in terms of rewards and punishment. Nevertheless, supervisors have an essential role in ensuring that street-level bureaucrats are satisfied in their workplace and exercise discretion to implement policies. The supervisor's role is significant as bureaucrats frequently ask for assistance on how to make the right decision to ensure compliance from the clients. Furthermore, many studies have concluded that supervision is a consistent, relevant factor in the study of street-level bureaucrats' (Brehm and Gates 2002; May 1999; Riccucci 2005). Although, these studies have highlighted that supervision may have a limited association with discretion. However, as seen in the results of this study, supervisory support still maintains a critical role in the street-level bureaucrat's ability and in their day-to-day responsibilities.

In conclusion, this study provided insightful information on the importance of willingness to implement, client meaningfulness, and the essential role of discretion in street-level bureaucrats. Additionally, this study highlights the importance of supervisory support as a fundamental factor that shapes bureaucrat's behavior during the implementation stage.

## 5. Significant of This Study and Future Research

The significance of this research is in providing a comprehensive understanding of street-level bureaucrats' discretion and other factors that are deemed vital to comprehend how bureaucrats interact with clients during policy implementation. This research makes a significant contribution to the current literature on street-level bureaucrats' discretion by identifying how the supervisory support for street-level bureaucrats magnifies the effects of their ability to act freely. Furthermore, most of these studies focused on the Western cultural context. Consequently, by examining street-level bureaucrats' discretion influences willingness to implement and client meaningfulness in Asia, mainly in the context of Malaysia, and analyzing the indirect effect of supervisory support, this study acts as an essential step in assessing the consistency of the relationships between these constructs across different social frameworks.

Future research can focus on understanding each of the constructs in this study from a qualitative approach to provide an alternative method that may offer different conceptualization to the effect of each construct on street-level bureaucrats discretion, also, future work may dive into identifying the factors that determine the level of willingness to implement and client meaningfulness (e.g., role expectation, workload, and even the mental health of the street-level bureaucrats, especially during the current pandemic).

**Author Contributions:** The authors made the following individual contributions to the paper. The conceptualization of the research study and paper, M.S.H., R.N.R.A., N.M. and H.A.H.; methodology, M.S.H., and H.A.H.; analysis, H.A.H. and M.S.H., writing supervision, N.M., and R.N.R.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research has not received any funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was approved by the University of Malaya Research Ethics Committee (Approval No UM. TNC2/UMREC-622).

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [M.S], upon reasonable request.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## References

- Al Halbusi, Hussam, Kent A. Williams, Hamdan O. Mansoor, Mohammed Salah Hassan, and Fatima Amir Hamid. 2019. Examining the Impact of Ethical Leadership and Organizational Justice on Employees' Ethical Behavior: Does Person–Organization Fit Play a Role? *Ethics & Behavior* 30: 514–32. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Anderson, James C., and David W. Gerbing. 1988. Structural Equation Modeling in Practice: A Review and Recommended Two-Step Approach. *Psychological Bulletin* 103: 411–23. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Barrick, Murray R., Michael K. Mount, and Ning Li. 2013. The Theory of Purposeful Work Behavior: The Role of Personality, Higher-Order Goals, and Job Characteristics. *Academy of Management Review* 38: 132–53. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Berkman, Michael B., and Eric Plutzer. 2012. *Evolution, Creationism, and the Battle to Control America's Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Black, Donald J., and Kenneth Culp Davis. 1970. Discretionary Justice: A Preliminary Inquiry. *American Sociological Review* 35: 384. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bradley, Greta, Lambert Engelbrecht, and Staffan Höjer. 2010. Supervision: A Force for Change? Three Stories Told. *International Social Work* 53: 773–90. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Brehm, John, and Scott Gates. 2002. *Working, Shirking and Sabotage: Bureaucratic Response to a Democratic Public*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan.
- Brewer, Gene A. 2005. In the Eye of the Storm: Frontline Supervisors and Federal Agency Performance. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 15: 505–27. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Brodin, Evelyn Z. 1997. Inside the Welfare Contract: Discretion and Accountability in State Welfare Administration. *Social Service Review* 71: 1–33. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Dawson, Jeremy F. 2013. Moderation in Management Research: What, Why, When, and How. *Journal of Business and Psychology* 29: 1–19. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Durant, Robert F. 2010. *The Oxford Handbook of American Bureaucracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Eisenberger, Robert, Florence Stinglhamer, Christian Vandenberghe, Ivan L. Sucharski, and Linda Rhoades. 2002. Perceived Supervisor Support: Contributions to Perceived Organizational Support and Employee Retention. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 87: 565–73. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ellis, Kathryn. 2011. 'Street-Level Bureaucracy' Revisited: The Changing Face of Frontline Discretion in Adult Social Care in England. *Social Policy & Administration* 45: 221–44. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Erdeji, Irma, Ana Jovicic-Vukovic, Snjezana Gagic, and Aleksandra Terzic. 2016. Cruisers on the Danube—The Impact of LMX Theory on Job Satisfaction and Employees' Commitment to Organization. *Journal of the Geographical Institute Jovan Cvijic, SASA* 66: 401–15. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Evans, Tony. 2016. *Professional Discretion in Welfare Services*. London: Routledge. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Evans, Tony. 2020. Street-Level Bureaucrats: Discretion and Compliance in Policy Implementation. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Farazmand, Ali. 2019. *Global Encyclopedia of Public Administration, Public Policy, and Governance*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Garrett, Henry E. 1939. "Lewin's" topological" psychology; an evaluation. *Psychological Review* 46: 517–24. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gofen, Anat. 2019. Levels of Analysis in Street-Level Bureaucracy Research. In *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 336–50. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Goodnow, Frank J. 2017. *Politics and Administration*. New York: Routledge. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Gustavsson, Nora, and Ann E. MacEachron. 2012. Managing Child Welfare in Turbulent Times. *Social Work* 58: 86–89. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hair, Joseph F., William C. Black, Barry J. Babin, and Rolph E. Anderson. 2019. *Multivariate Data Analysis*. Andover: Cengage.
- Harman, Harry H. 1976. *Modern Factor Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Harrits, Gitte Sommer. 2019. Street-Level Bureaucracy Research and Professionalism. In *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 193–208. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hill, Michael J., and Peter L. Hupe. 2014. *Implementing Public Policy: An Introduction to the Study of Operational Governance*. Los Angeles and Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Hill, Michael, and Frédéric Varone. 2021. Discretion, Rules and Street-Level Bureaucracy. *The Public Policy Process*, 246–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hupe, Hill. 2016. *Understanding Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Hupe, Hill. 2019. *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy: The Ground Floor of Government in Context*. Cheltenham and Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Johannessen, Lars E. 2019. Negotiated Discretion: Redressing the Neglect of Negotiation in 'Street-Level Bureaucracy'. *Symbolic Interaction* 42: 513–38. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Joshi, Anuradha, and Rhiannon McCluskey. 2018. *The Art of 'Bureaucraft': Why and How Bureaucrats Respond to Citizen Voice, Making All Voices Count*. Research Briefing: IDS.

- Kadushin, Alfred, and Daniel Harkness. 2014. *Supervision in Social Work*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Keulemans, Shelena, and Sandra Groeneveld. 2019. Supervisory Leadership at the Frontlines: Street-Level Discretion, Supervisor Influence, and Street-Level Bureaucrats' Attitude towards Clients. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 30: 307–23. [CrossRef]
- Khine, Myint Swe. 2013. Structural Equation Modeling Approaches in Educational Research and Practice. *Application of Structural Equation Modeling in Educational Research and Practice* 7: 277–83. [CrossRef]
- Kosar, Kevin R. 2011. Street Level-Bureaucracy: The Dilemmas Endure. *Public Administration Review* 71: 299–302. [CrossRef]
- Kottke, Janet L., and Clare E. Sharafinski. 1988. Measuring Perceived Supervisory and Organizational Support. *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 48: 1075–79. [CrossRef]
- Ladany, Nicholas, Deborah Lehrman-Waterman, Max Molinaro, and Bradley Wolgast. 1999. Psychotherapy Supervisor Ethical Practices. *The Counseling Psychologist* 27: 443–75. [CrossRef]
- Lieberherr, Eva. 2019. Street-Level Bureaucracy Research and Accountability beyond Hierarchy. In *Research Handbook on Street-Level Bureaucracy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 223–39. [CrossRef]
- Lipsky, Michael. 2010. *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Lowe, Robert, and Jeffrey Glanz. 1992. Bureaucracy and Professionalism: The Evolution of Public School Supervision. *History of Education Quarterly* 32: 396. [CrossRef]
- MacKenzie, Scott B., and Philip M. Podsakoff. 2012. Common Method Bias in Marketing: Causes, Mechanisms, and Procedural Remedies. *Journal of Retailing* 88: 542–55. [CrossRef]
- May, Peter J. 1999. Fostering Policy Learning: A Challenge for Public Administration. *International Review of Public Administration* 4: 21–31. [CrossRef]
- May, Peter J. 2003. Policy Design and Implementation. *Handbook of Public Administration*, 223–33. [CrossRef]
- May, Peter J., and C. Winter. 2007. Politicians, Managers, and Street-Level Bureaucrats: Influences on Policy Implementation. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 19: 453–76. [CrossRef]
- Maynard-Moody, S., and M. Musheno. 2000. State Agent or Citizen Agent: Two Narratives of Discretion. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10: 329–58. [CrossRef]
- Maynard-Moody, Steven, and Shannon Portillo. 2010. Street-Level Bureaucracy Theory. *Oxford Handbooks Online*. [CrossRef]
- Mazmanian, Daniel A., and Paul A. Sabatier. 1989. *Implementation and Public Policy: With a New Postscript*. Lanham: University Press of America.
- Meier, Kenneth J., and Laurence J. O'Toole. 2002. Public Management and Organizational Performance: The Effect of Managerial Quality. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 21: 629–43. [CrossRef]
- Metselaar, Erwin Eduard. 1997. Assessing the Willingness to Change: Construction and Validation of the DINAMO. Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, November 28. Available online: <https://research.vu.nl/en/publications/assessing-the-willingness-to-change-construction-and-validation-o> (accessed on 10 December 2020).
- Meyers, Marcia, and Susan Vorsanger. 2007. Street-Level Bureaucrats and the Implementation of Public Policy. In *Handbook of Public Administration: Concise Paperback Edition*. Newcastle upon Tyne: sage, pp. 153–64. [CrossRef]
- Mohammed, Abdul-Rahim. 2021. Discretion on the Frontlines of the Implementation of the Ghana School Feeding Programme: Street-Level Bureaucrats Adapting to Austerity in Northern Ghana. *Public Administration and Development*. [CrossRef]
- Musheno, Michael C., and Steven Maynard-Moody. 2009. *Cops, Teachers, Counselors: Stories from the Front Lines of Public Service*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Palumbo, Dennis J., Steven Maynard-Moody, and Paula Wright. 1984. Measuring Degrees of Successful Implementation. *Evaluation Review* 8: 45–74. [CrossRef]
- Podsakoff, Philip M., Scott B. MacKenzie, Jeong-Yeon Lee, and Nathan P. Podsakoff. 2003. Common Method Biases in Behavioral Research: A Critical Review of the Literature and Recommended Remedies. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88: 879–903. [CrossRef]
- Riccucci, Norma. 2005. *How Management Matters: Street-Level Bureaucrats and Welfare Reform*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.
- Ringle, Christian M., Sven Wende, and Jan Michael Becker. 2015. *SmartPLS*. Boenningstedt: Scientific Research Publishing.
- Saetren, Harald. 2005. Facts and Myths about Research on Public Policy Implementation: Out-of-Fashion, Allegedly Dead, But Still Very Much Alive and Relevant. *Policy Studies Journal* 33: 559–82. [CrossRef]
- Sandfort, Jodi. 2000. Moving Beyond Discretion and Outcomes: Examining Public Management from the Front Lines of the Welfare System. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 10: 729–56. [CrossRef]
- Sarstedt, Marko, Christian M. Ringle, and Joseph F. Hair. 2017. Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. *Handbook of Market Research*, 1–40. [CrossRef]
- Shafritz, Jay M., and Ott J. Steven. 2001. *Classics of Organization Theory*. Fort Worth: Harcourt College Publishers.
- Tummers, Lars. 2012. Policy Alienation of Public Professionals: The Construct and Its Measurement. *Public Administration Review* 72: 516–25. [CrossRef]
- Tummers, Lars, and Victor Bekkers. 2014. Policy Implementation, Street-Level Bureaucracy, and the Importance of Discretion. *Public Management Review* 16: 527–47. [CrossRef]
- Tummers, Lars, Bram Steijn, and Victor Bekkers. 2012. Explaining the Willingness of Public Professionals to Implement Public Policies: Content, Context and Personality Characteristics. *Public Administration* 90: 716–36. [CrossRef]

- Visser, E. Lianne, and Peter M. Kruijen. 2021. Discretion of the Future: Conceptualizing Everyday Acts of Collective Creativity at the Street-Level. *Public Administration Review* xx: 1–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wehrmann, Kathryn Conley, Hyucksun Shin, and John Poertner. 2002. Transfer of Training. *Journal of Health & Social Policy* 15: 23–37. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wilson, Woodrow. 1887. The Study of Administration. *Political Science Quarterly* 2: 197. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wood, Robert. 2006. Supervision and the Street-Level Bureaucrat. Paper presented at Annual Conference of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, PA, USA, August 31–September 3.
- Zhang, Huan, Ling Yang, Robert Walker, and Yean Wang. 2020. How to Influence the Professional Discretion of Street-Level Bureaucrats: Transformational Leadership, Organizational Learning, and Professionalization Strategies in the Delivery of Social Assistance. *Public Management Review* 22: 1–25. [[CrossRef](#)]