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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Do street-level bureaucrats *have* discretionary power? Analysing the immigration detention policy implementation from the perspective of organizational power struggles in Belgian ‘closed centres’

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ABSTRACT

‘Discretionary power’ suffers from conceptual ambiguity. Is it an attribute of individual street-level bureaucrats, or an organizational prerogative? If sociological approaches have deconstructed the legalistic donut analogy and explain discretion through a series of sociological variables, it is still unclear where the authorship of practices lies. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in two Belgian immigration detention centres, in this article I advance a relational approach to discretionary power. I argue that to understand the practices of street-level bureaucrats, we must analyse the power relations in which they are embedded. Drawing on Crozier & Friedberg’s strategic analysis and Emirbayer and Johnsons’ theory of the organization-as-field, I look at how detention staff strategically mobilized different forms of capital to influence the decision-making processes. I argue that, rather than being discretionary, their practices and daily routines are the result of struggles over the control of organizational uncertainties, particularly the management of risks linked to detainees. Hence, their practices are neither organizational nor individual, but relational: they are shaped by and contribute to these relations of power. This dimension enables us to think of discretion beyond the individual-organizational dichotomy and questions the pertinence of the concept ‘discretion’ to analyse migration policy implementation.

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Prologue

Then Bruno¹ (= nurse) tells me that the centre population consists of “the worst kind”: “many criminals”. When we walk through the green wing he comments on each detainee. (...) In front of Roshan’s cell, he says he is dangerous: “He’s a rapist. We cannot release him or he’ll rape children.” (Field notes, Vottem, May 2015)

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I asked Frieda (= social assistant) about Roshan. She said he was brought here because the Immigration Office hopes he can be interned in this area. "But the facts are not serious enough". "There are sex offences, but he never touched the girls. He was in a park, in public and he was singing obscenities, but he never touched them. So, the facts are not serious enough to have him interned." (Field notes, Steenokkerzeel, November 2015)

These two quotes illustrate how the same person was categorized in two immigration detention centres where I met him during my fieldwork. In Vottem, the narrative that he was a dangerous child rapist circulated widely. Consequently, management tried to have him interned in a psychiatric institution. He was held in the 'special wing'² (also 'secure' or 'green' wing), which was a maximum-security wing where detainees were held in individual cells and depended on security staff to light their cigarettes, receive their meals, shower, ... In short, they were subjected to a greater deprivation of liberty compared to detainees in the 'normal' wings, who could move freely within the wing and socialize with other detainees. In Steenokkerzeel, instead, staff did not consider Roshan a dangerous molester. Consequently, he spent the day on the normal wings, and the social services staff criticized the attempts at having him interned.

This contrast was the consequence of the policy of 'humanisation' (Crosby 2016; 2022), which implies that staff must adapt the centre regime to the specific needs of detainees, who should receive tailor-fitted measures respecting their social, psychological, medical and religious rights. This is enshrined in articles 6 and 7 of the Royal decree of 2 August 2002³ regulating the rights and duties of detainees and staff. The recitals of this decree stipulate that the 'normal' regime to which detainees are subjected, is the 'group' regime. It implies detainees can move around freely on the wing they are assigned to, interact with other detainees and participate in group activities. Exceptions to the group regime are listed under article 84, which provides for isolation measures. These measures are officially taken by the centre director, except for medical isolation, which is decided by medical staff. In 2014, the decree was amended to provide for a *régime de chambre* for detainees whose behaviour is considered incompatible with the group regime (art. 83/1). Under this regime, detainees are isolated from the group and are only slowly reintegrated into the group under strict conditions decided by staff during multidisciplinary meetings. During my fieldwork, the duties of 'humanisation' meant that centre staff constantly interpreted the behaviour and needs of detainees to provide tailor-fitted measures. Hence, according to the centre where a detainee was held, s/he could be treated very differently, as illustrated in the case of Roshan.

This case made me wonder how staff with similar professional backgrounds and quasi-identical organizations could treat him so differently. It made me question the concept of discretion. Were these differences examples of discretion? And was it individual or organizational discretion? In fact, the concept of discretion is ambiguous, shifting from an individually possessed power to an organizational constraint, which makes it difficult to use as an interpretative concept. In this article I attempt to dispel this ambiguity. My conjecture is that it stems from the assumption that 'power' can be possessed, rather than being a specific form of social relations that shape both individual and organizational practices.

From this perspective, I argue that to understand the implementation practices of street-level bureaucrats, we must analyse the power relations in which they are embedded. Following Spire (2008) and Darling (2022), I consider these relations to be

characterized by discretion in the sense that they occur out of the public's sight. Consequently, in this article I do not consider discretionary power to be something that is possessed. Rather, it is a specific configuration of organizational power relations, which require to be unpacked to understand the practices of street-level bureaucrats.

This relational dimension enables us to think of discretion beyond the individual-organizational dichotomy, which in turn makes it possible to avoid the pitfall of whether street-level bureaucrats *have* discretionary power – a claim they systematically deny (see Eule et al. 2019) – without disregarding the discretionary context in which their practices are shaped.

Immigration detention and migrant 'deviance'

Immigration detention has become a central policy tool in the governmentality of irregularized mobility in the Global North (Campesi 2024, 2020; Könönen 2022; Turnbull 2019; Griffiths 2013; Esposito et al. 2022; Hiemstra and Conlon 2017; Gashi, Perderson, and Ugelvik 2021; Fischer 2017). 'Irregularised' refers to the social construction of non-belonging (Bosworth 2014; Lietaert, Broekaert, and Derluyn 2015; Turnbull 2019), which creates moral boundaries between 'us' and 'them' that justify border control policies and enable immigration detention staff to make sense of their work (Walker 2019; Ugelvik 2016; Rezzonico 2020; Lindberg 2022). Put differently, immigration detention has been analysed from the perspective of the construction of migrant 'deviance'. Furthermore, this spectacularization of migrant 'illegality' (De Genova 2002) contributes to whitewash the fact that predominantly poor, racialized people from the Global South are detained (Turnbull 2017; Bhui 2016). Belgian immigration detention is no exception to this, where staff blame migrants for their detention and expulsion, enabling them to deny their participation in the violence of border control (Crosby 2022, 2025), and thus occult the racial dimension of detention.

This function of immigration detention contributes to the tendency of border bureaucracies to treat migrants with suspicion (Borelli, Lindberg, and Wyss 2022). However, despite the growing research on immigration detention in the past decade, the discretionary power of detention centres has not been as widely studied as that of other border bureaucracies (though see Hall 2012). While the difficulty of gaining research access to such sites (Bosworth 2014; Ryo 2019; Esposito et al. 2022) partly explains this, immigration detention is not easily grasped as a street-level bureaucracy. The decisions taken in detention are completely different from those of other border bureaucracies (see Borelli, Johannesson, and Lindberg 2025). In Belgium, they relate to how detainees are treated inside detention: solitary confinement, access to activities, detention yards, the right to receive visitors, etc., which affect the already vulnerable situation of detainees. Furthermore, detention staff is in quasi permanent contact with the detainees on whom their decisions apply. Contrary to most street-level bureaucrats, they must manage the consequences of their decisions. Hence, adopting a street-level perspective contributes to our understanding of both immigration detention and of discretionary power.

To situate my contribution, I first discuss the literature on migration policy implementation and street-level bureaucracy. I then discuss my fieldwork and how it inspired my theoretical framework, which combines the street-level bureaucracy literature with

organizational approaches. I then turn to my data, which I present and discuss in the light of the literature.

Border bureaucracies and discretionary power

Over the past decade, the increasing research on migration policy implementation has shown how border bureaucracies treat migrants with suspicion (Borrelli, Johannesson, and Lindberg 2025), negatively affecting their rights (Infantino and Sredanovic 2022). From this perspective, the treatment of migrants cannot be separated from the discretionary practices of border bureaucrats. It is therefore pertinent to briefly discuss the underlying literature.

Lipsky defines street-level bureaucrats as '*[p]ublic service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work*' (Lipsky 1980, 3). He defines discretion as the power to determine '*the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies*' (Lipsky 1980, 13). For Prottas (1979), instead, discretion lies first in street-level bureaucrats' power to process ordinary citizens into agency clients. Put differently, their discretion lies in the *categorization* of citizens, which will affect their rights. These authors opened a field of research on discretionary power that challenges the view of discretion as being merely a matter of legal norms (Evans and Hupe 2020). According to Baumgartner (1993), in fact, social norms structure patterns of behaviour and make the outcome of discretion much more predictable than legal norms. She illustrates how client characteristics such as social class, prestige, gender, and ethnicity affect street-level bureaucrats in predictable ways. For example, border guards use their discretion either to stop travellers for further control, or let them onto the territory based on their perceptions of travellers' trustworthiness (Heyman 2009; Crosby and Rea 2016; 2022). Thus, the impact of social norms on decision-making challenges the view of discretion as an attribute of autonomous individuals (Pratt 1999) and raises the issue of how such norms are articulated in the organizational context. This literature illustrates that discretion should be considered as 'practice' that needs explaining (Wagenaar 2020) rather than being an independent variable that explains practices. Researchers have thus focused on the factors that shape discretionary power.

Whereas Lipsky focuses on organizational constraints to understand discretion, other scholars argue that people *have durable patterns of behaviour* such that radical changes in behaviour are rare when they start working for an organization (Oberfeld 2020). For example, often street-level bureaucrats are members of professional associations, which have codified professional ethics that shape their views and practices and might conflict with organizational norms (Evans 2011; Prottas 1978). This makes the contrast between the two opening quotes of this article particularly interesting, since they concern staff with similar professional ethical codes (see Crosby 2025). It raises the issue of how these durable patterns are mediated by a series of organizational constraints and structuring factors.

For instance, organizational goals must comply with certain accounting principles (Hupe and Hill 2007; Gregory 2012), which reflect diffuse social norms and values. Hence, border guards are not only accountable in terms of border control, but also in terms of care and cost efficiency. Their individual style results from the articulation of

these rationalities (Achermann 2021). Furthermore, processes of socialization into organizational culture mediate the articulation of individual properties with organizational goals and practices. Mobilising Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Affolter (2021) has shown how street-level bureaucrats incorporate organizational norms and culture to the extent that they become durable dispositions that generate individual practices in line with organizational goals. Despite individual bureaucrats' different inclination towards asylum seekers, their institutional *habitus* explains how most asylum claims end up being rejected. These processes of socialization, however, are fraught with tensions. As illustrated by Spire (2008) the bureaucratic *ethos* he observed in a French immigration desk, was the result of tensions between young officials with a university degree and their middle-aged hierarchical superiors who had no university degree. This tension led the younger officials either to adhere to the more restrictive and suspicious views of their superiors, or to mutate to another administration. Consequently, the power relations in this immigration desk eliminated too great a difference in the use of discretion. This implies that *individual* discretion is co-produced by bureaucratic actors (see Miaz and Achermann 2022), which implies that it is the product of relations. As such, discretion and street-level bureaucrats are always *situated* (Watkins-Hayes 2009).

The situatedness of discretion has been analysed mostly from the perspective of the interorganizational field, which focuses on the strategic dimensions that shape the relationships between different institutions implicated in the implementation of migration policies. Darling (2022) has illustrated how municipal authorities facilitated or complicated the work of private housing partners involved in the implementation of dispersal policies in the UK according to whether they held good or bad relationships with them. Where the work of bureaucrats in one administration depends on that of bureaucrats in another, scholars have noted how the former incorporate norms and practices of the latter to avoid double work (Sredanovic and Fargues 2024; Alpes and Spire 2014; Mascia 2021). Likewise, several studies have shown how migration administrations take or avoid certain decisions to influence the case-law in their favour (Miaz 2024; Mascia 2025).

Though it sheds light on the relational nature of discretion, this literature does not transcend the individual-organizational dichotomy. It is the organization, not the individual bureaucrat, to develop discretionary practices. Furthermore, the relational dimension seems to correspond to the interorganizational field. Yet, inside the organization, too, there are power relations that shape bureaucratic practices, as illustrated by Spire (2008) and Affolter (2021). However, these relations of power are often reduced to the relations between street-level bureaucrats and managers, and usually focus only on one type of street-level bureaucrat within an organization. However, as argued by Rutz and de Bont (2020), instances of collective, multidisciplinary decision-making play an increasing role in user-centred policies. From this perspective, different types of street-level bureaucrats, with different roles and backgrounds, discuss cases together to decide on a course of action. Yet, such instances of collective decision-making have rarely been analysed, and even less so in the case of immigration detention. Lastly, in this literature, discretionary power still reflects the liberal trope (Pratt 1999) in which discretion is something that is possessed or exercised, rather being the specific form of power relations that shapes individual or organizational practices. In this article, instead, I consider discretionary power to be a specific *form* of power relations, which needs unpacking to understand how it affects both individual and organizational

practices. This distinction is necessary to avoid naturalising discretion. It implies shifting away from the practices themselves to focus on the power relations between actors and their corresponding strategies.

Notes on fieldwork

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three 'closed centres' in Belgium between October 2014 and December 2015: Merksplas, Steenokkerzeel and Vottem. However, I will only focus on the last two to understand Roshan's treatment. Not only had his immigration case remained unchanged over the period of my fieldwork, but management and social assistants had access to the same information in both centres and yet held such different views of him. Furthermore, both centres had the same organizational chart and a very similar architecture, such that one could expect them to function in more similar ways. Put differently, both centres shared a series of 'independent variables' that allow us to isolate the internal power relations to analyse implementation. For this reason, Merksplas has been left out of the analysis. Though its inclusion would have illustrated a third configuration of power, it would not have resulted in greater analytical complexity.

Closed centres are facilities in which migrants who do not have a residence permit are detained in view of a potential expulsion. They are run by the Immigration Office (IO), which is the federal agency under the Ministry of Interiors in charge of implementing migration policies. Though the fieldwork occurred a decade ago, the ethnographic dimension sheds light on the tensions that structure the organizational struggles, providing a lens to understand local variations in implementation. Furthermore, rather than producing generalizable findings, this paper produces interpretations that can be used as heuristic hypotheses for future research and comparison. The scope of this article, in fact, is theoretical rather than empirical. It is not to produce knowledge on Belgian closed centres today, but to understand the complexities of discretionary power in migration policy implementation, by focusing on organizational struggles. As such, the rather limited dimension of the fieldwork nevertheless contributes to our understanding and the debates on migration control and discretionary power.

For my fieldwork I was interested in the tensions between the sovereign rights of states to control their borders, and the fundamental rights of detainees. This tension was enshrined in the Royal decree of 2 August 2002. Whereas several articles guaranteed the well-being of detainees above detention and expulsion, others provided for the use of coercive measures. It was further reflected in the division of labour of the centres. The use of coercive measures was a matter for security staff, while the aspects of psychological, medical and social well-being, the duty of social services staff.

In both centres, the existing views regarding the treatment of detainees differed according to the category of staff. As such, which practices were more 'humane' was a matter of constant debate in which the safety of staff and the rights of detainees were often in tension. This focus on humanization emerged during the fieldwork as a salient issue among staff. It reflects the *emic* perspective typical of ethnographic research and offers a particular insight into what Walters (2011) calls the 'humanitarian border', where one of the stakes is the political struggle to define legitimate humanitarian intervention. It explains my focus on the different decision-making processes of the centres in

Steenokkerzeel and Vottem, in which these debates were central and as such offer a pertinent case to analyse the relational dimension of discretion.

I observed each centre for a three-month period during a first round of fieldwork (October 2014–July 2015), and then again for a two-week period (November–December 2015). On average I spent five days a week in the centres, between six to twelve hours, covering both day and night shifts, weekdays, and weekends. During the first month in each centre, I observed the intake and outtake procedures of detainees, followed by a period of shadowing staff. As of the second month, I conducted interviews with staff. In the centres of Merksplas and Steenokkerzeel, situated in Flanders I conducted interviews in Dutch, while in Vottem, situated in Wallonia, I conducted them in French.

At the time of my fieldwork, the organizational chart (Figure 1) of the centres was composed as follows. Each centre had a director who was assisted by a team of attachés. They each oversaw a specific branch of the centre: social services, security, ‘residents’ (as detainees were called), and administration. The social services were composed of a psychologist (or assistant-psychologist), who was in charge of the mental health of detainees; a team of social assistants, who kept detainees informed of all the decisions taken by the authorities; a team of educators who organized activities in the centres; and a team of nurses. Security staff was divided in three categories. The security assistant-coordinators were the supervisors of the security assistant-attendants (SAA) and the security collaborators (SC). The SAAs and SCs implemented surveillance and control. They intervened physically when fights broke out and when detainees had to be separated or confined. They were entitled to use force, but only if necessary and ordered by their hierarchy (management or SAC). The difference between SCs and SAAs was that SAA required a secondary school diploma, the SC required none. While security staff worked in several teams and were present around the clock in the centres, the rest of staff worked 9–5, except for educators, who had evening shifts to provide detainees with evening activities. Lastly, administrative staff oversaw the administration of the centres. Since they did not interact with detainees and did not participate in decision-making, they were not part of my fieldwork. All members of staff were state officials on the payroll of the IO and as such border bureaucrats.

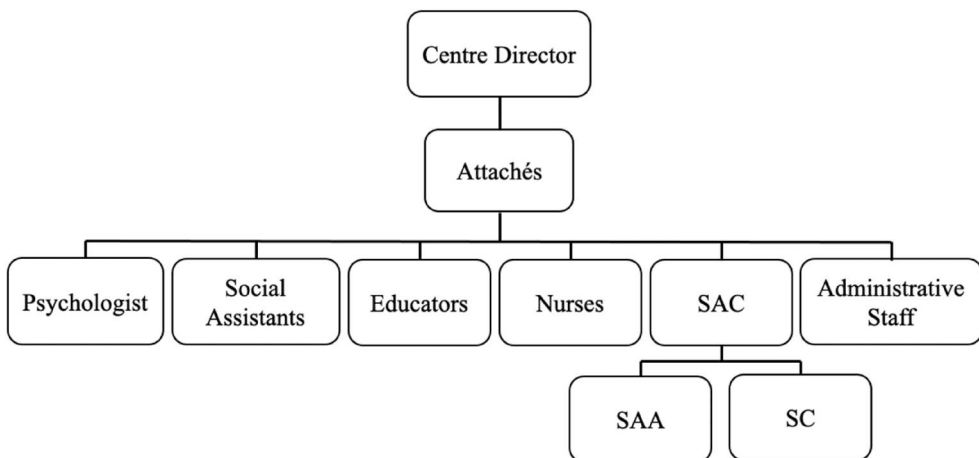


Figure 1. simplified organizational chart of the centres during my fieldwork (2014–2015).

Accessing the centres, navigating tense social relations

I was granted full access to the fieldwork by the IO's General-Advisor in charge of the closed centres. To increase my chances, I proposed a research convention stipulating the rights and duties of both parties. The street-level perspective proved to be key in building trust, since the idea of this approach is not to say what street-level bureaucrats should do, but to understand why they do what they do (Brodkin 2016). This way, the research did not question the legitimacy of immigration detention but paid attention to the technicalities of day-to-day implementation. It implied taking experience and work of staff seriously, increasing the chances of gaining their trust and finding ways to relate to them – a fundamental condition for ethnographic work (Boccagni and Schrooten 2018).

My approach proved fruitful to understand the social reality of the centres. Staff explained and showed what their work consisted of, and which obstacles they faced. The tense relations between colleagues quickly appeared as a structuring dimension of their work. I was frequently taken as a witness by respondents who exposed their points of view, as if to justify themselves. Hence, what I was being told and shown, could not be separated from these organizational tensions. It illustrates the way in which ethnographers can be manipulated by their respondents (Freidenberg 1998). It is in this context that I started articulating street-level bureaucracy with organizational sociology in which power relations are central. If this offered a pertinent theoretical lens to analyse the practices of detention, it also enabled me to maintain the 'right distance' (Avanza 2008) helping me to walk the very thin line between observing and taking sides in a very tense context (Goffman 1989).

Nonetheless, my interactions with respondents felt 'natural'. Being a male researcher in all-male centres made this easier. Female staff were often told to be careful and how to dress to avoid being sexualized by detainees. In the summer months, their lighter wear was an object of discussion among colleagues. From this perspective, a female researcher would have been considered an extra security issue by staff, which would have impacted the unfolding of the fieldwork. Likewise, being half Scottish and half Italian, but born and raised in Brussels, my background sparked fascination. This made breaking the ice and creating relations of trust easier. It stood in stark contrast with the members of staff with (North) African or Muslim backgrounds, who were treated with suspicion by certain colleagues or treated as traitors by certain detainees (see Turnbull 2017). Though it lies beyond the scope of this article to analyse the function of racialization in immigration detention, it forms the context of the fieldwork and analysis in which the organizational struggles that shape the practices of staff occurred. From this perspective, the policy and competing views of humanization, can be seen as discourses that contribute to occult the racial dimension of detention, and as such to the 'racial innocence' discussed by Turnbull (2017) and Bhui (2016).

The people with whom the trust was most easily earned were the staff that provided the 'social services': social assistants, educators, nurses and psychologists (henceforward 'social services staff'). We were approximately the same age and shared similar cultural backgrounds. When I was not particularly focusing on observations, they were the people I exchanged with the most. The relation with management was different, despite our equally similar background. Conducting research in their centre, they

regularly checked on me. Given the tensions between staff in the centres, this meant I had to be careful of what I said, lest I unwittingly contributed to those tensions. Consequently, this led to more formal relations. I earned much of the respect from security staff following them during their night shifts. Though originally planned to be able to interview them when they had more time, the night shifts quickly became a common condition of work: I was not merely a researcher with a daytime job and easy working hours. It proved I sincerely engaged with their work and understood their difficulties (such as the tedious night work).

A relational approach to discretion

Following Foucault (1976), I consider power as a structure of relations rather than something that is possessed or lost. In fact, according to Foucault there is no exteriority to power, but one is caught in power relations, whether through domination, resistance or concession. As such, power always has both a relational and a strategic dimension. From this perspective, I conceive discretion as a specific form of power in which border bureaucrats are caught and contribute differentially. Following Spire (2008) and Darling (2022), the particularity of discretion is that it occurs out of public sight: it is *hidden* or *discrete*. This characteristic of discretion gives it an aura of arbitrariness. However, in line with the implementation literature, what seems arbitrary responds to a certain logic that needs unpacking. I argue that this logic reflects the internal power struggles of organizations. However, how are power relations grasped and how can they be analysed?

My theoretical framework combines two distinct approaches in organizational sociology: the ‘strategic analysis’ of Crozier and Friedberg (1981) and the ‘organisation-as-field’, developed by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) on the basis of Bourdieu’s (2014) analysis of the firm as a field.

Through their ‘strategic analysis’ Crozier and Friedberg try to understand how cooperation works despite constant tensions among organizational actors. They conceive organizations to be characterized by zones of *organizational uncertainties* that need to be managed to avoid organizational failure. Consequently, the actors who manage to master pertinent uncertainties occupy a stronger bargaining position. Hence, the more an actor controls an organizational uncertainty, the stronger his/her position of power within the organization, and the more the other actors will depend on him/her. It follows that organizational power relations cannot solely be grasped from the written rules or the formal organizational structure. They are to be analysed through the strategies of actors to master pertinent organizational uncertainties and to anticipate the strategies of others to avoid becoming dependent on them.

In the centres, detainees formed an organizational uncertainty because, staff argued, you never knew what they were capable of (Hall 2012). Consequently, I consider the different ways to manage detainees as different shares in the control of this organizational uncertainty. From this perspective, I will discuss how the different categories of staff contributed to the management of detainees, and what strategies they employed to impose their views and increase their independence from others.

If this approach is useful to identify the actors and their strategies, it fails to conceptualize differences *within* categories of staff. In fact, in Crozier’s and Friedberg’s analysis,

individual workers within a same category seem to occupy identical positions and to be mutually interchangeable. Furthermore, the implication of the control of organizational uncertainties is that power is derived *only* from the position within the organization. As argued by Emirbayer and Johnson (2008, 23), however, organizational actors also carry with them ‘a specific volume and composition of capital (...) acquired in and reproduced by other fields’, such as specific academic degrees or professional experiences (cultural capital). These forms of capital endow them with differentiating degrees of legitimacy inside the organization (bureaucratic capital). Hence, from the perspective of the organization-as-field, it is important to analyse the individual trajectories of actors, as well as the relation between the capital they possess and the forms of capital that are considered legitimate to decide how the organization is run.

From this perspective, I will analyse the influence of the different academic and bureaucratic trajectories of the members of staff. This enable me to understand the extent to which professional background of staff is pertinent to develop strategies to increase their influence in the decision-making processes of the centres, which shaped their practices.

Two styles of decision-making

And you know, it's not because [detainees say] ‘Good day Madam’ – I mean, that's all I ask for, but behind, in your head, you must tell yourself: we must be careful! We do not know who we are dealing with (...) especially in an environment like this one, you really must be very prudent. (Interview, SAC, Vottem)

This vignette illustrates a common feeling among centre staff. Since detainees were held against their will, they were capable of anything. According to staff one always had to be careful (see Hall 2012). As such, anticipating and managing the unpredictability of detainees, constituted the control of the most pertinent organizational uncertainty (Crozier and Friedberg 1981) in the centres. It formed the core of the discussions during the various multidisciplinary meetings during which staff sought the best possible solution to the risks constituted by detainees such as hunger strikes, group formations, or tensions between groups of detainees, etc. These meetings constituted the ‘room for discretion’ (Rutz and de Bont 2020) in which professionals exchanged views and took client-centred decisions. However, the dynamics of these meetings differed considerably according to the centre.

In Steenokkerzeel, the input of the social services staff was fundamental. For example, speaking about how the decision was taken to ask for police escorts during expulsion procedures, a member of management argued that the decision was always based on the advice of social services staff:

Management does not decide this on its own. In the end it takes the decision, but it is always upon request of the social service. They know the residents best. (Interview, management, Steenokkerzeel)

Thus, the decision-making process in Steenokkerzeel corresponded to Rutz's & de Bont's (2020) analysis. Though the decision was formally taken by management, the case was first discussed collectively by a series of professionals with a good knowledge of the detainee. As such, the professional background of the social services staff had a decisive weight in the decision-making process.

In Vottem, management systematically disregarded the input of social services staff, illustrating it was considered less important. In the words of an assistant-psychologist in Vottem:

It all depends on the team you work with. You just know that if Chloé (= SAC) and Mr. Gerard (= vice-director) are at the meeting, we know that we will win nothing at the level of the residents, that nothing will move. If they are residents who are kind of annoying, like Badr, we will not make any progress. It really depends on the team you work with. It's clear, at that point that there are things I do not even try during those meetings ... (...) If we have Mr. Pâris (= centre director), he is much more open and listens much more ... (Interview, assistant psychologist, Vottem)

This piece of interview illustrates how the room for discretion has a strategic dimension that needs unpacking. In fact, just like the assistant-psychologist mentioned she adapted her input according to who sat at the table, we must consider the practice of ignoring social services staff as a strategy of certain members of management to impose their view on how detainees should be treated. The apparent absence of strategy in Steenokkerzeel suddenly appears conspicuous. My conjecture is that to understand the styles of decision-making during the multidisciplinary meetings, we must analyse the relations of power in the centres. This is what I turn to next.

Unpacking the relations of power

The position of security staff in both centres

The presence of security staff in the centres was a historical vestige of the centres' organizational uncertainty. In the past, their control of security propelled them to a dominant position of power, which durably structured the way the centres worked. At the time of my fieldwork, in fact, several security posts had to be occupied for a centre to be functional. These security posts were outlooks from where security staff had a view on the wing or external fences of the centre and from which it operated control buttons that opened and locked doors and gates at a distance. They also formed the biggest and most unionized category of staff and could threaten with strikes. Most importantly, the rest of staff depended on them in case the use of force was needed. Together, these elements gave security staff a certain bargaining power.

Nevertheless, in both centres, security staff occupied a weak position of power at the time of my fieldwork. They were excluded from the multidisciplinary meetings and their teams were divided. The 'hard' teams had a very authoritarian and disciplinary view of how to run the centre, while the 'soft' teams believed in building *rapport* and underenforcing certain rules to secure a smooth functioning of the centre. Both blamed each other for what they considered went wrong on the wings. However, since security staff's control of an organizational uncertainty contributed to structure how the centres worked, 'security' was an issue that crossed all aspects of decision-making. From the perspective of the organization-as-field, then, non-security staff's strategies had to contribute to improve the security in the centres to be considered pertinent and to increase their independence. In the following paragraphs I discuss which forms of capital non-security staff mobilized to develop alternative security strategies and how this contributed to their strong or weak position of power.

Steenokkerzeel

Dominant actors: social services staff

Social services staff had in common that they all had a higher education degree in what we could loosely define the 'care' sector: degrees in social engineering, social work, psychology, and nursing. Rather than focusing on whether a detainee followed the centre rules, they paid attention to his mental and physical condition, how he interacted with others and reacted to news regarding his case. Therefore, they developed knowledge of whether he could react badly and be dangerous for himself or others, as illustrated in the following note.

About Boulares (detainee) who was mad yesterday because his girlfriend had an overdose of pills, and he could not be there to assist her: "He was mad at the centre". However, Frieda (social assistant) informs everybody that he received an SMS from his girlfriend in the evening apologising and that "she loves him". She says "it was a cumulation of things because he also received his booking" (expulsion). "It was a mix of emotions". (Field notes, Steenokkerzeel, February 2015)

This vignette illustrates how their knowledge of detainees turned into crucial information, which put them in a position to manage the risks linked to detainees. It enabled them to issue guidelines on how to anticipate problematic situations with detainees, which was crucial even for security staff. Hence, their cultural capital provided social services staff with a share in the control of the organizational uncertainty represented by detainees. It enabled them to act as risk-managers, which explains why management always turned to them for decision-making. Their position, however, was also due to the weak position of management.

A delegitimated management

Between 1994, when the centre opened, and 2000 when the centre director took office, there had been four different management teams. From then onward, the director stayed, but her team frequently changed. This turn-over of management meant that they struggled to build up their bureaucratic capital, which Bourdieu (2014), defines as the legitimacy based on seniority within the organization and which (partly) explains why at the time of my fieldwork management lacked legitimacy and leadership in the eyes of staff. The members of management were constantly criticized for not handling conflictual situations and avoiding confrontation. This explains why management struggled to secure the cooperation of staff despite their formal position of power at the head of the centre.

Furthermore, while conducting fieldwork, an audit revealed high tensions between the centre director and the social services. Suddenly, the director announced her transfer to the offices in Brussels. When I interviewed her a year later, she reflected on how this discovery played an important role in her decision to leave after 15 years as director.

The group of which I thought it was going to be ok ... they were the ones who broke me. I'm not saying they were all like that, but I was really very disappointed. (Interview, former director, Steenokkerzeel)

The resulting power configuration in Steenokkerzeel was that social services staff occupied the dominant position, management an intermediary one, followed by security at the bottom.

Vottem

Dominant actors: management

In Vottem, management was composed of Mr. Pâris (centre director), Mr. Gerard (vice-director), and three attachés. Whereas staff called the three attachés by their first name, the two centre directors were always addressed formally as ‘Mister’ Pâris/Gerard, indicating a form of deference towards them. The following elements contribute to explain this.

Both started working for the IO prior to the construction of the centre in Vottem, and both had been running it since its opening. Their seniority surrounded them with an aura of legitimacy. Both also had a degree in criminology and worked in prison before joining the IO. This common background strongly influenced their vision of the centre, which corresponded to what prison scholars have called situational approaches (Sparks, Bottoms, and Hay 1996). Such approaches intervene in the carceral environment to prevent the rise of opportunities for wrongdoing and to control them when they arise. As Mr. Pâris enjoyed remembering, the centre had been built to endure riots.

So, our idea was: we are going to put very solid materials, windows, doors, and so on, really armour, like in prison, like the women’s prison in Berkendael, which I knew because I had worked at Forest and I had known Berkendael (...). So, the centre resisted, except if a fire broke out, but an average riot, which means broken chairs, broken slats ... so the next day we could work normally, even the very same day. We were not compelled to empty the wing. It was this idea, to keep working, to have a centre that is better adapted to a population that we did not really know when we opened the first centre in 93. (Interview, centre director, Vottem)

The creation of the special wing fitted in this approach. It enabled to isolate the most ‘difficult’ detainees, while maintaining a relatively loose regime in the ‘normal’ wings. Vottem was also the only centre in which each cell had a TV. This had the effect of avoiding the tensions that frequently occurred in the other centres when detainees argued over which channel to watch.

Beyond the situational approach to security, management also made extensive use of the privilege system (Goffman 1991) to negotiate desired behaviour of ‘difficult’ detainees. For instance, in the following case a detainee protested his transfer to the secure wing. This became the cue for the centre director to negotiate.

M. Pâris tells him to calm down and ‘simply’ asks him to ‘prove that you can go back to the [normal] wing’. But for now, ‘it’s not going to be possible because you’re too nervous’. The SAC then repeats the same thing and adds that here ‘you’ll have access to activities, the yard, sport’ and tells him that if he behaves, he’ll be able to spend some time on the normal wing. (Field notes, Vottem, June 2015)

Management considered these negotiations important to show they backed their own decisions and did not, in the words of Mr. Gerard, ‘abandon staff’ to handle the consequences on their own. Every day a member of management would check upon the detainees in isolation and speak to detainees with requests. This presence secured them the cooperation of security staff. Their position of power, however, was also the consequence of the weak position of social assistants and of divisions within the team of educators.

Weakened and divided social services

One of the first things that struck me in Vottem was that the social assistants were never present on the wings and never participated in any of the multidisciplinary meetings.

Their service had been restructured shortly before my fieldwork. Management justified this reform to guarantee that every detainee was seen by a social assistant once a week. For the social assistants, however, it constituted management's revenge for a strike they had organized.

They took away a great deal of our autonomy. We used to form a bloc between social assistants, and we were the only ones who knew the files thoroughly, and that annoyed certain people. But we were short of staff and it became untenable, so we agreed not to show up for work for a week. Nobody here knew what to do. So there, I think the reform of the service was also a way of punishing us, definitively. (Interview, social assistant, Vottem)

The reform imposed a file rotation so that detainees would not depend on one social assistant. An important consequence was that the social assistants no longer had good knowledge of the cases, which reduced their knowledge of crucial information regarding detainees and, more generally, their power in the organization-as-field.

The educators, instead, were very present on the wings. However, an important fracture ran across their team, which rested on competing views of the secure wing.

André (educator) says that the educators of the green wing argue that the Royal decree stipulates that detainees must get out three hours a day. "But", he argues "this decree does not specify that the special wing is in a centre with normal wings and that therefore it is the rest of the centre that suffers the consequences of the fact that we cannot manage the green wing!" For him it would be better to admit that the special wing does not work. (Field notes, Vottem, November 2015)

This disagreement partially overlapped with the seniority of educators. With the opening of the secure wing, new educators and an assistant psychologist had been recruited, whose first job this was. In the opposing camp, most educators had been working for several years. Hence, at the time of my fieldwork, the new educators and the assistant psychologist enjoyed a lower recognition from security staff and management in terms of expertise, while the educators of the other wings occupied a better position.

Put together, these divisions within the social services meant that they represented a much weaker opposition to management, whose views could more easily prevail compared to Steenokkerzeel. Consequently, management's cultural capital, based on their prison experience and their degree in criminology and their capacity to secure security staff's cooperation, provided them the most strategic advantage within this power configuration.

Having described the different tensions and configurations of power in both centres, I now turn to look at how they were reflected in the structure and strategies of the multidisciplinary meetings, which constituted the places of formal decision-making.

The strategic dimension of the decision-making process

Each centre had two multidisciplinary meetings: a general one, and a more specific one. During these meetings, staff discussed the problems that occurred on the wings. Most of the time, this meant discussing 'difficult' detainees, preparing a detainee for an expulsion procedure, discussing problems between (groups of) detainees, and how to solve them: isolation measures, providing extra security staff, watching out for specific indications of disorder, managing hunger strike, etc. In the following paragraphs I discuss the strategic dimension of such meetings.

Composition of the meetings

A quick glance at who composed the meetings indicates a first strategic dimension. In Steenokkerzeel (table 1) the presence of security staff was minimized as much as possible. SCs were always absent during both the daily 'noon-meeting' and the weekly 'EZA'⁴ meeting. Being held off the wings, it was difficult for SCs to attend the meetings, while SAAs, regularly participated when they could. The SACs were always present during the noon-meetings, where they read the security report, which was based on the input of security staff on the wings. In short, it seemed that the meetings had been designed to keep the rank and file of security staff away from the decision-making process, in an attempt of non-security staff to increase their independence from them.

In Vottem (Table 2), social services staff had a smaller share in the decision-making process, while security staff had more input. The social assistants and the nurses did not systematically attend the meetings, and never attended the special wing meeting, where the SAAs formed an important input due to their constant presence on the wing. Here, it appears that the underlying strategy was to decrease the influence of social services.

The composition of the meetings reflected the power relations of the centres, revealing thus a subtle strategic dimension in favour of the dominant actors to influence the decision-making process. However, if the composition constituted an advantage for the dominant actors, the decisions were still subjected to interactions in which more explicit strategies unfolded.

Table 1. compositions of multidisciplinary meetings in Steenokkerzeel.

	Noon-meeting	EZA
Management	✓	✓
Social assistants	✓	✓
Educators	✓	✓
Psychologist	✓	✓
Nurses	✓	✓
SAC	✓	X
SAA	(✓)	X
SC	X	X
Time	Daily at noon	Tuesdays at 10.00
On/off wing	Off	Off

Table 2. composition of multidisciplinary meetings in Vottem.

	Inter-services	Special wing
Management	✓	✓
Social assistants	X	X
Educators	✓	✓
Psychologist	X	X
Nurses	✓	X
Assistant-psychologist	✓	✓
SAC	✓	✓
SAA	(✓)	✓
SC	X	(✓)
Time	Daily at 9.30	Daily at 14.00
On/off wing	Off	On

Diminishing the main opponent

To influence the decision-making process, in both centres the dominant actors reaffirmed their dominance by sidelining their main competitor. In Vottem, management made use of their formal position at the head of the centre. They systematically took decisions in advance, which they then communicated to staff during the multidisciplinary meetings. In Steenokkerzeel, social services staff reaffirmed their professionalism to block interferences from their hierarchy.

Most importantly, during the different multidisciplinary meetings the dominant actors managed to decrease the value of other contributions. In Vottem, management systematically ignored social services staff, as illustrated in the following field note.

According to the assistant-psychologist Badr is not well. (...) His girlfriend really left him. The SAAs say he is verbally aggressive and that when they try to tell him, he denies it and says that it is "just his way of talking" – imitating him sarcastically. He would like to do the Ramadan on the normal wing and thus would like to speak to management, but Mr. Gerard says "clearly this won't be the case". (Field notes, Vottem, June 2022)

What is interesting here, is that the professional assessment of the assistant-psychologist was completely disregarded. Instead, the vice-director, seemed to use the input of the SAAs as a counter-narrative to justify his decision. Conspicuously, he systematically called Badr a 'pathological liar' and considered any measure to ease his isolation to be 'really stupid of us'.

In Steenokkerzeel, social services staff consistently pressed for clear guidelines and decisions on behalf of management regarding organizational issues. At times, this meant that management had to justify their decisions. For example, a member of management had decided to avoid the use of force preceding an expulsion measure, lest the relation of trust with the detainee be broken. This decision was questioned several days in a row during the multidisciplinary meetings by the social services staff, who demanded clarity in the implementation of procedures. After justifying his decision, this member of management agreed he would not take such a decision again.

In Karim's (management) view, force must be used as little as possible and since the detainee will be returning to the centre and that they will have to keep working with him, he found it was not pertinent to use force. However, he says that he can agree with it if everybody else thinks it is necessary. Everybody around the table says it is necessary, because 'that is the rule'. Anthony (social assistant) says that it's ok to question the rules, but to change them, this must be discussed at higher levels. (Field notes, Steenokkerzeel, March 2015)

This episode illustrates how social services staff questioned management's autonomy. In this case, social services staff did not disagree with the reasoning, but with its technical implications. They argued it would give detainees the wrong idea that they could oppose an official decision, which in turn would become an organizational problem.

These dynamics illustrate how the 'room for discretion' (Rutz and de Bont 2020) was fraught with struggles about whose vision of the centre should be followed. By diminishing their main competitors, the dominant actors in both centres managed to influence the decision-making to increase the value of their own input. The existence of two multidisciplinary meetings in each centre further contributed to this.

Shifting the locus of decision-making

The existence of two multidisciplinary meetings made it possible to shift the more important decisions to a configuration that played to the advantage of dominant actors. It occurred in slightly different ways in the two centres.

Steenokkerzeel

In principle, there was a difference between the 'noon-meetings' and the EZA-meetings. The first was held daily at noon in the visitor's area. It was the main point of coordination between the different services and the place where the issues regarding the wings were discussed. The EZA-meeting, instead, was held every Tuesday at 10.00 in the office of the social assistants. Its purpose was to put specific detainees under observation to detect if they needed extra attention or had specific needs. The aspect of care was much more central. Often this meant detainees were attributed a DII-code. DII-codes were part of a codebook called *Directives on interventions and interactions* (or DII), which had been developed by the psychologists of the different centres. It provided staff with guidelines on how to interact with specific categories of detainees without having to reveal confidential information. As such, these meetings had a strategic dimension since the guidelines aimed at reducing the risks of problems occurring from unprofessional interactions. Thus, the EZA-meeting easily shifted towards ordinary risk management, as illustrated below.

Concerning Boris (= detainee), the discussion revolves around how to communicate that his flight (= expulsion) has been booked and how to handle the situation in the best possible way. The social assistants think that the best thing would be that he be isolated, but then the question is "when?". Isolating him too soon is not an option, but it should be done preferably when there are still two security teams present, therefore between 21.30 and 22.00. The drivers will pick him up at 4.00 and his flight, with [police] escort, is at 5.55. So, should they put him in isolation [on the ground floor]? This way they can avoid having to take the stairs in the morning. (Field notes, Steenokkerzeel, March 2015)

In this quote, social services staff are gauging the risks of an expulsion procedure from a very technical perspective: precise timing, position of the isolation cell, number of security teams, etc. The fact that this issue was discussed during the EZA-meeting illustrates that it played a strategic function to manage the risks surrounding detainees in the absence of security staff and regardless of DII-labels. The presence of management merely seemed to rubberstamp the decisions taken by the social services staff, granting them official status. This explains how in Steenokkerzeel the room for discretion and the collective decision-making reflected the professionalism of the social services staff.

Vottem

In Vottem, the differences between the 'inter-services meeting' and the 'special wing' meeting were much starker. The first was held in an office between the wings on the first floor at 9.30. It consisted of communications of the different services regarding the centre. However, the communications regarding the special wing and the isolation cells took up most of the space. The reason was that the most 'difficult' detainees were held in these wings. The detainees of the 'normal' wings were very rarely discussed because they did not constitute a problem from an organizational perspective. In

short, the inter-services meeting functioned as a hub to dispatch the general news of the centre.

In terms of decision-making, the special wing meeting was much more important. It was held daily in the security post of the special wing, commonly referred to as 'the cave' (*la grotte*). Its name and configuration evoked the lab of the popular comic figure Batman: screens with camera views of the wing and courtyards and all sorts of control buttons to lock and unlock cell doors, fences, gates, turn TV screens on and off, etc., and an interphone through which detainees could communicate with security staff. On the wall of the 'cave' hung A4-sized pictures of the detainees held in the wing, annotated with pejorative comments such as 'drug addict' or 'terrorist'. Moreover, being held at 14.00, detainees would often buzz the interphone to speak to the SAAs, who were attending the meeting, leading to interruptions and irritation.

The meeting continues and the three buzz on the interphone again to ask for a lighter for their cigarettes. Xavier (SC) who sits at the command table says that all the SAAs are in the meeting, so they'll have to be patient. However, the meeting lasts long and the three buzz again. Xavier loses his temper and issues them a warning. Everybody laughs around the table. (Field notes, Vottem, May 2015)

The three detainees had been ringing the interphone several times during the meeting. The fact that they depended on the staff attending the meeting to light their cigarettes, was not considered. The timing and location of the meeting, therefore, contributed to the image of 'difficult' detainees, which justified the securitarian measures to which they were subjected. In this context, it was very difficult for the members of the social services to counter the narrative.

This specific configuration favoured the emergence of securitarian measures, which received a sufficient degree of support from security staff. As such, in Vottem, the room for discretion, reflected the securitarian configuration of power specific to Vottem.

Discussion and conclusions

Against this background, we can conclude that the different treatment of Roshan reflected the power configurations in the respective centres. In Vottem, where the securitarian views of management dominated, he was subjected to harsher treatment. In Steenokkerzeel, his more lenient treatment reflected the dominant position of the social services staff. Hence, through its street-level approach, this article illustrates how migrant 'deviance' varies according to differences in the centres' power relations, and how this affected the rights of detainees. As such, it contributes to our knowledge on immigration detention and the sociology of deviance.

Does this relational approach mean that the individual practices of street-level bureaucrats have no significance? No. However, it implies they cannot be isolated from this relational background. Individual practices frequently differ from the general organizational tendency. That is precisely why border bureaucracies are fraught with power struggles. A given street-level bureaucrat may handle in opposition to the dominating organizational configuration. Yet, this will cause reactions from other bureaucrats, and even migrants, either in favour or in opposition to the practice. It is through these contestations and oppositions that the general power configuration and *ethos* is formed and can change over time. This implies that opposing views and practices contribute to the discretionary power in a

given border bureaucracy, while also being shaped by it, and that practices must be analysed through a temporal lens to capture reactions to practices.

From this perspective, then, it is not possible to say that street-level bureaucrats *have* discretionary power. Instead, they are entangled in *power relations characterized by discretion* and in which they occupy stronger, weaker or equal positions of power. So, what contributes to their position in the organizational power relations?

In line with the literature on street-level bureaucracy (Evans 2011; Prottas 1978) we have seen that professional background plays an important role in shaping bureaucrats' practices. However, my findings indicate that this is easier where street-level bureaucrats occupy a dominant position of power. Oppositely, the organizational constraints (Oberfield 2020) seem to weigh more on street-level bureaucrats in subaltern positions due to their increased dependence on the dominant actors, which reduces the pertinence of their background in the general configuration of power. This indicates that professional background and organizational constraints only partly account for the practices of street-level bureaucrats. They must be articulated to the position of power they occupy.

I have argued that to understand the position of power of street-level bureaucrats, we must first find out which organizational uncertainties exist, then look at what strategies they adopt to increase their control of such uncertainties, and how this increases their independence from other actors and makes them indispensable in the organization.

In the centres, the power struggles meant that staff was compelled to develop strategies to manage the risk linked to detainees. The relational approach sheds light on a temporal dimension of the strategic element. Whereas security staff used to occupy a dominant position during the first years of existence of the centres, during my fieldwork they occupied a rather dominated position. In fact, over the years non-security staff had developed other ways of managing risks, increasing their independence from security staff. In Vottem, management adopted situational approaches to security, which implied that the physical intervention of security staff was less necessary. In Steenokkerzeel, instead, social services staff had managed to develop social engineering practices, based on the development of *rapport* with detainees, which provided them with crucial knowledge to prevent and manage 'problematic' situations. In both centres, the dominant actors managed to increase their control of the organizational uncertainties by mobilising their cultural capital successfully.

In turn, successfully mobilising their cultural capital depended on weighing in the decision-making process – an aspect that has often been neglected in the literature. Yet from an organizational perspective, decision-making is perhaps *the* most important organizational uncertainty actors try to master to become indispensable. In the centres this meant controlling *where* the important decisions were taken and *who* sat around the table.

The place where the meetings were held, effectively excluded certain categories of staff. In Steenokkerzeel, security staff was excluded from the meetings because they were held off the wings, while in Vottem the senior members of the social services refused to participate in the functioning of the secure wing. Thus, regardless of their cultural capital, they had little to no impact on the decision-making process.

Controlling *where* the meetings were held, was also important in terms of how the *setting* influenced the decision-making process. In Steenokkerzeel, the fact that the EZA-

meeting was considered to focus on aspects of care, meant that it was held in the office of the social assistants and that no member of security staff was present. Here, the social services staff were on their turf and operated undisturbed and took strategic decisions in matters of security – and not merely in terms of care. In Vottem, the strategic dimension of doubling the meetings was even clearer. The spatial configuration and timing of the ‘special wing’ meeting corroborated the securitarian discourse of management, making it easier to discredit the more social and caring approaches to detainees. Thus, in both centres the doubling of the multidisciplinary meetings had a strategic function that played in favour of whoever was in a dominant position of power. This finding is perhaps the most original contribution to the implementation literature, which to my knowledge has overlooked the strategic dimension of controlling the decision-making setting as a key element in the analysis of policy implementation. It illustrates how practices cannot be isolated from broader organizational struggles.

Lastly, I argue that the analysis of power relations offers a heuristic model to compare policy implementation through different bureaucracies, since it is not specific to the context of detention but focuses on: the forms of capital of staff, the control organizational uncertainties and of decision-making processes, the tensions between staff, and the strategies that follow from the organizational division of labour. The room in the elephant is that nowhere is the word ‘discretion’ to be found. It is conspicuous that in the literature discretion never functions as an ‘independent variable’ to explain implementation. Instead, the focus always lies on practices. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that there is no unanimous definition of discretion, which consequently remains a very ambiguous concept that raises more questions than it provides answers. In fact, discretion always seems nothing more than the starting point of implementation studies that quickly shift their gaze towards *practices*. Should we then not follow Pratt (1999) and stop treating discretion as the attribute of individual bureaucrats – as something that can be possessed? Rather, should we not consider that people are turned into (different categories of) street-level bureaucrats or policy recipients according to the position they occupy in specific organizational power struggles? Is it, perhaps, not time to come to terms with the fact that discretion is not a useful concept to analyse policy implementation?

Notes

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms.
2. The use of quotation marks in this article refers to *emic* expressions taken from the fieldwork. I therefore use them to critically distance myself from their normalization. In the theoretical parts, they are used only for this latter purpose.
3. Royal Decree of 2 August 2002, *Moniteur belge*, pp. 40460-40490.
4. EZA stands for ‘extra care and attention’ in Dutch.

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