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Trabalhando o meio: burocratas de médio escalão e a produção da ação pública no governo federal

(Making the middle: Mid-level bureaucrats' work and public action in Brazil)

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Resumo:

O artigo problematiza a atuação dos burocratas de médio escalão (BMEs) e sua influência sobre a produção de políticas públicas. A reflexão parte do limbo conceitual ocupado por tais atores na literatura sobre sociologia das organizações e nos estudos de implementação. Com base em survey com ocupantes de cargo de direção no governo federal (aprox. 8.000 respondentes), caracteriza-se a burocracia de médio escalão como um espaço social e ambiente de trabalho diferenciado dos demais segmentos, como a burocracia de linha de frente (street-level bureaucracy) ou o nível hierárquico superior. Essa caracterização é aprofundada pela análise comparativa de cinco estudos de caso de programas federais em distintas áreas do governo, permitindo a identificação das condições político-institucionais que afetam o grau de influência e os meios pelos quais essa influência é exercida pelos BMEs. Diferentemente dos burocratas de linha de frente – que exercem influência via ajustes discricionários – e dos burocratas do alto escalão – que definem decisões e regras –, os BMEs se situarem no meio e entre múltiplos outros, desempenhando um papel de montagem de coletivos de implementação e um trabalho de unificação, por meio do qual eles estabelecem (ou não) ligações com diferentes tipos de atores ao seu redor. Assim, no médio escalão, o trabalho cotidiano adquire conotação política ao regular as conexões que definem aqueles que se tornam os "legítimos" parceiros na condução da ação governamental.

Introduction: the middle as a problem

Mid-level bureaucrats (MLBs) hold a quite paradoxical position in the literature on organizations and policy studies. They are definitely not a new topic, as different studies in the field have long dedicated attention to one or another type of actor, profession, or task situated in the intermediary ranks of large organizations (e.g. Simon 1947; Gouldner 1954; Dalton 1959). However, very rarely MLBs have been thought of or treated as a governmental group, class, or transversal segment of the employees of the state, in contrast to long established developments of this sort focused on actors at the upper and lower levels of the government structure. Such deficiency in scholarly attention to the mid-level bureaucracy[2] has been recognized in multiple recent works (Barrier et al. 2015). Howlett (2011), for example, asserted that the literature has so far failed to provide a more in-depth characterization of the roles performed by these actors in the intermediate echelons, amounting to what Meier (2009) had already pointed out as "the missing variable" in policy studies.

This article takes stock of these debates and aims at contributing to overcome this conceptual limbo and improve our understanding of the mid-level as a "governmental group" (Borraz 1995), through a transversal-comparative perspective (Barrier et al. 2015), rather than as isolated actors, professions or sets of tasks. This enterprise draws inspiration from previous works that have conceptualized the top-level bureaucracy (Bezes & Le Lidec 2007; Demazière & Le Lidec 2014; Hammerschmid et al. 2016), as well as the "street-level bureaucracy" (Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003), by describing the structural features and patterns running across multiple types of public policies, organizations, and professions, analyzing the specificity of their roles and forms of influence in the production of public action.

Advancements in the direction of understanding the mid-level bureaucracy face important theoretical hurdles, as classic debates on organizations and policy studies (both in sociology and political science) have portrayed the mid-level as a "non-problem". These debates have evolved largely on the basis of well-established traditions that led scholars to focus on extremes and their oppositions (top vs. bottom levels; technical expertise vs. politics; formal vs. informal). As Benamouzig & Borraz (2015) indicated, the field of sociology of organizations emerged from the foundational opposition between formal/theoretical/legal knowledge and practical/informal knowledge. And still today, these oppositions play a major role in contemporary debates about public sector reforms (Bezes & Demazière 2011). On such track, local, informal knowledge, and the zones of uncertainties associated to them, provide lower-level agents with power resources to negotiate their autonomy and participation, against the attempts of the top-level to control and rationalize the operational of the organization (Crozier 1964; Crozier & Friedberg 1977).

Similarly, in political science and public administration, since the foundational works of Woodrow Wilson and Max Weber, "the same basic point, that specialist knowledge gives the bureaucrat power over those generalist politicians who are meant to give them direction, has been recast in different ways over the years by different brands of social science theorizing" (Page 2010, p.256). The contrasts between bureaucrats and politicians' roles in government and the ways through which they influence

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[2] The exception being the management literature (both in the private and public sectors), which tended to conflate the mid-level and the managerial activities inherent to organizations. Here we aim at stepping back to be able to see what kinds of roles MLBs actually perform in policy production.

policymaking (Aberbach, Putnam & Rockman 1981; Page 2012), the conflicting authority between professionalism and bureaucracy (Lazega & Wattebled 2011), as well as the processes through which bureaucrats construct their autonomy vis-à-vis politicians (Carpenter 2001), have been at the center of attention for political scientists devoted to study of bureaucracy. Finally, the subfield of policy studies has equally flourished upon the analyses of dissonance between the formal, legal aspects of central programs and the practices and empirical knowledges that shape local implementation (Pressman & Wildasvsky 1973).

As a result, the actors who occupy the middle echelons of the bureaucracy, the knowledge and work they produce have been left without a proper place, lacking a clearer conceptual identity and role in the studies of government organizations and policy production. Nevertheless, contemporary changes in the policymaking and public administration landscapes have been demanding renewed attention to the mid-level, as they call into question these dynamics between the upper and lower levels and offer new opportunities for reflection about the actors that populate these intermediary spaces.

First, public policy production has become undeniably more complex in the last decades, as diverse actors interact at multiple levels through varied contractual and funding regimes, challenging traditional bureaucratic, verticalized structures. The emerging flatter, collaborative, transversal, project-based, modularized or networked organizational arrangements are characterized by greater functional interdependencies and the need for effective horizontal coordination and collective action among peers – actors that tend to be formally equal in power and potential competitors (Lazega 2001). Furthermore, the management of these "horizontalized" organizational bundles demands new forms of knowledge and instruments – materialized in indicators, policy evaluation, and monitoring systems (Le Galès 2016) – designed to interfere with the information asymmetries between those giving orders at the top and the local, specialized executors at the bottom, as well as between other horizontal-transversal collaborators (Benamouzig & Borraz 2015). These forms of knowledge and instruments for managing public action interfere as a vector of differentiation in professional trajectories, involving re-compositions of work, the redesigning of professional worlds, and the "emergence of new forms of state expertise" (Bezes & Demazière 2011). As a consequence of these contemporary transformations, scholars anticipate an increased scope of influence of actors in the intermediary segments of the state structure (Howlett 2011). But now, such influence is supposed to rest not only on their bureaucratic expertise, as previewed in classic debates, but also on the potential uses of their specific place in a larger division of labor, involving the control of instruments, mobilization of resources, and recreation of status through the operation in between fluxes of authority and information (Page 2010).

Following these leads, the objective of this article is to analyze the MLB as a segment of the bureaucracy, seeking to describe their work (routine activities, tasks, and interactions) and to understand how they produce their roles and influence in a lager division of labor in the production of public action. The analytical perspective that will guide this enterprise draws inspiration from the work of Gilles Jeannot (2005; 2008) and collaborators (Deroche & Jeannot 2004) and their efforts to focus attention on the work performed by different actors in the production of public action and to interconnect approaches in sociology of work and sociology of public action. It basically involves looking at public action through the work of those public agents involved in its production, "allowing us to reconstruct public action from the analysis of the work

performed by the different agents involved" (Jeannot 2008, p.14). Such approach favors analytical attention to actors that have not necessarily been the objects of exploration in the sociology of work – since the field has been traditionally dedicated to well-defined, established groups, or minimally recognized and institutionalized as professions – and brings to focus agents whose work is often weakly prescribed, subject to uncertainty and involved in ambiguities, but that nevertheless play important roles in the day-to-day fabrication of contemporary public action.

In terms of research design, the empirical analysis will be based on comparisons within one single country, holding constant the administrative tradition and the political-institutional environment. The analysis of the mid-level bureaucracy in Brazil allows us to extend the debates and put to test some of the arguments recently produced in the French and international literature. Furthermore, Brazil is, at the same time, a very different country and society, as compared to France (i.e. levels of income, inequality, development, historical trajectories, etc.), facing different public problems; but with similar processes of new public management-inspired public sector reforms in the last decades. Therefore, the case of Brazil shall provide a fresh terrain for reflections about the roles of MLBs in the production of public action.

Data collection involved three complementary sources: a) administrative records, providing general indicators for the entire population of MLBs in the Brazilian federal government; b) a unique survey[3], which produced a sample of 7.223 responses (29% response rate, from a universe of approximately 25.334 MLB posts, as of 2014), offering information about the characteristics of the position, work routines and activities, professional trajectories, and perceptions about MLBs autonomy and influence; and c) five case studies of policies and projects carried out by the Brazilian federal government, providing a more fine-grained analysis of work routines, practices, and perceptions, as well as placing MLB work into the contexts of public action in different policy domains, such as infrastructure, environment, public security, tax collection, and social benefits.

The continuation of the text is organized as follows. First, we will explore the mid-level bureaucracy as a differentiated labor market and social space, trying to identify its typical characteristics vis-à-vis the top and the bottom levels of the bureaucracy (i.e. forms of access, recruitment, turnover, working activities, autonomy, and interactions). We will contrast the empirical data collected on MLBs in the Brazilian federal government with stylized descriptions of work at the street- and top-level bureaucracies, based on examples from the existing literature. Second, we will focus on five case studies of actual government programs and services. The analysis of the cases will allow us to identify the challenges and dilemmas that inhere in specific interventions and evaluate how MLBs negotiate and produce the recognition of their roles, as well as the ways through which they interfere with the production of public action. Finally, we will conclude highlighting the main findings from the study and their contributions to the ongoing debate about mid-level bureaucrats.

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[3]The survey involved the administration of an online questionnaire to public agents who were occupying intermediary positions in the administrative structure of the federal government, between April and June, 2014. It was based on a convenience sample, which ended up resembling very closely the population in terms of its main internal segmentations and no structural biases have been observed (Freire 2014).

The mid-level bureaucracy as a differentiated working and social space

As in other parts of the globe, the Brazilian government has been hit by waves of new public management-inspired reforms. From the mid-1990s to the present date, their implementation has advanced steadily, but often through incomplete reform cycles (Resende 2002; Abrucio 2011), as they spanned across governments motivated by different political ideals. While in the 1990s, neoliberal governments favored the measures associated to structural adjustment, such as privatization, regulation, and agencification; the center-left governments of the 2000s, attempted to improve policy delivery and coordination through recentralization efforts and the development of tools and systems for performance monitoring and evaluation. These trends and their associated challenges, therefore, provide for an environment for MLBs work in Brazil that is not unlike those in other western administrations.

In 2014, the administrative structure of the Brazilian federal government (Executive Branch) was inhabited by approximately 640.000 employees, distributed along seven hierarchical levels between the ordinary civil servant and the elected president and vice-president. At the top-level, there were about 300 positions, involving ministers, deputy ministers, and DAS-6 positions (secretariats and heads of departments). At the very bottom, there were 613.639 civil servants, including universities' professors, researchers and staff; federal police officers; tax inspectors and other federal inspectorates; diplomats and foreign relations officials; public management, budgeting, and auditing specialists; among many others. In between, the mid-level comprises positions from DAS-1 to DAS-5, ranging from section and unit chiefs to coordinators or directors. In 2014, there were 25.334 such posts at the mid-level (amounting to 4% of the total civil service)[4] (Lopez 2015).

In complement to ongoing efforts to conceptually define the mid-level bureaucracy vis-à-vis the top and bottom levels (Barrier et al. 2015), we will take inspiration from Demazière & Le Lidec (2008) and Biland (2012) and frame the mid-level bureaucracy as a labor market, in order to empirically explore the features that potentially differentiate it from lower and upper levels of the government bureaucracy.

First, in terms of (a) *access and recruitment*, the MLB is a relatively more endogenous labor market, as both the bottom and the top levels are more opened to outsiders. Since the Constitution of 1988, access to positions at the bottom level must occur through public, competitive exams, recruiting mostly from outside of the civil service. At the top-level, access is dependent upon political appointments, through which the president can recruit his/her ministers – mostly from outside of the civil service – and secretaries and heads of departments (DAS-6) – more mixed and drawing both from the civil service (57%) and outsiders (43%). In contrast, even though access to MLB positions is also based on appointments by the political leadership and top-level bureaucrats, recruitment occurs mostly from within. On average, 71% of all MLB posts were occupied by civil servants, most often from the same ministry or other federal organization. As the survey data indicated, of all MLBs in office in 2014: 92% had previous work experience in the federal government, from which 76,5% had occupied other mid-level positions before (accumulating, on average, 6,6 years of experience in such posts). And, finally, the greater participation of civil servants on MLB positions can be explained by both legal requirements establishing a minimum proportion of civil

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[4] The general structure and layout of the DAS system in the federal government was defined by the Decreto-Lei 200, in 1967, and later updated and revised by many other normative acts.

servants for certain levels[5] and the economic incentives that make MLB positions more attractive to civil servants than to non-civil servants, as they add 55% of the posts salaries to their regular salaries, adding up to a better deal than the salaries enjoyed by non-civil servants.

When we look at (b) *stability and turnover*, the bottom levels of the bureaucracy are certainly where we find the greatest stability, as federal civil servants in Brazil acquire tenure after three years of approval in the exams, entering a life-long career and becoming part of an occupational or professional group. At the other extreme, top-level positions are associated with the instabilities linked to the electoral cycles, since they are directly appointed by the elected. But some of this instability is compensated for by the belonging of these top-level bureaucrats into partisan networks that lead them to similar positions in other governments around the country (Louault 2014). Therefore, it is at the mid-level where turnover and instability tend to be greatest. In addition to being vulnerable to changes associated with the electoral clock – for example, in 2014, 70% of all MLBs had been appointed by the president who took office in 2011 –, MLBs are subject to intense internal circulation due to moods and political dynamics of a coalition government, thus the most frequent duration of stay (statistical mode) on the same MLB position is only one year, as reported in the survey.

Third, when we look at (c) *routine activities and interactions*, it becomes clear how MLBs are turned to the inside, the center of the state, while other bureaucrats at the lower and upper levels are at the frontiers of state, mostly looking to the outside. At the lower levels, the notion of "street-level bureaucrats" meant precisely to designate the "people employed by government and who are constantly called upon to interact with citizens in the regular course of their jobs" (Lipsky 1969, p.2). They have also been called "the faces of the state" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003), as these workers are often engaged in decentralized service provision, mostly busy with the processing of cases, in which they are supposed to apply the general rules decided at the top to the specific, concrete situation they encounter on a day-to-day basis.

At the other extreme, studies dedicated to the work of top-level bureaucrats have called attention to their decision-making roles, even though describing it as an incremental, continuous, and collective process, rather than the image of a heroic isolated individual (Nollet 2014). Furthermore, their daily schedule is filled with back-to-back meetings (committees, boards, councils, etc.), events, discussions, and ceremonies, most of which involving close interactions with politicians (congressmen and other elected representatives), the press, interest groups, and policy stakeholders (Bevir & Rhodes 2010). They turn their attention to the outside and internal issues only come to their interests when they are turned into external, public, or political problems.

In contrast, MLBs activities and interactions indicate they are involved with the innards of government. According to the survey data, their working routines comprises not only administrative procedures (54%) – such as managing contracts, budgets, and human resources – but also a wide variety of other policy-related work (46%) – such as mobilization, articulation, and sensitizing – performed on a day-to-day basis through individual conversations (phone and email), participation in meetings (inside and outside their organization), and elaboration of policy documents. Therefore, MLB work is largely performed in and through interactions. But these interactions, in turn, are

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[5] Decree 5.497/2005, required a minimum of 75% of civil servants in DAS-1 to 3 positions and 50% for the DAS 4 positions. There are no minimum levels established for DAS-5 and 6 posts.

highly concentrated on encounters with other bureaucrats. As captured by the survey, in their work routines, they interact "always" and "frequently" only with their subordinates, superiors, and peers. They interact "rarely" or "sometimes" with a bunch of other actors, being peers in other federal organizations the most frequent of them, on top of citizens, firms, and civil society organizations. And finally, they report "never" or "rarely" interacting with politicians or the media in their quotidian activities.

Lastly, the survey provides some information on the perception of MLBs about their (d) *autonomy* – i.e. the ability to make decisions about how to carry out their own work. The mean score is high (3,8 with a standard deviation of 0,78, in a scale from 1 to 5), because the majority of MLBs perceive to enjoy autonomy "always" or "frequently" in setting the goals of their units (68%), deciding about the organization of work (59%), and choosing the instruments and techniques to be employed in their units (75%). Such perceived autonomy in carrying out work inside their units, combines with the scarcity of formal prescriptions[6], resulting in vagueness and lack of a clear definitions of the specific duties and responsibilities attached to each DAS position, especially when compared to professional work and service provision performed at the bottom, and the politically-delegated missions to be fulfilled by officials at the top level.

In sum, the empirical data on MLBs provide us with enough elements to characterize the mid-level as a sufficiently differentiated social and working space, due to its: (a) relative endogeneity in terms of access, recruitment and circulation of workers; (b) greater instability of the positions; (c) working routines characterized by diversified tasks (not only typical administrative procedures) and interactions directed or confined to the center/interior of the state; and, finally, (d) high levels of perceived autonomy associated to vague job prescriptions.

However, even though we can portray the mid-level as a sufficiently differentiated segment of the bureaucracy (vis-à-vis the top and bottom levels), the very elements of differentiation do not suffice in providing for a stabilized, clear definition, or recognition of specific expertise and distinguished sets of practices and objects of work. Despite the fact that access, recruitment, and circulation are mostly restricted to the interior of the state, the intense instability of these positions does not allow for the construction of a group identity or the stabilization of commonly shared knowledge[7], leading to the perception of the working routine as involving an open-ended list of activities, upon which MLBs enjoy considerable autonomy on how to carry them out. In sum, although we might be able to set the mid-level apart from the other segments, it is still difficult to identify and describe MLBs particular roles and forms of influence in the production of public action.

This situation is well captured by the notion of "*métier flou*", as proposed by Jeannot (2005). It calls our attention precisely to this kind paradox. While "*métier*", in general, designates well-defined activities, a specific know-how, and the belonging to stabilized group, allowing us to name and distinguish from others; the "*flou*" comes in to refer to the fact that, in some situations, organizational ambiguity, vagueness in prescriptions,

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[6] The DAS system was originally designed, in 1967, by the Decree-Law 200, for increasing flexibility in government's recruitment.

[7] Differently than observed by Queré (2015) for the French case, in Brazil, there is no formal requirements of specific training or education for mid-level bureaucrats, such as those provided by the *Instituts Régionaux d'Administration* (IRA). The National School of Public Administration (ENAP), in Brazil, has regular course offerings targeted at mid-level bureaucrats, but enrollment is optional and only reach a small proportion of such labor market.

and employment instability, hamper our ability to precisely define the characteristic set of working activities, knowledge, and practices. According to Jeannot (2005), these situations have become more common in the last decades, due to the growing complexity and variability of tasks, knowledge, and competences required for the production of contemporary public action.

Therefore, in a *métier flou*, agents must discover their work, produce their roles, and have their influence recognized in the larger system of action in which they are embedded. After having treated the mid-level bureaucracy as a labor market and sought to understand its aggregated elements of differentiation, by way of external comparisons, we must now turn to an exploration of its internal heterogeneities.

Political-institutional conditions and policy challenges

In order to understand how MLBs construct their roles and through which ways they take part and exert influence on the production of public action, we will focus on the comparative analysis of five cases studies of policies and programs carried out by the Brazilian federal government, between 2011-2014. By restricting our focus to these cases, we will be able to provide a more a fine-grained analysis of work routines, practices, and perceptions, as well as to place MLB work in context. The five cases[8] were selected to maximize the variation in contexts, rather than to establish controlled comparisons. The selection aimed at satisfying variations in three criteria: a) policy domain (infrastructure, environment, public security, tax collection, and social benefits); b) level of bureaucratization (degree of formal institutionalization; own personnel; control over means of policy execution); and c) level of priority (within-government, as declared by President).

This sample provides us with different scenarios within which MLB work takes place. The findings from the comparative analysis suggest that (a) first, the scope of MLBs' influence on public action are constrained by political-institutional conditions, and, (b) secondly, the specific construction of their roles is highly sensitive to how they perceive the challenges they face in implementing the policies they are involved with.

Political-institutional conditions and the scope of influence

The five cases, each in a different policy domain, can be regrouped into three categories of political-institutional conditions, as a result of the combination of their characteristics in terms of level of bureaucratization and level of priority within government.

The first category is defined by a combination of low levels of bureaucratization and low levels of priority, as assigned by the president. It is exemplified by the case of the National Policy on Public Security (NPPS). The National Secretary of Public Security, within the Ministry of Justice, oversees the implementation of the national policy. However, since 1967, policing in Brazil is the constitutional competence of state-level governments. Therefore, the role of the federal government is more of induction (and

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[8] The production of the cases studies involved secondary sources, document analysis, and qualitative interviews with mid-level bureaucrats. A descriptive narrative of each of the cases was published in an edited volume Cavalcante & Lotta (2015).

promotion standards and technical-financial support), as it cannot legislate directly on the theme. Also, critical resources for policy implementation (i.e. police corporations) are not under the direct control of the federal government. In addition, the National Secretary of Public Security lacks its own personnel or civil service career. The team is composed mostly of people seconded by state governments (usually from their police forces) or civilians (usually from NGOs and social movements) hired under temporary contracts or appointed to DAS positions. Furthermore, the National Policy on Public Security has not been chosen among the government's priorities (not during the period of the study), which means it receives less attention from the President's Office as well as less budgetary resources and prestige within the government. Thus, the trajectory of this initiative has been a constant process of policy formulation, which has not been able to make consistent steps in terms of its consolidation (Souza & Gomes 2015).

This case is representative of situations in which MLBs, even though potentially enjoying room of maneuver for the construction of their role – due to the low level of bureaucratization –, have their capacity to influence policy severely limited – due the low level of priority and consequent difficulties in accessing and mobilizing relevant resources within government. In situations of this type, combining low levels of bureaucratization and priority, MLBs roles and influence becomes restricted to day-to-day management and micro-level processes, such as the redesign of small projects proposed by state-level police forces, auditing of contracts, or when they are demanded by top-level officials to offer their views and opinions on specific issues (e.g. decisions related to budget cuts). Under these political-institutional conditions, the MLBs interviewed reported "doing what is possible, and at reach", with little influence in the actual shaping of the national policy (Souza & Gomes 2015).

The second category of political-institutional conditions results from the combination of high levels of bureaucratization and high levels of political priority within government. It is represented in the sample by the Federal Revenue Service (FRS). The FRS is administered by the Secretary of the Federal Revenue Service in the Ministry of Finance. It's an organization with a long history of gradual but steady institutionalization and bureaucratic strengthening. The Revenue Service is long recognized in the history of the Brazilian state as an "island of excellence", exhibiting the typical features of a professionalized weberian bureaucracy. Its attributes, competences, and functions are clearly established in laws, decrees, and other normative documents. The Revenue Service has a verticalized structure with very well defined hierarchical positions and a clear horizontal division of labor between departments and their subunits. It is populated by members of the tax inspector and analyst careers, recruited through very competitive public exams to earn one of the highest salaries in federal government. MLB positions are almost exclusively appointed to members of the career. In the execution of the service, the organization depends very little on other government agencies to perform its critical tasks, controlling all the necessary resources. Internal processes have been extensively routinized and codified. As one interviewee has mentioned, "a decade ago, it would take a few months until a new middle manager would master all the unit's fluxes and procedures. Now, it takes two weeks, as all tasks have already been mapped and turned into internal protocols. There is a protocol for everything". Finally, in terms of level of priority, the FRS performs a critical function for the government as a whole, materializing the extraction of resources form society that will fund all government services and activities. Therefore, the Revenue Service naturally enjoys a privileged position in negotiations inside government, as well as constant attention from the Presidency (Silva 2015).

In this scenario, even though MLBs access all the resources necessary for executing the service, their autonomy over work is low, due to advanced levels of institutionalization and regulation over work. Consequently, there is little room of maneuver other than for small, incremental changes in administrative processes. So, here again, MLBs' influence is restricted to the gradual process of improving the service´s internal management, most commonly though the introduction or improvement informational technologies, modernization of administrative procedures, or supervising external contracts, as reported by a clear majority of interviewees (Silva 2015).

Finally, the third political-institutional scenario differs from the two previous ones in the sense that it involves a combination of high priority within government and intermediary levels of bureaucratization (in between the NPPS and the FRS), leading to a relatively greater potential for MLBs' policy influence. This situation is present in the three remaining cases of the sample – the Bolsa Familia Program (BFP); the Bolsa Verde Program (BVP); and the Program for Acceleration of Growth (PAG).

The BFP is based on the direct transfer of a grant to the mothers of families below the established line of poverty. The transfer is conditional on the children's attendance to school and preventative health screens and periodic examinations. The program was created in 2003 through the merging of different existing social grants and vigorous upscaling of their national coverage, reaching 13 million families (or 46 million beneficiaries) in 2014. The National Secretary of Citizenship Income (SENARC), in the Ministry of Social Development, controls the most important instrument for the program's execution: *Cadastro Unico*, the unified register from which the program's beneficiaries are identified and monitored. The register is fed at the bottom by teams of social workers in the municipal governments. But, it is SENARC that makes the screening and decisions about granting the benefits and from there on it articulates with CEF (a state-owned bank) the transfer of the money directly to the beneficiaries (Lotta & Oliveira 2015). The program has been a priority for the federal government, since its creation in 2003, up to 2014. Therefore, it enjoys presidential attention and access to the resources necessary to its successful implementation.

The PAG was created in 2007, with the objective of increasing public investment in infrastructure and streamlining the implementation of infrastructure projects in the federal government. It is basically an office for monitoring infrastructure projects and articulating diverse government organizations towards anticipating and solving implementation bottlenecks. Since PAG's creation the level of project execution has been substantively increased making public investments double (from 1,62% to 3,27% of GDP), reaching over US$250 billion in 2014, with significant impacts on employment levels. The program has been created by a Presidential Decree (not a law approved by Congress) and its operation is not subject to much formal regulation. PAG was based on the Ministry of Planning and staffed by federal civil servants, most of which members of three careers: infrastructure analyst (AI), planning and budget analyst (APO) and the specialist in public policy and management (EPPGG). Since its creation, PAG has been considered one of the key initiatives undertaken by the federal government, enjoying full attention by the President and the necessary resources (especially human and political) for its performance (Pires 2015).

The BVP, in turn, was created in 2011, and seeks to bring together poverty eradication with environmental conservation efforts. It basically grants a stipend to poor families, living in rural areas near conservation parks, who commit to developing

environmentally sustainable activities. It is understood as a way of providing minimal subsistence income to families in the expectation of preventing their engagement in deforestation. Given its novelty, the BVP was pretty much in process of institutionalization, involving a relatively small but increasing volume of legal and normative prescriptions. The program is coordinated by the Ministry of the Environment, in partnership with the Ministry of Social Development, which are both staffed with civil service careers dedicated to the implementation of the program. BVP's implementation involves three other organizations, each responsible for the different kinds of lands dedicated to conservation or preservation (Abers, 2015). The BVP, together with BFP, was part of the small group of interventions considered priority by the President's strategy "Brazil without extreme poverty" (*Brasil Sem Miséria*), thus, enjoying privileges within the operation of the federal government, such as budgetary resources, prestige and attention to its demands for coordination among the implementation actors involved.

These three programs share similar political-institutional conditions: they exhibit intermediary levels of bureaucratization – initially small, but growing body of legal prescriptions; civil service careers and dedicated organizational structures; control of some (not all) of the critical means for service execution; and, finally, they were among the Presidents' flagship programs between 2011-2014. In terms of the scope of MLBs influence in the production of public action, these were the cases in which MLBs reported substantial interference in shaping their programs' contents and strategies, by developing new instruments, solving implementation problems, or articulating with new actors for redefining the program's objectives and components.

Policy challenges and role constructions

The comparative analysis across the five cases has so far demonstrated that the scope of MLBs influence is highly sensitive to political-institutional conditions. But we still don´t know much about how MLBs construct their roles and through which ways they operate when they take advantage of these favorable conditions to influence policy. In this section, we shall zoom in the stories of the three latter cases, in order to get a better picture of: (a) what kind of work MLBs perform in these situations and how they conceive of their quotidian practices; and (b) through which means they end up interfering in policy production.

At this level of analysis, we found that understanding MLBs roles and influence requires taking into account what they see as the main policy challenges ahead of them. So, we will look deeper into the PAG case and then use the other two cases (BFP and BVP), as contrasts and complementary illustrations.

The PAG administrative structure is populated at the top-level by the head of the Department who was directly subordinated to the Minister of Planning and her advisors. At the mid-level, there were five directors (four dedicated to thematic areas of infrastructure – ports & airports; roads, rail & hydro; energy; oil & gas – and one to information management). On average, under each director (DAS 5) there were two

coordinators (DAS 4), each of them supervising the work of two technical assistants/experts[9].

In terms of work routines, PAG's MLBs are positioned at the intersection between lateral-horizontal interactions – with diverse federal government organizations responsible for or interfering with the execution of infrastructure projects – and upward-vertical interactions – with a steering committee, composed by ministers (Planning, Finance, Civil Office, and the infrastructure ministries) directly subordinated to the President. In the latter case, they were expected to report, in a timely manner, about implementation problems, which they were not able to fix themselves and that are likely to negatively impact a specific infrastructure project. They are expected to denounce, expose a problematic situation in time for high-level decision-making on corrections and adjustments. In turn, at the lateral-horizontal level, they are supposed to monitor – gather and analyze information about the situation of the projects – and to articulate other actors at the same hierarchical level to prevent situations of potential harm to projects execution (i.e. delays, diversions of purposes, excessive costs, etc.)

The lateral monitoring role is performed through daily contacts and exchanges between PAG's MLBs and the MLBs of the ministries and agencies responsible for the execution of each infrastructure project under PAG's portfolio. Therefore, their work routine is basically characterized by back-to-back meetings, phone calls, emails, and the updating and analysis of informational systems and databases. However, there are two events that are central in structuring their work routines: the trimestral reports and the situation rooms. The trimestral reports are aimed at wide public dissemination and are presented by the Minister of Planning in a formal speech to the press and, afterwards, uploaded to PAG's website. They represent a moment of accounting for the progress of public investments to society. The reports include a global economic analysis as well as balance-sheets on the evolution of each project.

The production of these reports is an ongoing process organized mainly through the situation rooms. There are approximately 15 such situation rooms, each dedicated to a specific thematic group of infrastructure projects (e.g. transmission of energy, roads, urban mobility systems). They consist basically of monthly meetings convened by PAG's MLBs[10]. The usual participants are other MLBs (DAS 5 and 4) from the various ministries and agencies engaged in executing or regulating projects (from public works to socio-environmental licensing, financial intermediation, state corporations, regulatory agencies and so on). The discussions involve updating and checking information on the situation of the projects, identifying problems, obstacles and measures to 'unblock' project execution. In many cases, the interactions between participants during the meeting, who are usually officials empowered to take some decisions on the spot, on behalf of their organization, are all that is needed to produce the agreements and solutions to the progress of a venture. On other occasions, understandings are not achieved, requiring the referral of the situation to the ministerial steering committee.

These meetings are definitely at the apex of the lateral interactions that characterize MLB work at PAG. To successfully run these meetings and also effectively monitor the

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[9] I performed 16 interviews, covering nearly all MLBs occupying DAS 4 and 5 positions at PAG, as well as some former officers and other MLBs in 3 ministries involved with infrastructure projects. I also did direct observation of some of their regular activities and working routines.

[10] Some are responsible for 1, others for several rooms, depending on the complexity and volume of projects in each thematic area.

execution of infrastructure projects on a day-to-day basis, PAG MLBs must find their way to accessing reliable and strategic information. They must know whom to demand it from and they must have their demands responded in timely manner and with the quality and precision needed. Therefore, MLB work at PAC critically depends on their hierarchical peers spread out within the federal government and on their recognition of PAG's MLB authority. The construction of such authority is based on skills and resources they are able to mobilize in the course of their work.

First, one of the very first skills PAG's MLBs need to develop in order to be recognized as an effective monitor, articulator, and mediator is a vision of the "whole picture". That is, a capacity to identify and call upon the various governmental actors and organizations that interfere with the execution of infrastructure projects. Seeing the whole picture presupposes also a sensibility to understand and respect the different agencies' points of views, while at the same time, trying to induce them into some convergence.

> "it's very much like this, having the skill to really understand the position of each organization involved, how each one has its own legal attributions, its own area of competence, and trying to see that the position of each one of them is respected, while at the same time trying to arrive at some point of convergence, which in the end is the progress of the project's execution. So, for example, the entrepreneur has carried out an environmental impact assessment study and the study was badly done, or it is incomplete or something like that, and he hands it in to the environmental licensing agency and then they tell us 'look, with this study, as it is now, I cannot issue an official position on the case'. So, we definitely cannot force that agency to issue a technical note that it would not feel comfortable with. So, then, we must call the entrepreneur and we say 'look, do you really want to get this contract? cause if you do, then you should better conduct a proper study'… our role is mainly that of examining the conflicts that arise between the interests of the project executors and the various government bodies involved". (Interview 14)

Secondly, in order to access reliable and timely information, MLB work at PAG requires the ability to set up and nurture personal-technical networks, in parallel to communications through formal organizational structures or through partisan groups within government. Because of the situation rooms, they end up getting to know the technical teams in the ministries. In addition to speeding up access to information, interviewees spoke about using their network of contacts with technical teams in order to get more reliable information, and avoid tensions, delays or potential refusals by politically appointed authorities belonging to other partisan networks. These direct contacts are all the more relevant in the (not uncommon) event of change in the political leadership of the different ministries involved, allowing alternative paths to formal protocols and hierarchical structures.

> "For example, recently there was a change of minister [ministry omitted] and all the heads of departments were changed. But in that case, you know whom to turn to if you want more reliable information. Not the person that has very strong political ties and is there only to play a role that was set out for him by the party… we seek out other people, someone we already know to be more trustworthy…" (Interview 8).

Finally, PAG's MLBs possess a key resource influencing the recognition of their authority by peer MLBs spread out in other organizations: access to the core decision-making nucleus of the federal government – the PAG steering committee, composed by selected ministers and sometimes the President herself. Such exposure to the top level of the government occurs in two ways. Firstly, PAC's MLBs are supposed to report to the steering committees all the problems that were not solved through the lateral interactions at the situation rooms. Secondly, PAG MLBs can receive direct demands from the top. The Minister of Planning, and sometimes the President herself, needed information about the projects in other to prepare speeches or responses to the press, congressmen, and auditing and oversight bodies. In many cases, given the urgency of these informational needs, PAG MLBs must be reached directly by the authorities, relaxing the traditional hierarchical ladder.

In a government structure that contained 39 ministries plus all the government agencies attached to them, all requesting attention from the top at the same time, having connections to an actor capable of channeling and advocating demands to the highest spheres of government becomes a precious asset. Such situation allows PAG MLBs to reframe their relation to their peers in government, not only as based on their monitoring, but also involving potential "exchanges". "I think of it as an exchange. Just as we make demands on them, so we are also used by them as a channel for their demands to get through to the higher levels of authority, to the ministerial steering committee" (Interview 6). In the course of fieldwork, we found multiple examples of such channeling to the top in response to requests posed by peers, such as when PAG MLBs mediated on behalf of their peers in other government agencies with the National Treasury for the liberation of installments held back for some formal, "bureaucratic" reason; or when they convened meetings to open communications between two government agencies; or even when they intermediated demands from ministries to the President's Chief of Staff, regarding the revision or passing of new administrative norms.

In sum, in order to effectively perform their work as monitors and articulators of the implementation of infrastructure projects, PAG MLBs must produce their authority and have it recognized by the very actors of whom they are so dependent (to access reliable and timely information). They produce their role authority through a combination of skills they develop on the job ("seeing the whole picture" and "connecting to the trustworthy") and resources that they are in a privileged position to mobilize (access to top decision-making centers).

In addition to characterizing their work routines, it is also key to understand how they interpret, attribute meaning, and conceive of their roles. The analysis of PAG MLBs narratives about what they do allow us to identify how they see themselves in relation to the other actors and to the environment surrounding them. It allows us to extract their interpretations of the policy challenges that they must face and that justify their role and position, as well as in which ways they perceive their influence in the production of public action.

In the following quotes, PAG MLBs place their work against the perception of a highly-fragmented environment for government activity. They problematize the operation of both political and administrative centrifugal forces that disturb the production of coherent infrastructure projects.

> "[the PAG] blocks decisions that we might consider, shall we say, not very republican, you see? [in reference to the clientelistic appropriation of some infrastructure projects] (…) in effect, in the infrastructure area at least, you manage to govern, to head towards a given national policy, endowed with a coherent vision for the country". (Interview 5)

> "Our role is to ensure that whatever is being decided in the ministries, whatever is going to be implemented, is aligned with the directives issued by the Presidency and the steering committee… smooth out the wrinkles, right?". (Interview 6)

> "we have innumerable internal interactions among government bodies… and that interlocution process, it works a little as if it were oiling the mechanism, making it all work in a more integrated manner… PAG works as a part of the mechanism that ensures the system does not become a mere collection of various isolated micro-systems. Instead, it creates a process of internal integration". (Interview 7)

The underlying perception of fragmentation and incoherence is consistent with contemporary analysis of the political and administrative system set up in Brazil since the constitution of 1988 – a multi-party presidential regime, in which a governing coalition is built through the distribution of ministries (especially those associated to infrastructure investments) to different political parties (Gomide & Pires 2014; Lopez 2015). In this context, PAG MLBs interpret their roles as promoting a minimum level of communication, articulation, and coordination among the various actors involved in the production of public action in infrastructure – even though these notions and objectives are not explicitly defined in the formal, statutory mission attributed to PAG in the norms that regulate its operation[11].

In short, in the face of much fragmentation and centrifugal tendencies, they conceive of their work as "holding it together". And, consequently, by constructing their role as such, they circumscribe their potential influence in public action as *bonds and ligaments* or producers of integrations who interfere by connecting or not (including or excluding) a wide variety of government actors to the center of government or among themselves, through the day-to-day management of lateral-vertical interactions.

Other cases, other challenges…

The work routine for MLBs in the Bolsa Familia Program (BFP) can be equally characterized by back-to-back meetings, phone calls, emails and the updating and analysis of informational systems and databases. In addition to ongoing relationships with their superiors and subordinates, BFP MLBs primarily interact with the Ministries of Education and Health, representatives of states and municipal governments, and auditing bodies. However, in order to fully understand the meaning of these interactions and of the MLB work around BFP, it is important to place them in the context in which program was created. The eradication of extreme poverty and famine was one of the main campaign promises in President Lula's election in 2002. BFP was the

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[11] Presidential Decree nº 6.025/2007 defined PAG as "constituted of measures designed to stimulate private investment, expand public investment in infrastructure, improve the quality of public expenditure and control the expansion of current use spending in the sphere of Federal Public Administration".

government's main response and it was designed with the goal of technically targeting the poorest, with two main implications. First, the choices of beneficiaries should be insulated from the influence of patronage and clientelistic networks, which for decades characterized the strategies of politicians in Brazil, who used social benefits to reward or attract voters as they sought reelection. Therefore, the creation of a new, massive social program faced the threat of being instrumentally captured by both politicians and local public sector employees engaged in clientelistic machines. Second, in order to bypass these established networks, BFP's execution demanded new instruments for identification and registration of the beneficiaries.

Such narrative about the challenges associated with BFP's creation was frequently mobilized by the MLBs interviewed in explaining their position and role in the Program's operation. They narrated their work as initially having to put up a new social program blocking the influence of actors traditionally engaged in the field and selectively including new partners (such as the Ministries of Education and Health). Their investments in developing the Cadastro Unico (the national register of beneficiaries) were key to both ends, as they excluded politicians and local governments from the selection of beneficiaries and provided a database for pointedly articulating actions in the monitoring of children's school attendance and preventative health care. And once the BFP was set up and running, they recapped their mission as the "guardians of its core objectives", "preventing it from having its guidelines diverted". As "guardians", they narrate their role as involving both: politically shielding the program from undesired interferences by Congress and other political representatives of state and municipal governments; and make themselves understood ("surfing between different syntaxes") when negotiating with other federal government organizations (Lotta & Oliveira 2015).

Through such role construction, BFP MLBs influenced public action in terms of consolidating public perceptions about which actors were legitimate or illegitimate policy partners, and conditioning such interactions to the Program's technical imperatives. At the early stages, BFP MLBs were empowered and expected, by top level officials, to innovate and set up the legal norms and administrative procedures necessary to run the program. Later, as the Program developed and gained even greater visibility and importance, they became the *guardians* of the own creations through an increasing process of institutionalization and routinization.

In turn, MLBs in the Bolsa Verde Program (BVP) also had their work routines defined by numerous scheduled meetings, but involved the processing of large volumes of documents (due to its decentralized operations), as well as the feeding and maintenance of informational systems and databases. As the program was created in 2011, a year before Brazil would host the UN Sustainable Development Conference Rio+20, the government wanted to showcase the initiative to the international public at the meeting and, thus, set ambitious targets for the BVP: the inclusion of 73 thousand families in the program in less than one year (which later on happened to be revised, even though the program made huge steps in enlisting new beneficiaries). The BVP also faced two initial challenges: the identification and inclusion in the *Cadastro Unico* of an "invisible" group of beneficiaries, people who live in remotes areas of the country; and the monitoring of the environmental conservation requirements upon the beneficiaries (Abers 2015).

As a result of the intensive pressures for meeting the Program's target, tensions emerged between those emphasizing BVP's social or environmental goals. While the Ministry of Social Development emphasized the speedy inclusion of more and more beneficiaries, MLBs at the Ministry of Environment were concerned about the weakness of their assessments of beneficiaries' efforts towards environmental conservation. They resisted the excessive focus on merely enrolling beneficiaries by convincing and bringing in other governmental and non-governmental actors, in order to reinforce the program's environmental component and monitoring systems. For example, through a partnership with the British Embassy and an NGO, they designed and delivered a training program on sustainable practices to support beneficiaries families conservation efforts; they also bargained with agricultural extension agencies around the offer of rural technical assistance to BVP recipients; and, finally, they developed a partnership with a university for running the socioeconomic assessments and the satellite image analyses necessary for monitoring environmental conservation in the areas covered by the program (Abers 2015).

Therefore, by developing a critique of the BVP's unbalanced focus on the cash transfer component, some of the MLBs involved sought to rebalance the social versus environmental dimensions by performing a role of *boundary stretchers*, reaching out to other actors, not originally nor formally involved in the programs' execution, and adding new components to the strategy. In this case, the work of MLBs at the Ministry of Environment interfered directly with the boundaries of public action, adding "new guests to the party", and influencing the programs' shape and contents.

… but, similar roles

For the three cases discussed above, we described the work routines of MLBs, the ways through which they conceive of their work, and we analyzed how MLBs quotidian practices and interpretations delineated their potential interference in the production of public action. By understanding work as did Jeannot (2005, p.5), as the "human action on whatever resists prescriptions", we revealed that MLBs roles construction, in each case, was sensitive to policy contexts, challenges, and the ways in which these actors interpreted their environment. While in the PAG case, MLBs constructed their role as the *bonds and ligaments* that resisted fragmentation and attempted to "hold it together", linking up lateral and vertical relationships around infrastructure projects; in the BFP case, MLBs operated as *guardians*, who shielded the and program from undesired participations and resisted perceived external threats; and, finally, in the BVP case, MLBs performed as *boundary stretchers*, by resisting the excessive performance pressures and bringing in new partners to rebalance the focus among the different components of the program.

Thus, the pattern running across these three stories of role definition (vis-à-vis perceived policy challenges) is the MLBs´ work in assembling policy implementation collectives, as they go on connecting or disconnecting different types of actors in their surroundings. Since MLBs experiment the state from within, they face directly government´s internal fragmentations, tensions, and disputes. And as they try to make sense of such environment through their work, they introduce their interpretations of integration, coherence, and order, which then guide them in making what they consider the "right" connections or unmaking and avoiding the "wrong" ones. Thus, MLBs perform a work of unification. Their role is bringing public action together at the heart

of the state. And by making the middle, they influence public action by way of regulating connections: including, excluding, or linking up multiples actors surrounding them.

Conclusions

Our goal was to analyze the mid-level as a specific segment of the bureaucracy, seeking to describe their work (routine activities, tasks, and interactions) and understand how they produce their roles and then influence the production of public action. By comparing the mid to the upper and lower levels of the bureaucracy in the Brazilian federal government, we revealed the elements that characterize the intermediary echelon as a differentiated social and working space, where bureaucrats experience the state from within (and not from its borders to the outside), through intense endogenous circulation and the performance of non-stabilized and vaguely prescribed sets of tasks.

This general perception became more nuanced when we looked inside the mid-level and explored the different contexts under which MLB work takes place. By comparing across cases in different policy domains, we found that political and institutional factors condition the scope of MLBs policy influence, as levels of bureaucratization may affect their margins of maneuver in making choices about how to perform their work, and levels of priority within government are likely to affect the resources MLBs are capable of mobilizing. When such conditions are conducive to greater potential influence, we understood that MLBs perceptions of the policy challenges they face are key to the construction of their situated roles and, consequently, to the forms through which they interfere with public action. By being in the middle and between multiple others, the MLBs in the cases studied took on the challenges of producing integration in the face of political and administrative centrifugal forces, setting up and protecting technically sound initiatives from undue interventions, or balancing between competing claims by bringing in new partners and components. In responding to these challenges, they performed a work of unification, making the middle by connecting in and out with multiples different others surrounding them.

At last, the mid-level can be understood not only as a differentiated social and working space, but also as a governmental group whose influence in the production of public action is also distinct. If at the lower levels, bureaucrats influence policy by adjusting, translating, and adapting general rules and guidelines to concrete service interactions and situations; and if at the upper levels, bureaucrats´ influence takes the forms of decision- and rule-making, and representation in abstract policy-making struggles; at the mid-level, bureaucrats assemble implementation collectives and regulate the connections that end up defining who the legitimate and illegitimate policy implementation partners are.

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