Using Ethnography to Study Public Policy: A Case Study of Policy-Making in the Administration of Low-Rent Housing¹

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Abstract

On the basis of ethnographic surveys conducted in low-rent housing organizations in two French urban areas (renamed Petiteville and Miville), this contribution points out the concrete methodological advantages of using grounded perspective to grasp the methods used by bureaucrats when sorting out applications. I refer to the theoretical tools of street-level bureaucracy, referring to Lipsky’s classic study of front line practices in public organizations. Through extensive interviews and direct observations of agents at work, we show how these processes can result in the exclusion and discrimination of specific groups, depending on the influence of urban and institutional contexts and organizational constraints. In the first part of the presentation, we analyze how local authorities elaborate informal rules to deal with legal uncertainties. Based on different criteria – class, race, age and family composition -, they aim to organize the spatial distribution of populations. In the second part, we study how these categories are taken up and actualized by bureaucrats in their everyday practices. We examine how stereotypes and classifications are activated through encounter and how they lead, in specific circumstances, to inequalities and discriminations. Finally, we argue that ethnographic study is required to go beyond legal approach and to catch individual practices and representations. We also show that comparative field observations shed light on regularly occurring selection mechanisms and can thus be used to generalize results.

Key Words

Public policy, street-level bureaucracy, discretion, social housing, discrimination, inequality.

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Introduction

This paper, based on an ethnographic study of housing allocation, aims to identify factors that shape the working practices. It was born in reaction to an initially surprising series of events: April the 7th, 2014. A trial opened at the Nanterre High Court, involving the HLM2 Company Logirep for ethnic registration and discrimination. Indeed, in 2005, a Black French applicant lodged a complaint after being denied an apartment on the basis of the 1998 law against exclusion which states that “the allocation of housing must promote equal opportunities and social diversity”. In a recorded conversation, the street-level bureaucrat in charge of the case justified the allocation commission’s decision by referring to an “ethnic” interpretation of the principle of social diversity, e.g. the application was refused because there were already too many Black people in the building. However, since the discriminatory intention of the social landlord was not demonstrated, the company was simply condemned for ethnic registration, and not for discrimination. This was the second time that a French HLM organization was condemned on these grounds, after a case in Saint-Etienne in February 2009.

These examples reveal how social landlords can mobilize ethnic3 categorizations in their daily practices. They also illustrate how legal rules can be infringed by public and private actors who implement public policies. To put it simply, our first line of inquiry was: how do individuals and organizations, which are supposed to house people most in need, build up and mobilize illegal criteria? I aim to show how processes of systemic discriminations and unequal treatments are built within the agencies and in the relations they establish with their surroundings. More generally, we look into the way future tenants in social housing are chosen and identified within the large pool of applicants. In other words, we address the question of symbolic boundaries that are drawn by the administration between the “insiders” and the “outsiders”4 of social housing. This is not a minor topic since public housing and bureaucratic discretion are linked to a more general reflection on government, public action, service delivery, access to rights, and citizens’ satisfaction.

The legal definition of eligibility criteria and selection principles constitutes the first level of housing policy regulation. First, eligibility depends on having valid identity papers and not exceeding income ceilings5. Second, housing selection is oriented by two categories of public action, which are the right to housing and social mix. The right to housing, introduced in May 1990 by the Besson law, states that “every person or family experiencing particular difficulties, because of the insufficiency of their resources or their conditions of existence has the right to an aid from the government (…) to obtain access to a decent and independent home or to maintain themselves there”. It was strengthened in 2007 with the creation of an “opposable” right to legal action against the State for social housing. In addition, social landlords have to foster social mix in their estates. Vague and unclear, the concept of social mix is, however, understood in many different ways, including a mix of family types, ages, jobs, incomes, race and ethnicity. Social scientists also point out how this principle conflicts with the right to housing: “the principle of social mix allowed a disadvantaged applicant to be refused a place on a poor area, or an ethnic minority member to be refused a place in an ethnic minority area” (Ball, 2009: 324). This contributes to dig a gap between “policy as written” and “policy as

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2 HLM is an abbreviation of “Habitat à Loyer Modéré” (i.e. social housing).
3 The concept of ethnicity refers to differences in terms of culture, whereas the concept of race is used to designate biological differences (Safi, 2013: 8-9). In this text, the terms shall be used indiscriminately, even if many social scientists are asking questions about the relevance of the distinction between race and ethnicity (some of them thinking that the use of ethnicity is a way to deny the fundamental meaningfulness of race and its political scope).
4 The “insiders” are those who successfully access to social housing because of their properties. On the contrary, the “outsiders” are systematically refused or received a specific treatments (such as concentration in “bad areas”). In The Established and the Outsiders (1991), Elias and Scotson show how exclusion, stigmatisation, inequalities and discriminations of the outsiders are the result of inter-groups’ socio-dynamics seen as power relations (class or race). The present study follows on from this work, considering dynamic mechanisms that produce systemic discriminations and unequal treatments.
5 Because 70 per cent of French people are eligible for social housing, there are not discriminating criteria.

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performed” (Lipsky, 2010: xvii). So legal principles are very far from producing strong discontinuities and strict boundaries (Bourdieu, 1986: 17). Allocation decisions involve the exercise of discretion, and therefore HLM agents having a significant amount of leeway in shaping their working practices.

**Statement of the problem**

This paper investigates how the combined observation of institutional relations, organizational context and individual representations produce an understanding of working practices, and lead to an explanation of inequalities and discriminations. I analyze the process of qualifications and categorizations according to which agents make their choice. I outline how these processes can result in social exclusion and the discrimination of specific groups, depending on the influence of urban and institutional contexts, as well as organizational constraints. The paper is organized in two parts. First, I examine how the actors of social housing elaborate formal rules to deal with the uncertainty of the existing legal framework. Supported by policy instruments, these rules seek to organize spatial distribution of social groups based on several criteria, which bring out institutional categories (in particular of class and race). Even though these rules are produced by different types of actors (public and private) depending on local power relations, the fieldwork shows that the populations considered as threatening by local authorities and social landlords are invariably the immigrants and the poors. This result in a hierarchy of customers and buildings which determines the type of accommodations bureaucrats can offer. Then, I analyze how these categories are taken up and actualized in micro-level daily interactions. The paper concludes with a discussion showing regular occurrences in selection mechanisms that inform policy and governing. But as a first step, I will start by a brief examination of the ways in which prior studies have analyzed social housing policies, and by an overview of the concept of bureaucratic discretion.

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**Background: French social housing**

French social housing targets people whose income do not exceed certain limits. The social landlords are the key actors in the housing chain. They own 16 per cent of French principal residences, housing ten million people. We distinguish two types of social landlords: public organizations called “offices publics” (n=270); and private organizations called “entreprises sociales pour l’habitat” (n=281). The offices publics are attached to a local body of government (commune or department6) whereas the entreprises sociales pour l’habitat (ESH) are commercial companies. Other actors who intervene in the allocation process are: the mayor of the commune where the home is situated, who has a casting vote; the members of Action logement (historically called the Comités interprofessionnels du logement) reserving up to 50 per cent of the vacancies in social housing for employees7; and the departmental prefect who, as local state representative responsible for housing the most vulnerable groups, quarter of vacancies for this purpose. 5 per cent of social housing is also reserved by the prefecture for civil servants.

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**State of art: Housing the poor and the minorities**

**Prior literature on social housing**

In organizational sociology and policy analysis, scholars often focus on local systems of social housing to shed light on regulation processes and governance arrangements. They examine the interlinkages within a group stakeholders with differing principles and divergent interests. Especially, Catherine Bourgeois (1996) argues that public social landlords are primarily concerned with politics favoring their voters, whereas private social landlords prioritize applicants with the most resources. Sociologists and political scientists have pointed out the opacity and complexity of the process. They speak of room for manoeuvre and power relations

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6 The commune is the smallest important unit of local government, before agglomeration and department.
7 Indeed, in France, private employers must deduct 0.95 per cent from their wages bill to assist the housing effort. In return, they have the possibility to propose candidates.
(Bourgeois, 1996; Houard, 2009; Ball, 2009). Despite their insight into the “black box” of social housing allocation, researchers have not precisely explored the regulatory mechanisms that govern policy (in particular, the role of street-level bureaucrats).

In urban sociology, much of the literature centers on the effects of housing policies, in terms of discrimination and segregation. Research examines how social landlords and local authorities use the principle of social mix to develop strategies of creaming\(^8\). In this regards, the law is being used to block some groups’ access to social housing (especially the poor and the minorities). This results in exclusion, discrimination or concentration of certain “profiles” in sensitive areas (Ballain and Benguigui, 1995; Tanter and Toubon, 1999; Geld, 2001; Tissot, 2005; Kirszbaum, 2009, 2013). Thus, research establish clear connections between social mix and discrimination, but they do not present explanations for them. Among the exceptions, we should mention Valerie Sala Pala’s analysis of ethnic discriminations in France and Great-Britain (2005, 2013). Based on semi-structured interviews conducted in the early 2000s, Sala Pala argues that public policies contribute to produce ethno-racial boundaries. In order to place the “right” candidate in the “right” place, HLM agents categorize individuals in order to distinguish those who should be housed and those who should not. From her point of view, “Contrary to the Republican myth of ethnic indifference, the criteria of “origin” is remarkable in the representations which orientate the perceptions and practices of actors” (2013: 139). Their beliefs in a cultural inadequacy of minorities produce simplifications and routines which link ethnicity, way of habitation and way of life. To social landlords, minorities constitute a risk group in terms of management. Thus, their access to social housing is restricted to some buildings and neighborhoods (Simon, 2003). More generally, Sala Pala raises the question of responsibility in the production of discriminations and inequalities: is it individual or collective? Questioning the concept of “institutional racism” built by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton during the Civil Rights, she elaborates a theoretical framework to distinguish process mapping (“a shared mental map that allows actors to interpret situations and guide practices”), categorization (“classification (formal and informal) of individuals or objects according to specific characteristics”), stereotypification (“cognitive structure for knowledge, beliefs, expectations – positive or negative – about a social group”) and racialization (“representations which essentialise the characteristics (biological or cultural) of members of social groups”), which are not reducible to racism or institutional racism, defined restrictively as “social representations which essentialise features (biological or cultural) of members of a social group and which judge negatively the characteristics of this group” (2013: 76). Finally, if marks of racialization and racism are observed in street-level bureaucrats’ discourses, they are not generalized; they circulate less than ethnic stereotypes. Sala Pala concludes that there is no relationship between racism and discrimination: “the social actors do not need to be racist to discriminate” (180). She actually shares the findings of several American sociologists. For instance, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva refers to the expression of “colorblind racism” to describe this idea. Other scholars, such as Devah Pager and Lincoln Quillian, have given up concept of racism – seen as problematic - in order to focus on discriminations – “observable, measurable, quantifiable and tangible practices” (Bonnet, 2013).

Theoretical literature on social housing inform the processes of categorization, and its contribution to the production of a racialized social order. But it is limited in two ways. First, research neglects interactions between the various ways of classification and prioritizing people, in particular, class and race. For instance, those who focus on poverty may not account for minorities (Ballain and Benguigui, 1995), while those whose the starting point are ethno-racial discriminations have sidestepped socio-economic dimensions (Sala Pala, 2013). In a classic work about the labor market, Joleen Kirschenman and Kathryn M. Neckerman (1991)

\(^8\) Creaming strategies are an implicit system for determining which clients will receive priority. In particular, Michael Lipsky show how street-level bureaucrats give more attention to “easy” clients.
describe, however, “complex interactions” between race, class and space in the employees’ perceptions: “Race is an important factor in hiring decisions. But it is not race alone: rather it is a complex interactions with employers’ perceptions of class and space, or inner-city residence. (...) In fact, race was important because it signaled class and inner-city residence, which are less easy to observe directly. But employers also need class and space to draw distinctions within racial and ethnic groups; race was the distinguishing characteristic most often referred to, followed respectively by class and space” (204, 209). This suggests that it is necessary to incorporate contextual factors, and to allow for wider criteria as they emerge and are actualized. Furthermore, existing literature is mainly based on semi-structured interviews, which are less effective than direct observations to examine front line practices (risks of taboos, difficulties to put practices into words, and so on) and to facilitate communication about sensitive topics, such as racism and discrimination (Bongrand and Laborier, 2005).

**Studying the allocation process in everyday practice**

To avoid these theoretical and methodological problems, we argue that policy analysis should be paralleled by street-level bureaucracy and ethnographic approaches, thereby laying the groundwork for a new theoretical perspective on regulation and policy implementation. Since the early 1990s, street-level bureaucracy has known significant development in sociology and political science, in particular to investigate the impacts of the transformations of public services and the Welfare-State on daily practices. That research focused on education, health and social policies. Several organizational structures and categories of tasks were explored such as service delivery, policing and security activities (Hupe and Buffat, 2014: 552). But housing policy has not been studied from this perspective at depth. We know little about how daily practices shape the allocation process. In French literature, we find, however, three exceptions: first, a report by François Eymard-Duvermay and Emmanuelle Marchal (1993) about New public management’s effects in low-rent housing organization; secondly, an article by Philippe Warin (1993) describing the reality of service relations as regulators, and showing that several types of regulation are in function; thirdly, the doctoral research of Pierre-Edouard Weill on how the “opposable” right to housing introduced in 2007 tends to reinforce the segregation and exclusion of the most socially disadvantaged (2013). Influenced by Goffman’s sociology, the first two researchers neglect institutional and political aspects of the allocation process. In a slightly different way, more inspired by Bourdieus works, Weill explores people’s ability to “enforce their rights”. Thus, he focuses on a specific part of the social housing chain characterized by unusual actors, and does not address the issue of selection mechanisms.

**Theoretical Framework: Discretion, categorization and professional practice**

Resolving our puzzle requires us to look beyond the legal approach and the analysis of policy effects. We move on to consider empirical evidence related to regulation, organizational control and bureaucratic discretion.

**A broader conception of bureaucratic discretion**

The legal concept of “discretion” reflects the administration’s power to act on the basis of its own judgment. According to Weber’s sociology, rules orientate social activities more than they determine them (1995: 11-23). From a “micro” perspective, discretion is viewed as a choice range within a set of institutional parameters that set constraints for the behavior of agents. This

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9 This research perspective is observed both in French literature and American literature. For the “French side”, see: Dubois 2010a; Siblot 2006; Spire 2007, 2005; Cartier 2003; Weller 1999; Jeannot and Joseph 1995. For the “American side”, see: Brodkin 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Rice 2013; Watkins-Hayes 2009.
refers to street-level bureaucracy\(^\text{10}\) (also called street-level organization\(^\text{11}\)), drawing on Michael Lipsky’s classic study of front-line practices in public organizations. Initially based on agency-centered sociological and rational choice-institutional premises, street-level bureaucracy has been revisited and fitted with other theoretical perspectives, such as Goffman’s interactionism and Bourdieu’s analysis of domination. The core argument introduced by Lipsky was that street-level bureaucrats actively make policy: “I argue that the decisions of street level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky, 2010: xiii). Street-level bureaucrats are responsible for translating clients into institutional categories, and “it is only in the interaction between caseworkers and clients that formal policy comes to life” (Rice, 2013: 1039). They often exercise significant discretion playing with rules and procedures (Bourdieu, 1986) despite their subordinate position. Contrary to the common conception of bureaucratic encounter as a quasi-mechanical interaction between an impersonal distant bureaucrat and a standard client to be routinely processed, “neither impersonal bureaucrats nor standardized clients exist: only social agents with individual personalities who, within certain conditions and limits, are required to play the role of the impersonal or standardized bureaucrat or client” (Dubois, 2010a: 3).

This research contributes to the foundation of bottom-up approaches to policy analysis, and argues that policy cannot be understood simply as a set of objectives or decision, but must also be recognized as practices. Most papers focus on variation at street-level while seeking factorial explanations at that same level, particularly individual characteristics and personal view of the actors involved depending on social properties (gender, race, class), professional trajectories and job conceptions – especially, personal beliefs about what is fair and unfair (Dubois, 2010a; Watkins-Hayes, 2009; Spire, 2007, 2005; Siblot, 2006; Maynard-Moody and Musheno, 2003); institutional positions (François, 2013) and generational membership (Cartier, 2003). Researchers also insist on organizational influences that set the goals, rules and resources (funds, rhythm of work, pressures). The image of the “two bodies” of the agent used by Dubois, borrowed from Kantorowicz’ study of the sovereign, is a good illustration of street-level ambivalent position: he is, on the one hand, an individual with a particular life trajectory and on the other, the personification of a bureaucratic apparatus that is meant to be impersonal and at equal distance from all (73). The separation between these two bodies is seen as a resource, to be mobilized in different ways. These findings show that caseworkers’ attitudes towards policy goals vary empirically and influence street-level work.

But this approach overlooks the fact that implementation contexts vary across local systems in terms of institutional design and the relationship between actors. Within the same policy area, differences may exist in the level of discretion available to implementing agencies and their staff in different cities. Street-level bureaucracy tends to consider front-line practices by isolating them from the social context in which they take place. To avoid the problem, I will consider bureaucratic discretion in a broader perspective, as linking the multiple levels of consideration relevant to policy analysis. Thus, in addition to street-level bureaucracy, I will explore the concept of discretion from a “meso” perspective, including the idea of public agency acting with considerable latitude in implementing broad mandates (Scott, 1997).

**Rethinking discretionary power in a dynamic way**

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\(^{10}\) “Public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work are called street level bureaucrats in this study. Public service agencies that employ a significant number of street level bureaucrats in proportion to their work force are called street level bureaucracies” (Lipsky, 2010: 3). HLM agents can be considered as street-level bureaucrats. First, they work in direct contact with citizens (called clients by social landlords). Second, they are in charge of the distribution of scarce resources. Third, they have inherent discretion.

\(^{11}\) Brodkin, 2012.
The notion of discretion must also be analyzed in a dynamic way, as an issue that crystallizes conflict and power relations. Contemporary transformations (decentralization, territorialization, privatization and multi-actors networks) have led to the emergence of new co-ordination measures for local government and to changes in the role of street-level bureaucrats. This is the reason why bureaucrats are often seen to assume a greater variety of tasks, such as developing new instruments for dealing with clients and participating in the formulation of organizational goals. Many a research highlights the general trend towards individualization of public policy and ever-greater autonomy of street-level bureaucrats (Lima, 2013; Dubois, 2010b). From Dubois’s point of view, this autonomy is organized by State government and constitutes a strategy of blame avoidance. He supposes that not taking political decisions at the top level, or defining targets that are impossible to achieve together, is a way to shift responsibility down to the street-level professionals. Dubois calls it an “implementation trick”\(^{12}\) (Dubois, 2010b: 277). Therefore, attention will be paid to local features and institutional factors that may create a space for autonomous actions at the street-level.

**Methodology**

Policy-related ethnography comes in the wake of our theoretical framework. We seek to examine policymaking when public policies are territorialized and applied in an uncertain legal frame. First, ethnography provides useful qualitative data that offer nuanced and realistic ground-level views of policies, too often analyzed abstractly from the top. Second, it allows us to grasp practices and their underlying representations. Third, ethnography is heuristic, and used to deconstruct official categories and to reveal power relations that they contain (Dubois, 2012). In this contribution, I point out the concrete methodological advantages of using grounded perspective to grasp the methods used by bureaucrats when sorting out applications.

The empirical material is based on extended ethnographic surveys combining direct observations and in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of local decision bodies, managers and street-level bureaucrats from public and private social landlords (n=26). The observation of working practices consisted in following bureaucrats for a number of consecutive days. It spanned the whole range of agents’ activities - meeting with applicants, viewing apartments, and attending allocation commissions\(^{13}\). Follow-up interviews included open-ended questions about agents’ perceptions of clients, working practices, the application of rules and procedures. This methodology had been applied in two social housing organizations located in two different areas, selected in order to capture varied land prices, socioeconomic characteristics and local governance. On the field, I introduced myself as a PhD student in sociology aiming to understand how social housing allocations work concretely. I systematically sent to Directors General a document summarizing the research, its goals and its methodology. For clients, I was an intern learning about sales agents. This position allowed me to stay behind the street-level bureaucrats during the interviews, a mum observant taking notes.

The first part of the survey focused on a housing company in a medium-sized French city with 400,000 inhabitants (renamed *Miville*\(^{14}\)). Between November 2012 and January 2013, I followed two HLM agents in charge of renting out 1,000 lodgings each. In addition, interviews were realized with all the employees of the company. The second part of the survey was conducted in a public HLM company in a small-size city, with 130,000 inhabitants (renamed *Petiteville*). Between November 2013 and February 2014, I had an internship that allowed me to observe daily agents-clients interactions.

\(^{12}\) This a reference to the “implementation gap” highlighted by Pressman and Wildavsky in their seminal *Implementation*.

\(^{13}\) The allocation commissions are the committees that take the final decision.

\(^{14}\) The names of sites, organizations and individuals have been changed in order to ensure the anonymity of interviewees.
Table 1. Presentation of the two case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Organization A</th>
<th>Organization B</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Entreprise sociale pour l'habitat</td>
<td>Office public - 9,000 housings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12,000 housings (with 8,000 housings located in Miville)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>Miville</td>
<td>Petiteville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local context</td>
<td>- Approximately 400,000 people.</td>
<td>- Approximately 130,000 people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Unemployment rate (15-64 years old):</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10%.</td>
<td>16%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Percentage of single-parent families:</td>
<td>- Percentage of single-parent families:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13%.</td>
<td>19%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Percentage of immigrants: 6%.</td>
<td>- Percentage of immigrants: 11%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Percentage of social housings: 23%.</td>
<td>- Percentage of social housings: 30%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local agencies</td>
<td>Three local agencies (B1, B2 et B3). Five HLM agents.</td>
<td>No local agency. Six HLM agents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of social housing</td>
<td>A1: 2,583 lodgings.</td>
<td>Approximately 9,000 lodgings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A2: Approximately 3,600 lodgings.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A3: Approximately 2,500 lodgings.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics of social housing allocation</td>
<td>The allocation commission met weekly in the head office building. Chaired by the general director in charge of renting, it had six permanent members. In 2011, the committee examined 3,412 applications. There was an overall fill rate of 35 per cent.</td>
<td>The allocation commission met bi-weekly. Chaired by the general director in charge of renting, it had six members, always including a tenant representative and local elected officials of the commune where the home involved was situated. In 2012, the committee examined 3,752 applications. There was an overall fill rate of 48 per cent.</td>
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Findings

I. The construction of local rules

In the case of territorialized policies like housing policies, the lawmaker entrusts social landlords and members of allocation committees with the power to select tenants. But as we previously noted, formal rules are vague and contradictory, leaving substantial space for the autonomy of local actors (Bourgeois, 2013). “Secondary norms of application” are created through the interaction with clients. They are closely linked to the local actors’ capacity for action and the power relations established between them. Thus, analyzing local configurations will allow us to identify the scope of social landlords’ autonomy and to explain the logic that underlies institutional categories, according to which applications are selected.

I.1. The institutional production of bureaucratic discretion

Contextualized analysis aims to describe environment and power relations that constrain HLM organizations in the implementation of social housing allocation. I observe several mechanisms in the production of social landlords’ discretion: the absence of economic engagement for the agencies on the one hand; a weak political leadership in housing issues, on the other. Based on fieldwork, I identify two different cases summarized in the table below.

Variation in social landlords’ discretion

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15 Pierre Lascoumes defines the “secondary norms of application” as interpretative standards of institutional frameworks, accommodated to local contexts (1990).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization A</th>
<th>Miville (Local agencies: A1, A2 and A3)</th>
<th>Very little discretion.</th>
<th>Political: Social housing has low levels of reservation. But local authorities have a major role in the housing chain, which reduces strongly social landlords’ discretion. (Indeed, an automatic system is used to sort out and select applications).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization B</td>
<td>Petiteville (no local agencies)</td>
<td>Significant discretion.</td>
<td>Mainly political: Because of its public status, organization B is very close to local elected officials. Their membership on the allocation commission gives them a certain power. They can examine all the housing proposals, and refuse or impose one of them.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scope of bureaucratic discretion</th>
<th>Type of constraint</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Political: Social housing has low levels of reservation. But local authorities have a major role in the housing chain, which reduces strongly social landlords’ discretion. (Indeed, an automatic system is used to sort out and select applications).</td>
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Economic constraint is the first to reduce bureaucratic discretion of social landlords. It is linked with the principle of reservation, a characteristic of French social housing. Reservation implies that as a counterpart to their investment in affordable housing construction, several actors (such as Action logement, local authorities and representatives of local State) are authorized to name applicants in estates to which they financially contributed. One or several files are chosen and sent to social landlords to be examined by HLM agents. In view of the issues at stake, these applications going through this channel are rarely rejected. So, in this case, the allocation committee can be compared with a simple recording chamber (Geld, 2001; Bourgeois, 2013b; Sala Pala, 2013). In both case studies for this project, the reservation rate is low: it represents fifteen per cent of social housing in Miville; and it only concerns new build projects in Petiteville.

The second constraint is political. It has to do with the key role of local authorities in the allocation process, in their ability to hand out building permits and in their financial participation to the housing effort. According to this, social landlords have to contend with them. However, the intervention of local politicians varies strongly from one area to another. In Miville, the municipal service in charge of housing is central in the architecture of allocation. It is responsible for file processing and pre-selecting applicants. Civil servants send one file for one vacancy, and sort files based on a scoring grid defined by local actors – mainly social landlords and elected officials. The HLM agents only come in afterwards, by organizing a “discovery” interview and a visit of the apartment. In light of the information provided, the chair of the commission either confirms or rejects the allocation. This local configuration significantly reduces the work of social landlords and – therefore – most of the bureaucratic discretion that would allow them to intervene in the spatial distribution of social groups.

In Petiteville, power relations between local authorities and HLM organizations are more balanced. Bureaucrats register files, receive individuals, make housing proposals and organize viewings. In this regard, the degree of discretion for social landlords is higher, albeit limited by the political requirements expressed through the allocation commission. Indeed, elected officials are permanent members of the commission through which the local authority can act directly, claiming “pass-through” and issuing vetoes against certain applications. These political interventions are decided on a case-by-case basis. They follow particular action patterns that reveal clear political priorities. For instance, one of them consist in limiting access to people in precarious situations coming from “outside the department”. The purpose is to avoid congestion of the municipal social services:
“... But how do politics interfere here?

- It is in the CAL (i.e. the allocation commission)! In the CAL, they choose by asking “where are they from? Why did they come here?” And thus... We close the door a bit more than for people who come from... Well if you’re coming from out the département, it’s a bit hard! (Laughs). I received quite a lot of applications these past days coming from X, Y... Pff... “What are they doing here?” They couldn’t fit in there! [...] “Why are they coming to Petiteville?” That’s what they ask... Because they do not want even more congestion than there is at the Civil Center for Social Action, help entirely going to a population that is difficult to manage, etc. So in the end... Social cases, they say “yes”, but you know our quota is met already, we didn’t want to get more. So every time, it’s “why did they come here?” And when the answer is “They think they have more chances of finding a job here”, the economic argument, they say “Well they don’t by staying at home!” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

Finally, in either case, HLM organizations are subjected to the same type of political constraint, but it results in different forms of bureaucratic discretion depending on the institutional context.

### 1.2. The allocation process and the spatial distribution of social groups

“I believe that at some point, we will need those who know what the population of the building is like to express their opinion on what type of applicant should be assigned there” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

According to Christelle Morel Journel and Valérie Sala Pala, urban policies aim to “control or to act on the social occupation of territories” (Morel Journel and Sala Pala, 2011: 2). Social housing allocation is one way to do this. Policies are based on local rules that aim to assign the “right candidate” to the “right place” by establishing a social hierarchy of territories which requires a detailed knowledge of estate, occupation and clients. This knowledge is shared asymmetrically by social landlords and municipalities: because they own social housing, HLM organizations have a very precise view on living conditions in their estate, whereas local authorities hold a global view of neighborhood life. Thus, our case studies illustrate two contrasting typical situations: the case in which social landlords exercise a significant discretionary power (Petiteville), and the case in which local authorities are extremely present in the process (Miville). In this section, I will examine how these configurations are reflected in local rules. To achieve this, I will focus on the instruments\(^\text{16}\) that evidence local rules and practical categories, their construction and their use.

In Petiteville, “we try to ensure a well-balanced population, so we don’t put too much RSA\(^\text{17}\) where we could still get another profile” explained Alexandre, the Director-General of housing company in Petiteville. Based on the managers’ evaluation of neighborhood life, the Director-general produced an Excel table used to classify social groups and buildings.

“... And how it was built how?

- It was built by the manager in charge of renting, that’s Rose, by the person who takes care of neighborhood life, that’s Josiane, by the directors for proximity and recovery, that’s it. For each address, these four people with their view, they saw that we were trying to pinpoint “so yes, for us, this is a good population, it’s quiet or... It’s less calm, this type, and so on”... So we built it (Excel table) by comparing what they told us and the way it was actually occupied... In fact, each person, each of the four people did this work individually. We shared them afterwards in order to see “I think this address is very attractive, and you estimate that it is moderately attractive, why?” And from the explanations that have been given, we finally managed to agree on a classification” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

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\(^{16}\) “A policy instrument is a device both technical and social, which organizes specific social relations between public action and its beneficiaries, based on representations and meanings it conveys” (Halpern, Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2014: 12).

\(^{17}\) “RSA” means « Revenu de Solidarité Active » which is an earned income supplement.
The housing administration distinguishes five categories of social housing attractiveness (very attractive, attractive, medium, unattractive and specific populations). These levels refer to professionals’ perceptions of how people live in buildings: “An attractive building is quiet, calm, with good surroundings, close to the city center, yet it is housing that have rents sometimes cheaper than some housing in sensitive areas! The rent has nothing to do with that!” explained an agent. Then, for each level of attractiveness, an indicative target of desired tenants was defined. These targets mingle references to age (student, retired), socio-professional status (open-ended contract, fixed-term contract, temporary work, active solidarity revenue) and housing situation (out of prison or shelter).

The building classification

Based on this table, street-level bureaucrats identify the buildings and the districts that can be offered to the clients they receive. The original color code serves to implement allocation process as quickly and efficiently as possible.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attractiveness</th>
<th>Indicative target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very attractive</td>
<td>Open-ended contracts, retired and students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractive</td>
<td>Open-ended contracts, retired and students, fix-termed contracts, temporary work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Open-ended contracts, retired and students, fix-termed contracts, temporary work, active solidarity revenue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unattractive</td>
<td>Fix-termed contracts, temporary work, active solidarity revenue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific populations</td>
<td>People who are coming out of prison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People who are coming out of shelter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This classification is supplemented by a document categorizing populations at risk, that is to say those who are likely to stop paying rent or to get involved in neighbourhood disturbances: tenants in debt, young people under twenty-five, the homeless, people who wander from shelter to shelter, clients needing mental health supports, offenders, traffickers, large families, and so on. They are the subject of specific treatments. The economic risk is estimated through statistics, which create a kind of evidence: “It is a proven fact that young mothers earning RSA are the people proportionately more often in debt, compared to other folders” said an agent. Besides, the risk associated with individual behavior is evaluated based on field experience and practical knowledge:

“During the “discovery” interview with some homeless applicants, we realise that they’ve had an extremely chaotic life, without ever succeeding in keeping an accommodation. Typically they just wander from shelter to shelter. Well, in these cases, it is more than hazardous (…). You are statistically much more likely to engage in problematic behaviour when your environment is flawed, and vice versa, so it’s difficult” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

Those instruments establish a hierarchy of buildings and individuals to organize the distribution of population per address. They also provide instructions for the actors who use them. Thus, people depending on social aids shall be given priority on the “medium” or the “unattractive” social housing, whereas employees, retired people and students must be positioned in “attractive” areas. Finally, those who are called “specific” are “assigned” to targeted buildings in order to be “tested”:

“- What do you mean by « to test them »?
- That’s what we say here. To test them is to assign them to buildings where we have problems, to see how they behave, if they get into trouble. And if after a while they don’t create any problems, and if they want to move, then we move them to a nicer place, you see. Because unfortunately, we have a building... Usually persons who are coming out of prison, they are assigned to 36N”
(Samia, sales agent, Petiteville housing company, December the 9th, 2013).
The allocation process implies a qualification of both clients and buildings. Fieldwork shows a kind of one-to-one equivalent relationship between residency and applicant’s “quality”: individual characteristics determine the type of accommodations bureaucrats can offer, as well as residency informs about social properties of clients. In this regard, the address appears as a criterion for distribution of social housing applicants. This results in residential segregation. Actually, despite their goal of social diversity, the housing company in Petiteville fosters the concentration of equivalent profiles. Two different arguments are mobilized to explain it. First, social landlords make a commercial argument, that they do so in order to address the need to reduce the rate of unoccupied housing and to increase attractiveness of social housing. The organization seeks to restore a sort of “balance” in the spatial distribution of social groups by increasing the percentage of workers. Thus, “we seek to put more workers in good addresses, the idea is to reach 60, 70, 80 per cent of stable people” said Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company. This is a pragmatic reasoning: since “stable people” systematically refuse dwellings in sensitive urban areas, the social landlord sets aside units for them in the most attractive sectors:

“If I put people who receive benefits in the most attractive sectors you just mentioned, then who am I going to assign in sensitive urban areas, where I have 300 unoccupied apartments? This is not... This is... The person I am going to put there, downtown, where everyone wants to go, they will « take the place » (so to speak) of a person with a good job, a permanent working contract, because the person with a permanent contract, I won’t be able to assign them to the deprived neighbourhood. They won’t go, so I will just end up with an unoccupied flat” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

Second, a managerial argument is advanced, based on the idea that one cannot mix different populations (in terms of age, family composition or occupational status) with different lifestyles in a same building. Mixing is actually a potential source of conflicts and management difficulties. “If someone has a good application file, but he has “a look”, tattoos, piercings, he will not be accepted on a building with a majority of seniors. It wouldn’t help him since he has to integrate. Mixing, that's the theory; in practice, yes and no... We concentrate so that this goes well. I am personally in favor of social diversity but there are barriers” explained Rose, the chief of the renting-service, in an informal conversation. This is very close to arguments advanced by the General Director in charge of renting:

“They’ll be mingled with people who have same behavior, so we will succeed in having an “osmosis”, quotation marks, of lifestyles... In one building, I'll have people that aren’t disturbed by nightlife, they will listen to loud music or watch TV until midnight, and we won’t be hearing complaints from neighbors because they have the same habits and that’s it, it does not disturb them. On the contrary, if I put that kind of person in the building across the street, in the same area, but where we have half the people that are seniors or people who are working and get up in the morning... No! So we try to curb nuisance by specializing our buildings that way. That is to say that in a given building, there is a target customer” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

Local rules underline categories based on class, age, address and family composition. They are not communicated to applicants but they are materialized in policy instruments. Field observations also shed light on more discrete categories (“There are things that are mentionable and others less” said Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville Company) - families known for nuisance and crime, and minorities. Indeed, the social landlord seeks to limit minorities in specific areas: to Alexandre, “below 80 per cent of French, we have to rebalance”. These rules are justified by both commercial and managerial arguments. First, the concentration of minorities would be driving the French out, and creating more vacancy: “The issue is French people’s perceptions of the neighborhood. When they say “this is an Arab neighborhood”, it means I have a problem” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville Company). Furthermore, the lifestyle of some minorities is perceived as problematic for community life: the “Africans”, the “Yugo”, and the “Kosovars” are especially targeted. Thus,
by exploring social housing allocation in Petiteville, I underline how the bureaucratic discretion, supported by accurate knowledge of social occupation, promotes the construction of specific rules related to the spatial distribution of social groups. They are based on a hierarchy of both neighborhoods and clients.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Commercial argument</strong></th>
<th><strong>Managerial argument</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excerpt from an interview with Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013.</td>
<td>Excerpt from our field book. December the 12th, 2013.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- But why limiting minorities in this sector, if there are no vacancies here? - There are no vacancies yet! It will happen if we continue to rent to foreign people. Once it becomes a neighborhood of foreigners, Eighty per cent of our applicants are French, Twenty per cent are foreigners. If you do this, you’ll cut eighty per cent of French applicants because they won’t go. This is why... How can I say this? My policy is not to bring trouble to the estate, from a commercial point of view. (...) When you have this thought, it’s fair to say “wait, our role is to ensure that there is no unoccupied housing”. If we don’t want unoccupied housing, we have to care about populating. When we start bringing foreigners all together, I’m not sure that we are winning! What you put behind the word “ghetto”? A neighborhood of French people? I don’t think so. For me, in fact, it’s large buildings where problematic foreigners were concentrated. I... This word of “ghetto” for buildings of French occupants, I don’t know... So, that’s it, it’s just to avoid switching to a situation in which a sector is perceived as the “black neighborhood”, the “Arab neighborhood”, and finally I’m Black, so I’m going there, ok. So I have a pool of applicants, because when there will be no French who want to go there, I’ll see my vacancy increasing. Besides, I’m not sure that it is well appreciated to be qualified as a Maghreb area, a black area or another. I don’t think it’s very rewarding.</td>
<td>14.30. Informal discussion with Jean, CEO of the agency B: “When the state tells us that we have to house the Kosovars, yes we house them but not anywhere. With their lifestyles... Here we talk about how neighborhoods live, but we must also look at the rents”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Miville, local authorities organize the allocation process. Unlike the social landlord whose purpose is to anticipate the non-payment risk and the risk of neighborhood nuisance, municipal officials seek to maximize the number of housing proposals while respecting the scoring grid’s priorities.

**The scoring grid of housing applications in Miville.**

The scoring grid promotes access to social housing for homeless people and precarious situations. Note that the part-time employees receive no priority points associated to precarity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Homelessness or urgent housing need</strong></th>
<th><strong>9 points</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Residual charge</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 30 per cent and 35 per cent</td>
<td>4 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater than or equal to 35 per cent</td>
<td><strong>6 points</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Precariousness</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary placement</td>
<td>4 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed or RSA (benefits)</td>
<td>8 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Resource conditions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than or equal to 40 per cent</td>
<td>6 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 40 per cent and 60 per cent</td>
<td>0 point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seniority</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 1 to 12 months</td>
<td>1 point per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 13 to 24 months</td>
<td>1 point per month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The 25th month</td>
<td>30 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeout</td>
<td>25 points</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The spatial distribution remains important for local authorities; indeed, fieldwork shows its involvement at various levels of the social housing chain. Before the allocation commission takes place, the HLM organisms make recommendations to officials from the municipal service in order to encourage them to take neighborhood life into account. Data on social occupation is gathered orally (by telephone or during regular meetings) and disseminated in the form of an Excel table. As in the previous case, “risk profiles” are established and made visible by the instrument: people out of work, people who stand from benefits, single-parent families, persons who are coming out of prison or shelter, homeless people and clients needing mental health support. In the allocation commission, social landlords can also intervene to refuse individual cases or defer them if judged inappropriate in regards to social occupation. The commission can assign those cases to another dwelling, or redirect them to other types of accommodation. Before commissions take place, the issue is to reduce risks, during and after commissions, social landlords aim to “secure” residential trajectory.

“We didn’t give them the responsibility to control housing allocation. We keep it! And that, it’s through the CAL (i.e. the allocation commission). The CAL is not a registration chamber at all. If we don’t agree with a profile, we refuse it! “Inadequate housing” for the candidate is an argument when their lifestyle is not consistent with the life of the building... […] The spatial distribution of people stays under our command at all times. We can recommend social support or special needs housing” (Rozenn, Director in charge of renting, Miville, January the 15th, 2013).

These categories also refer to local rules targeting the buildings which are perceived as “sensitive” and where bureaucrats “can no longer house more disadvantaged people”. In respecting the principle of social diversity, actors avoid concentrating poverty:

“If you already have two or three (disadvantaged people) in a small residence, you can’t say “I’ll add a fourth”. We have to be consistent!” (Régine, sales agent, Miville, January the 14th, 2013).

In organization A, social mix is understood in terms of professional status, resources, age and family composition. The underlying is that “living together in harmony” can only be achieved in socially mixed neighborhoods: “The ideal is when there are a lot of different profiles, and when the most difficult profiles can melt away into the masses” (Julie, sales agent, Miville, January the 11th, 2013). At this point, we highlight a huge difference between the two case-studies. Indeed, in Miville, social mix is understood at the building level whereas it is thought at the neighborhood level in Petiteville. In the former case, different profiles of people are mixed in a building; in the latter, they are concentrated in a building. Concerning minorities, a policy of non-concentration had been applied in Miville for several years. With the support of local authorities, social landlords blocked the Turkish applications targeting the Kemal neighborhood. Hence, they aim to counteract “cultural isolationism” and “communitarianism”:

“We have one community, only one, that follows this logic, and everything is done to counteract it, which I repeat whenever I’m facing the Fasild19 or the Halde20. Yes, we assume political responsibility in favor of social mix, and we’re not in favor of communitarianism! So we try to avoid ethnic concentration. Because in this case, that’s what it is. All neighborhoods or all the cities are ready to receive the entire population. Everywhere, they find social responses and associative responses. And when you’re somewhere in Miville, you’re never far from the other part of the city. And therefore, for solidarity, there is no need for people to

19 The support Fund for Integration and the Prevention of Discrimination (Fasild) is a public institution that finances operations in favor of the integration of immigrants.

20 The High Authority to Combat Discrimination (Halde) was created in 2005 and dissolved in 2011. It was competent to address “all forms of discrimination, direct or indirect, prohibited by law or by an international agreement which France is a party”.

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Decided by elected officials, the policy was implemented by both municipal service and social landlords. As Christian explained us in the previous excerpt, the rules focusing on minorities were submitted to the representatives of Fasild and Halde, but remained hidden to the clients. More or less assumed by actors, these rules were deleted with the establishment of a single application form for housing (named the “Cerfa”), which simplifies the categories informing nationalities. The absence of tools to capture ethnic background accelerated abandonment of the policy.

The application form of housing.

Below are excerpts from an application form filed in 2010 (from the organization A) and a "Cerfa" form used by applicants since 2011. The comparison of these two cases reveals the transformation of administrative categories used to inform nationality. The “place of birth” is replaced by the “nationality”: “French”, “European Union”, and “Outside the European Union”.

In both cities, local rules are built by social landlords and municipalities in order to organize the spatial distribution of social groups. These rules are more or less formalized, and not public. Fieldwork underlines “risk categories” based on class, race, age and family composition criteria. They provide various strategies for social housing allocation (social mix, specialization). Among them, minorities represent a specific group since whatever local context and institutional power relations that constraint organizational activities, actors seek to limit their reunion. However, registers of justification vary depending on the kind of institution which promote strategies (social landlord or municipality). In the second part, we will see how these rules are applied in the field.

Table 3. Rules and their justifications in Petiteville and Miville

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“At-risk groups” (According to housing company direction)</th>
<th>Petiteville</th>
<th>Miville</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social status, age, family composition (Unemployed, people standing on benefits, under 25, large families, and so on).</td>
<td>Major role in the allocation process: the HLM company.</td>
<td>Major role in the allocation process: local authorities, through the municipal service in charge of social housing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main grounds for justification</td>
<td>HLM actors seek to reach a kind of “harmony” in their estates by concentrating the same profiles in a building.</td>
<td>HLM actors seek to create social mix in their estates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial argument</td>
<td>The specialization of social housing is thought of as a way to fight against housing vacancy.</td>
<td>Integration argument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerial argument</td>
<td>A variety of profiles increases the risk of neighbourhood disturbances.</td>
<td>HLM actors look aim for “harmonious community life”. The “ideal stairwell” is characterized by a diversity of profiles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
II. From Rules to Practices: What space for autonomy of street-level bureaucrats in daily micro-level interactions with clients?

The above subsections have shown how a set of rules and tools, built both by social landlords (Petiteville) and by local authorities (Miville), reduces bureaucratic discretion. However, agents continue carrying out their activities with discretion. This room for manoeuvre is planned and organized by the institutions. They encourage systematic face-to-face interviews in order to value the individual treatment of customers. In Petiteville, public instruments are actually defined as a "guideline": "it is the responsibility of actors to deviate from the rule when they need to after studying situations and meeting people”. “I make exceptions to the rule when it is accepted. If they told me “yes, you can do it”, well I’m doing it” explained Barthelemy. At Miville, sales agents are members of the allocation commissions; and they give their opinions on clients. In a fairly constrained framework, street-level bureaucrats therefore have leeway to qualify and categorize clients. They mobilize group categorization and identification, thus revealing a segmentation between “us” and “them”.

2.1. Practical categories and front-line practices

In both our case studies, the street-level bureaucrats lead an equivalent exercise of qualification and categorization based on practice criteria, in order to sort and select housing applicants. Qualification, based on the informations contained in the housing form and on “clues” than collected when meeting the client, is a crucial step to clarify the application file and to mobilize the rule that applies to the case. The results of the client survey feed discourses and “representations” that categorize people and produce social hierarchies (Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal, 1997). Social psychology shows how these operations are used to predict individual behavior.

Street-level bureaucrats’ judgments on clients

The “good” candidate is distinguished by his quality of good payer, his ability to occupy the dwelling and to fit in. His individual quality is examining through family standards (married couple with an average number of children), professional norms (employment, regular income) and ways of living (Sala Pala, 2006: 88).

“It's true I'm digging less into the information when I feel they will be less of a problem, when we’re in a case of... I will not say normality... That’s a stereotype but... You know, traditional families and conventional career paths. Well we don’t need... There are no more questions to ask” (Xavier, Miville, January the 9th, 2013).

Thus, judgments made by HLM agents about the candidates result from a body of evidence: punctuality for appointments, self-presentation and children’s behaviors during the interviews,
responding quickly to a housing proposal, bringing all the administrative documents and follow-up calls to bureaucrats to follow are also well considered: “it means that they’re true applicant”, “You see those who really want a house compared to others”. Honesty, sincerity and goodwill are also valued by the street-level bureaucrats (Bourgeois, 2013: 70). In particular, they pay attention to the consistency of the client trajectories. “Feeling” and “instinct” are thus put forward as a major professional skill:

“When I arrived here, I thought that “everyone is beautiful, everyone is nice, and everyone pays” and that’s because you see files and receive people that you learn to ask the right questions, you learn to... Some addresses speak to you. I don’t know. After, you manage to know when you have people in front of you, when they are confident or when they grope a little... In this case, you dig, you dig, and they contradict each other. Well you know there is a problem. You dig again and you find a debt. Often, when we have doubts, in the end, we always find the... It’s always justified when we don’t feel it! So yeah, maybe by dint of dealing with a lot of cases, we develop a sort of instinct for all of that” (Emma, Petiteville, December the 10th, 2013).

These discourses contain judgments, shortcuts and stereotypes through the interaction with customers. They bring out practical categories organized around two segments: the risk profiles, on the one hand – large families, families of “troublemakers” (identified by their names), homeless people, former inmates, and alcoholics, social cases, people who wander from shelter to shelter, people needing mental health supports, offenders, traffickers; the good candidates, on the other hand – workers and retirees. These practical categories do not completely overlap the institutional categories, because many agents reject the general level of the rule and prone a greater account of their judgment based on the proximity with clients and individual situations. Thus, institutional categories are taken up and actualized in daily micro-level interactions. They are refined and imbued with new meaning. For instance, sales agents in Petiteville make a clear distinction between two types of people who stand from benefits: there are those who deserve to access housing in a good sector and those who do not deserve it; those who are actively seeking employment and those who rely on social aid. Thus, the classic dichotomy between the “good” poor and “bad” poor has been updated.

“We must make a distinction. You have people, young or old, who are unemployed or stand on benefits because it suits them, and you have those who don’t have a choice: job loss... Here, between us, we make distinctions. I’ll treat all housing files similarly, but between someone who has always stood on benefits because it suits them, and as I mentioned, a woman who finds herself alone... I’ll make a distinction” (Emma, Petiteville, December the 10th, 2013).

These discourses are very widespread among HLM agents; and because the company management allows for bureaucratic discretion and values individual treatment, they lead to specific decisions in the field. If after a face-to-face interview, the agent finds the applicant “good”, “quiet”, “who won’t be a problem” (Samia, Petiteville), he may bypass the rule and house him in an attractive sector (with the approval of the Director in charge of renting).

“The “discovery” interview is still important?
It is even more than necessary, it helps us to know families, to know who are in front of us, and if we are more in a so-called “specific” population that must be housed in a specific place, or if we are on household’s residential opportunities... If the person is one of our tenants, if they stand on benefits, if they are known to us, and that they want an upper floor... If they don’t create problems, it won’t be a problem for me! We want to foster loyalty in our clients, someone who pays their rent, who perhaps stands on benefits, but who pays their rent is not a problem. There! I’m not saying that they can switch from an “unattractive” sector to a “very attractive sector”; I don’t agree, but it could be to an attractive area, yes!” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

In addition to these social representations, based on class, age, place of residence and family composition, racial stereotypes play a major role, as minorities are associated to many of the “bad” applicant characteristics: inappropriate, troublemakers, combining social and economic difficulties. These judgments reveal both an essentialisation of difference – “they occupy their
dwelling like in their home villages” - and a negative evaluation of this difference – “they'll deteriorate housing” - with a shift from the question of origins to the question of cultural maladjustment (Sala Pala, 2010: 22). The appearance is also a stigma (Goffman, 1975: 13) which result in the exclusion of minorities: “What matters is less the nationality than the appearance. In X (new housing project), we put Africans dressed in “boubous ”21. In other buildings, we have already put bearded men and women wearing the burqa. That disturbed existing tenants. What matters is the appearance. So, we don’t put more “boubous” in X. That doesn’t mean that no more Africans are put there” explained Barthelemy, a sales agent in Petiteville Company. The fieldwork shows that these cognitive arguments are mobilized invariably in the two cities.

“When it’s a Turk, we know it’s a Turk. When it’s a Mahorais, we know it’s a Mahorais. When it’s an Asian, we know it’s an Asian. We know that with Asians, there are no problems. We know that with Turks, there are a lot of troubles because first, they don’t want open-kitchen, and it’s known that they’ll refuse because of their culture you see. We know that we must put Turks two maximum in a new program. The problem is that when you put two Turkish families in a program, we know that you’ll attract more of them afterwards, because they are more likely to live in community, but they shouldn’t be too many of them. You see, afterwards it looks a bit ghetto. There are people who tend to live together. That’s it. If we put two African families, it’s too much because they make noise. It’s known. Music, it’s well known. It’s a question of culture, not a reproach! And it’s an observation that if we don’t play with social mix in a new housing project, we may have problems or noise or overcrowding, depending on nationality” (Angela, Miville, December the 11th, 2012).

Institutional categories in interaction22

Symbolic boundaries23 made by social actors to categorize people are based on group membership reflecting lifestyles and cultural differences. But it appears that the links between representations and professional practices are not automatic and systematic, because of the environmental constraints caused by the institutional context and the relations established by the agencies with their surroundings. For instance, in Miville, the decision to reject or postpone an application needs to be justified to elected officials and institutional partners. Thus, the allocation process cannot be based only on the agent’s subjectivity, but must be supported by evidence such as rental debts or proof of neighbourhood disturbances. This results in a gap between the agents’ perceptions and the final decision. The fieldwork observations nevertheless show how individual representations can be translated in effective practices. Especially, I will show how, under certain conditions, the ethno-racial categorizations lead to discriminations. This demonstration is based on the following case study.

Ethno-racial categorizations and discriminatory practices: the example of the Kemal district.

The Kemal district, located in the south of Miville, was targeted by a policy blocking the access of Turkish people to social housing. Despite the fact that local authorities dropped that policy, the HLM agent in charge of renting in this area continues to apply it when she has the ability to do so, for change of residence in the estates managed by Miville Company. Based on a study of housing applicant names, she acts according the following rule: “As we say, a Turk who leaves can be replaced by another Turk, but one who doesn’t leave can’t be added. I don’t know if you see what I mean. If it’s a French who leaves, I can’t move a Turk in!” (Julie, January the 11th, 2013).

For Julie, this policy stems from management instructions, implemented on behalf of social mix in order to

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21 A “boubou” is an African traditional clothing.
22 In this section, I describe mechanisms that also be analysed in terms of intersectionality.
23 “Symbolic boundaries are tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality. Examining them allows us to capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classifications. Symbolic boundaries also separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership (Epstein, 1992: 232). They are an essential medium through which people acquire status and monopolize resources. Social boundaries are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities. They are also revealed in stable behavioural patterns of association, as manifested in connubiality and commensuality” (Lamont and Molnar, 2002: 168-169).
Since the practical categories often interact with each other into complex combinations, the link between representations and practices is hard to pinpoint. If these interactions seem to produce a case-by-case treatment, comparative research underline regularities in selection mechanisms. One example is the Jean Jaures district in Petiteville. It is targeted by a policy restricting the access of blacks to the buildings where they are perceived as too numerous. The Jean Jaures district is the only neighborhood of Petiteville which is concerned by such a policy. But, according to basic statistics and background data provided by the social landlord, the percentage of French citizens is much higher in the Jean Jaures district (73%) than in the Jules Guesde district (60%) where there are many North Africans. The paradox is solved in different ways. First, it can be read in a cultural perspective: since the black culture is supposed to be more problematic than the Arab culture, black people are more discriminated against than others.

### Race and culture

> “North Africans, we don’t hear about them. They live at home, they aren’t meeting up in the communal parts... [...] But the thing with blacks, it’s not necessarily related to children. It’s also that there are cousins, uncles, and so on. You know. They meet up with each other... But it’s not just the children. They invite their whole families, and those families have kids... You see. In fact, they meet up all the time. For evenings, weekends. For parties. And it always causes noise, loud music...” (Samia, sales agents, Petiteville, December the 9th, 2013).

Another reading grid can be mobilized by referring to the interactions between the different categories of race, class, address and family composition. Indeed, ethno-racial dimension is often confused with aspects related to socio-economic status and family composition. The fact that the Jean Jaures district is characterized by a higher level of unemployment than in the Jules Guesde district can be explanation enough for the implementation of this policy.

### Context data. A comparison between Jean Jaures district and Jules Guesde district

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Jean Jaures district</th>
<th>Jules Guesde district</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of social housing units</td>
<td>869</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>8728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of French citizens</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of unoccupied housing</td>
<td>6,6%</td>
<td>0,8%</td>
<td>2,8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of people in rent debt</td>
<td>7,2%</td>
<td>4,1%</td>
<td>5,5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income &lt; 20% of ressource ceilings</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To Emma, the large families are considered as a more threatening group than black people, because they are expected to generate disturbance in the neighbourhood. She denies any correlation between race and culture but she recognizes that black people are over-represented when it comes to large families. In this regard, family composition is used as a proxy to designate race, thus fueling racial discrimination.

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24 For the majority of social housing actors, the selection of applicants is based on case-by-case treatment. From this point of view, HLM agents are not different from caseworkers implementing social policies (Astier, 2000, 2007; Lima, 2013).

25 The work of agents is based on skin color or client names in order to identify black people.
Race and family composition

“You can’t say “it’s the blacks who fuck up!” That’s... [...] Really, it’s about families with 8-9 children, but the fact that you’re French or Algerian or black, it will turn out the same. The downstairs neighbors will “flip out”. However, it’s true you see this family structure more often in African population than in French populations, right. It is rare to have a French family with 9 children” (Emma, sales agent, Petiteville, December the 10th, 2013).

Adjustments around the rules are also observed and reveal practical combinations of institutional categories on the ground. For instance, the contractual status of workers - temporary employees, trainees, those with fixed contracts – reveal levels of integration and stability; it illustrates their “place in society”, to quote the Director-general of Petiteville Company. This is the reason why HLM agents are willing to assign black workers to Jean Jaures. In this sense, the criteria of class and race cannot be understood in isolation. The ethnographic surveys underline other interaction effects (such as between class and address).

Race and class

“I’m telling you, I’ve tried ... It’s per individual case... For large families when I knew it wasn’t an option, I didn’t start it because I knew that we didn’t want to hear “the large families, oh no!”... But for example, I have already moved in a black man who was working. I put him in Jean Jaures. I put him, and he was accepted because he was working. It depends on the case. Because I felt that the guy, if he works; in the daytime, he works, since he isn’t at home...” (Samia, sales agent, Petiteville, December the 9th, 2013).

Practical categories, built in the field, are not neutral. They involve hierarchies between social groups resulting in unequal treatments, discriminations and exclusion. They reveal some regularities in selection mechanisms – criteria which are predominant depending on configurations – without being frozen in space and time. They are renegotiated in front-line practices. Finally, we would like to examine the responsibility of street-level bureaucrats in the production and reproduction of discriminations: what are their attitudes in response to allocation instruction?

2.2. Organizational position, professional identity and training in shaping working practices

Street-level bureaucrats adopt various attitudes when it comes to implementing allocation policy. In a previous study, I identified three types of HLM agents based on to individual behaviors and working practices. First, “loyal” agents completely endorse the registers of justification (diversity and integration) under which discriminations are conducted. Second, “critical” agents do not accept the rules and try to fight against them by developing avoidance strategies. Third, “pragmatic” agents apply the rules with detachment (Bourgeois, 2013: 73). In a more dynamic way, I will show how these behaviors contribute to the production and the reproduction of discriminations.

The dominant position of pragmatic agents in agencies

Between 2001 and 2006, Régine implemented the policy regarding Turkish people in the Kemal district. As an employee of Petiteville housing company for thirty-two years, she felt she could not negotiate her way around it. To Regine, there was no possibility to give her personal opinion on it, or else she should go elsewhere:

“You don’t have to agree or disagree... You know, when you’re an employee, you do what you’re told or else you go see elsewhere” (Régine, sales agent, Miville, January the 14th, 2013).

26 Similarly, if the organizational rule is to not propose attractive sector to applicant living in “bad addresses”, it can be bypassed for workers with fixed-term contracts.
In Petiteville, management functions are not territorialized, which means that all agents abide by the same rules. These rules are strongly criticized by the street-level bureaucrats as a way to catalogue housing applicants. They also a barrier to their autonomy in the shape of management tools and rigidity in the choice of future tenants.

“I think it's a shame to catalogue everybody but, well, I don’t decide. It's true that it's a shame because you have people who... It is not because they stand on benefits that...” (Samia, sales agent, Petiteville, December the 9th, 2013).

Criticism is also targeted at the content of rules. Indeed, some employees highlight contradictions between concrete practices and legal priorities: “We are going to take the fixed-term contractor in order to reduce management risk, but the law tells us to take “people who come out from shelter!” explained Rose, the chief of the renting-service. She even comes to describe the instructions as discriminatory:

“Because I still remain convinced, but that just my opinion, that it’s not... Well, I'm convinced and I weigh my words, I speak freely, I still find that it's really discriminatory because you can’t catalogue profiles like that! This is what I told you “you, you come, you're young, and you just leave your family, I don’t know you're in RSA, you've just finished your studies. I'll put you in 36N with alcoholics! No...” (Rose, chief of the renting-service, Petiteville Company, December 9th, 2013, Excerpt from the Field book).

Despite the awareness of unequal treatment and discrimination, social housing professionals apply the rules; they don’t “rebel” in Rose’s word. “You live there, you are catalogued; you have such a name, you are catalogued. That's a bit annoying but... We rely on the rule, we don’t have that much choice” said Emma. Similarly, Samia “understands the rule”, she does not agree with it, she is not totally opposed but she must comply with this rule: “The unfortunate part is that we generalize for everyone, but we have no choice” (Samia, sales agent). Finally, since avoidance strategies are organized, they do not come to destabilize the institutional order and they do not inhibit the reproduction of discrimination.

“They don’t apply rules strictly. If you want, for the last allocation commission, or the next, we’ll attend together, and you’ll see that between instruction given and what they did, there’s a gap - I’m going to have RSA in these sectors, and I don’t step up to the plate because I tell you, they must have some autonomy, the rest is just a directive, an orientation. True, if there is someone who stands on benefits and isn’t seen as problematic in the discovery interview they could have, I wouldn’t be against... I’m going to oppose when I see “Well, it’s ok, this is the tenth RSA you put on the sector, and we aren’t in the desired target” but if it’s only one, I’m not...” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

The role of the on-the-job training in the reproduction of practices

By promoting transmission and routinization of practices, on-the-job training can allow us to understand the significant place of pragmatic attitude among street-level bureaucrats.27 The limitation of Turkish applications in the Kemal district illustrates how despite its abandonment by the local authorities,28 the fight against communitarianism continues to be applied as a practice inherited and valued by the professionals. In Petiteville, the chief of the renting-service, with their strong experience in the field, holds a key position in the transmission chain of practical knowledge and skills. By signing out on the forms, Rose controls the activities of new recruits. Several months after entering the service, agents have yet to obtain her agreement to make an offer of accommodation. The comments on applications - “not the profile” or “other building” - signify that candidates must be reassigned in another dwelling; they will not be

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27 We find similar finding to those of the literature on street-level bureaucracy: “Street-level bureaucrats may modify their initial job conceptions by reducing their ideal image of the job to a more pragmatic version” (Hupe and Buffat, 2014: 551).
28 “We are in favour of social mix, and not communitarianism!” said Christian, an elected representative with responsibility for social housing (February 28th, 2012).
accepted by the allocation commission. Thus, the service manager constitutes a filter in the selection process, which reinforces the institutional order.

“- But, if I understood, at the beginning, you put Black RSA in the Jules Guesde district...?
- Yes, and then Rose told me “no Blacks”, “another building” she said, “another entry”. I went to see her and she told me “other building”. [...] But, now, I’m better able to target the right person on the right place, but that, it comes with experience” (Emma, sales agent, Petiteville, December the 10th, 2013).

The development of instruments also meets the need for new agents training. What is at stake is to promote an internalization of rules towards the speedy achievement of commercialization goals. The Director-General of Petiteville housing company sees them as “integration tools”:

“This tool then, it was also, beyond the messages we wanted to convey to sales agents who are already familiar with the job, it was an integration tool for us, because before a new agent is actually operational and make the right match between clients and buildings, there’s a lot of time. Since September, we have a tool which gives them a clear orientation. If you have such a profile, you suggest that” (Alexandre, Director-General of Petiteville housing company, in charge of renting, November the 29th, 2013).

Finally, allocation practices are shaped by institutionalized rules at the meso-level, and reinforced in their effects by training, routines and collective categorizations at the micro-level.

**Conclusion: Street-level work and the regulation of public policies**

Social housing allocation is a process very slightly regulated by law. It is implemented by public and private actors with various abilities to act, which can produce discrimination and exclusion. Because legal objectives are vague and unclear, they draw a minimal framework for public action, which is taken up and refined on the ground. Guided by the “right to housing” and the principle of social mix, this frame actually defines what is possible and not, what is legal and not. Finally, despite the impressive battery of rules and regulations governing their activity, the HLM agencies can exercise significant discretionary powers when deciding who qualifies as future tenant. Supported by instruments, institutional rules aim to organize spatial distribution of social groups based on several criteria (social status, origin, age, family composition, address). This results in a hierarchy of both customers and buildings, which determines the type of accommodations bureaucrats can offer. I then analyzed how these institutional rules and categories are actualized in micro-level daily interactions. I showed how routines and collective typifications finally reinforce the production of inequalities and discriminations in front-line. In both case cities, data reveal “us”/”them” classifications, based on street-levels’ perceptions of class, race, family composition and space.

Our findings suggest that complex interactions constantly refine institutional categories and imbue them with new meaning. I argue that ethnographic study is required to go beyond legal approach and to capture individual practices and representations. There is a need for a sociology of actors’ practices including contextual factors (especially, territorial and organizational dimensions). Fieldwork allows us to see and understand illegal practices and to explore their underlying genres of justification. Comparative research is also crucial to highlight regularities in policy-making in various contexts. Even though institutional rules are produced by different types of actors (ESH and OPH) in local power relations, we showed that populations considered as threatening by local authorities and social landlords are invariably the poors and the immigrants. They are the ones subjected to specific treatments. We brought out two different strategies: concentration and dispersion. Depending on the institutional context, the poor are either concentrated in specific neighborhoods or not. Concerning the minorities, we outlined a consensus among organizations and local authorities on the need to
fight against regroupment. But different arguments are mobilized: the social landlords insist on managerial and commercial aspects, whereas elected officials develop a discourse centered on the idea of integration.

In this regard, the allocation process can be interpreted as a territorialized jurisprudence, organized by networks of local actors. We therefore put forward the idea of an “individualized government” built around street-level bureaucrats (Dubois, 2010b), and demonstrate the importance of comparing and linking the micro- and meso-levels of analysis in order to understand policymaking.

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