

P R E F A C E

Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services

*Prepared For The Thirtieth Anniversary, Expanded Edition
Of Street-Level Bureaucracy*

This book is in part a search for the place of the individual in those public services I call street-level bureaucracies. These are the schools, police and welfare departments, lower courts, legal services offices, and other agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions.

It is also an inquiry into the structure of one of those resonant moments in civic life. Like driving on interstate highways, playing in a public park, voting, dining in a smoke-free restaurant, paying taxes, and listening to National Public Radio, interactions with street-level bureaucracies are places where citizens experience directly the government they have implicitly constructed. Unlike these other experiences, however, citizen encounters with street-level bureaucracies are not straightforward; instead, they involve complex interactions with public workers that may deeply affect the benefits and sanctions they receive.

Street-Level Bureaucracy was originally published in 1980 and made two distinctive claims. The first was that the exercise of discretion was a critical dimension of much of the work of teachers, social workers, police officers, and other public workers who regularly interact with citizens in the course of their jobs. Further, the jobs typically could not be performed according to the highest standards of decision making in the various fields because street-level workers lacked the time, information, or other resources necessary to respond properly to the individual case. Instead, street-level bureau-

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crats manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice and psychologically simplifying their clientele and environment in ways that strongly influence the outcomes of their efforts. Mass processing of clients is the norm, and has important implications for the quality of treatment and services.

These observations are instructive in themselves, and have profound implications for public policy. They suggest that understanding public policies in street-level bureaucracies requires analysis of how the unsanctioned work responses of street-level bureaucrats combine with rules and agency pronouncements to add up to what the public ultimately experiences as agency performance.

The second claim was that work as diverse and apparently unrelated as that of guidance counselors, judges, police officers, and social workers to a degree is structurally similar, so that one could compare these work settings with each other. Describing front-line public service delivery in terms of a small number of analytic characteristics made possible a new way of seeing these very familiar public roles, and how they were like and different from one another.

However diverse these occupations otherwise are, they could now be seen as embodying an essential paradox that plays out in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the work is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives that have their origins in the political process. On the other hand, the work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case. Not only that, but generally the public wants administrators of public services to be at least open to the possibility that a special case is presenting itself, or that extraordinary efforts of one sort or another are called for.

Essentially all the great reform efforts of the last thirty years to improve performance or accountability in street-level public services may be understood as attempts to manage this apparently paradoxical reality: how to treat all citizens alike in their claims on government, and how at the same time to be responsive to the individual case when appropriate. The phrase “street-level bureaucracy” hints at this paradox. “Bureaucracy” implies a set of rules and structures of authority; “street-level” implies a distance from the center where authority presumably resides.

In *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, I show how people experience public policies in realms that are critical to our welfare and sense of community. Too often we read about education, policing, social work, and other vital public services without realizing or being given concrete understanding of how these public policies result from the aggregation of the separate actions of

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many individuals, or how and why the actions in question are consistently reproduced by the behavior of individuals.

The book is grounded in observations of the collective behavior of public service organizations and advances a theory of the work of street-level bureaucracies as individual workers experience it. 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. I maintain that public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators. These decision-making arenas are important, of course, but they do not represent the complete picture. To the mix of places where policies are made, one must add the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers. Further, I point out that policy conflict is not only expressed as the contention of interest groups, as we have come to expect. It is also located in the struggles between individual workers and citizens who challenge or submit to client-processing.

For example, many people are convinced that police officers disproportionately single out African Americans for scrutiny and wrongly use skin color and racial characteristics to target blacks for attention. Police officials invariably deny that they engage in racial profiling, and suggest that if blacks are stopped disproportionately it is because they act in ways that legitimately trigger police inquiry. It is evident that, to the extent racial profiling exists, it arises not from official policy or direct racial orientations but out of the ways police officers draw on social stereotypes in exercising the discretion sanctioned by their departments.

Similarly, we know that service bureaucracies consistently favor some clients over others, despite official policies designed to treat people alike. To understand how and why these organizations sometimes perform contrary to their own rules and goals, we need to know how the rules are experienced by workers in the organization, what latitude workers have in acting on their preferences, and what other pressures they experience.

Few callings deserve greater respect than those involving public service. As citizens we are grateful to those people who teach our children, protect life and property, manage our natural resources, and help people in need to access social services. These functions have evolved as hallmarks of inclusive, prosperous societies throughout the world. Some street-level occupations are highly respected and well-paid. Others, such as some social workers, have a more contested position in society. Some operate in relative obscurity, whereas others, such as police officers and child protection work-

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ers, are among those who are often in the news for regrettable developments. If a child dies while in protective care, or a person is badly treated while in custody, everyone in those agencies experiences the resulting public criticism.

One important way in which street-level bureaucrats experience their work is in their struggle to make it more consistent with their strong commitments to public service and the high expectations they have for their chosen careers. People often enter public employment with a commitment to serving the community. Teachers, social workers, public defenders, and police officers partly seek out these occupations because they offer socially useful roles. Yet the very nature of these occupations can prevent recruits to street-level bureaucracies from coming even close to the ideal conception of their jobs. Large classes, huge caseloads, and other challenging workload pressures combine with the contagious distress of clients who have few resources and multiple problems to defeat their aspirations as service workers.

Ideally and by training, street-level bureaucrats should respond to the individual needs or characteristics of the people they serve or confront. In practice, they must deal with clients collectively, because work requirements prohibit individualized responses. Teachers should respond to the needs of the individual child; in practice, they must develop techniques to manage a classroom of children. Police officers should respond to the presenting case; in reality, they must develop techniques to recognize and respond to various types of confrontations, particularly those that threaten their authority or may pose danger. At best, street-level bureaucrats invent modes of mass processing that more or less permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and thoughtfully. At worst, they give in to favoritism, stereotyping, convenience, and routinizing—all of which serve their own or agency purposes.

Compromises in work practices and attitudes are often rationalized as reflecting workers' greater experience on the job, their appreciation of practical and political realities, or their more realistic assessment of the nature of the work. But these rationalizations only summarize the prevailing structural constraints on human service bureaucracies. They are not "true" in an absolute sense. The teacher who psychologically abandons her commitment to help every child to read may succumb to a private assessment of the status quo in education. But this compromise says nothing about the potential of individual children to learn or the capacity of the teacher to instruct. This potential remains intact. It is the system of schooling, the organization of the schooling bureaucracy, that teaches that children are developmentally

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“slow” or unmotivated, and that teachers must abandon their early commitments to be an excellent teacher to every child.

In the same way, the criminal justice system allows police recruits to presume that they can approach with impunity young people hanging out in certain neighborhoods to see whether they are in possession of guns or drugs, even if they have no evident cause for suspicion other than the coincidence of age, race, and neighborhood. Young police officers learn that judges will back them up if the young people claim that the officers planted evidence or made up their own descriptions of the encounters. Court officers, judges, prosecutors, and public defenders collaborate in the mass processing of a great many new and repeat juvenile offenders each year yet retain the ideal that each may have his or her fair and full “day in court.”

Some street-level bureaucrats drop out or burn out relatively early in their careers. Those who stay on, to be sure, often grow in the jobs and perfect treatment and client-processing techniques that provide an acceptable balance between public aspirations for the work and the coping requirements of the job. These adjustments of work habits and attitudes may reflect lower expectations for themselves, their clients, and the potential of public policy. Ultimately, these adjustments permit acceptance of the view that clients receive the best that can be provided under prevailing circumstances.

Street-level bureaucrats often spend their work lives in these corrupted worlds of service. They believe themselves to be doing the best they can under adverse circumstances, and they develop techniques to salvage service and decision-making values within the limits imposed on them by the structure of the work. They develop conceptions of their work and of their clients that narrow the gap between their personal and work limitations and the service ideal. These work practices and orientations are maintained even as they contribute to the distortion of the service ideal or put the worker in the position of manipulating citizens on behalf of the agencies from which citizens seek help or expect fair treatment.

Should teachers, police officers, or social workers look for other work rather than participate in practices that seem far from ideal? This would mean leaving clients to others who have even fewer concerns and less interest in clients than they do. It would mean not only starting over in a new career, but also abandoning the satisfactory aspects of the work they have managed to carve out.

Should they stay in their jobs and dedicate themselves to changing client-processing conditions from within their agencies? This approach is problematic as well, though it is the career path taken by many who leave direct

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service for management. In their new positions, some will be reformers striving for change to the limit of their capacity and what the times will bear. Others will settle for the status quo.

The structure of street-level bureaucracy also confronts clients with dilemmas bearing on action. Consumers of public services, for the most part, cannot choose the public services to which they will be subject. They must accept the schools, courts, and police forces of their communities. If they are poor, they must also accept the community's arrangements for health care, income support, housing subsidies and other benefit programs. In approaching the institutions that administer these policies, they must strike a balance between asserting their rights as citizens and conforming to the behaviors public agencies seek to place on them as clients. As citizens, they should seek all to which they are entitled. As bureaucratic subjects, they must temper their demands in accord with their assessment of the limitations of the public agencies which control benefits and sanctions. Although it is apparent that exceptions are often made and additional resources often found, clients also recognize the potential costs of unsuccessfully asserting their rights.

On matters of the greatest urgency and moment, such as health care, education, justice, housing, and income, clients passively seek support and fair treatment from public agencies when evidence and experience suggest that their hopes may go unrewarded. The dilemmas of action may be particularly acute if clients are poor, are immigrants, or are of a different racial or ethnic background than the public employees with whom they interact. Should I wait my turn and submit to the procedures of the agency, despite reservations? I risk being unable to gain attention to my particular needs and concerns. Should I speak out forcefully and demand my rights? I risk antagonizing the workers by disrupting office procedures.

It is no small thing to adjust successfully to the rigors of the street-level workplace. Virtually all jobs involve adjustments to routines of practice, challenges to keeping a fresh outlook despite repetitive tasks, and compromises between personal needs and vocational requirements. Despite the many barriers to effective practice described in these pages, street-level bureaucrats frequently manage to find a satisfactory balance between the realities of the job and personal fulfillment. The society is all the better for their capacity to find a satisfactory balance in their work life.

When I originally wrote this book, I was intent on elaborating on the coping behaviors of street-level bureaucrats. In doing so I emphasized the gap between the realities of practice and service ideals. This approach had its value, to judge from the reception the book has enjoyed over the years. But

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it led to neglect of an important reality: vast numbers of people in public service on a daily basis go to work at rewarding and fulfilling jobs. They meet their classes, carry out their assignments, and manage their caseloads without much complaint. Work goes on in these public service organizations to general satisfaction. Partly this is because workers, clients, and the general public have more modest expectations than they might have. But it also goes on because frontline workers have figured out how to do what they regard as a reasonable job with resources at their disposal.

How does one reconcile a clear-eyed assessment of the dilemmas of street-level bureaucracy with the reality that many if not most teachers, police officers, and social workers like what they do and do their jobs relatively well by community standards?

There are two ways to understand the term “street-level bureaucrat.” One is to equate it with the public services with which citizens typically interact. In this sense, all teachers, police officers, and social workers in public agencies are street-level bureaucrats without further qualification. This is the way the term has commonly come to be used.

Another way—the one I originally intended—was to define street-level bureaucracy as public service employment of a certain sort, performed under certain conditions. In this second approach, street-level bureaucrats interact with citizens in the course of the job and have discretion in exercising authority; in addition, they cannot do the job according to ideal conceptions of the practice because of the limitations of the work structure.

When I first wrote the book, I did not mean to suggest that every frontline worker experienced stressful working conditions. I know teachers who with little effort are able to pay attention to every child in their small school. I know art teachers who experience little stress in leading their classrooms through exercises. I know National Park rangers whose daily routines require coping with boredom as much as anything else.

In this second conception of the term, in other words, not every teacher, police officer, or public social worker experiences the pressures that I stated street-level bureaucrats face by definition. Frontline workers whose jobs are relatively free of restrictive structural constraints will still develop routines in response to their work requirements. But the routines will not be developed primarily to cope with a difficult work environment. If we adopt the second perspective, we can see that not every frontline worker experiences the pressures this book analyzes.

Additionally, although many street-level coping behaviors may widen the gap between policy as written and policy as performed, other coping behaviors reflect acceptable compromises between the goals of enacted policy

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and the needs of the street-level workers. Not every coping mechanism distances the worker from the goals of the organization. Indeed, the best workers are the ones who bridge the gap.

Perhaps it is best to imagine a continuum of work experiences ranging from those that are deeply stressful and the processing of clients is severely underresourced, to those that provide a reasonable balance between job requirements and successful practice. Workers' places on that continuum might change over time as they gain experience, as caseloads and assignments vary, or as the workplace itself adopts new approaches or engages new clientele. All street-level bureaucrats potentially confront circumstances that lead them to coping mechanisms representing departures from the service ideal. But all frontline workers do not cope with these issues all the time.

Still another reason that many street-level bureaucrats can successfully negotiate the gap between the ways they cope with their jobs and public expectations is that those expectations are undoubtedly considerably lower than the ideal. Public expectations may replicate on a societal basis the compromises street-level bureaucrats adopt in coping with their clients person by person.

This can be explained partly by the fact that the work of street-level bureaucrats is mostly hidden from public view, so even attentive citizens do not necessarily know what is going on agency by agency. Also, to the extent that general expectations of public services go beyond demands for efficiency and honest administration, they are likely to focus on incremental improvement. That is, the hopes of the public for improved agency performance are likely to focus on marginal changes in client or administrative outcomes, and are likely to be based on limited indicators. Reformers who hold out for prospects of radically better services and client outcomes tend to be dismissed as excessively idealistic.

A final set of dilemmas confronts citizens who are continuously, if implicitly, asked to evaluate public services. This occurs in focused forums such as a referendum on a school budget or a revolt against high property taxes. It also occurs in diffuse expressions of dissatisfaction with the public sector, such as Colorado's famous Taxpayers' Bill of Rights (TABOR), which set in motion a drastic decline in public services until TABOR was suspended by voters in 2005. Indeed, the many initiatives to limit state and local spending in recent decades have largely been understood as attacks on the value of government.

What are the policy alternatives? When all the "fat" has been trimmed from agency budgets and all the "waste" eliminated, the basic choices re-

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main: to further automate, systematize, and regulate the interactions between government employees and citizens seeking help; to drift with the current turmoil that favors reduced services and greater standardization in the name of cost effectiveness and budgetary controls; or to secure or restore the importance of human interactions in services that require discretionary intervention or involvement.

How much can human intervention be eliminated from teaching, nursing, policing, and judging? The fact is that we must have people making decisions and treating other citizens in the public services. We are not prepared as a society to abandon decisions about people and discretionary intervention to machines and programmed formats. Yet how can one advocate greater attention to the intervening and discretionary roles of street-level bureaucrats in the face of the enormous and often well-deserved popular discontent with the effectiveness and quality of their work?

I try to address these questions in this book. I do not exonerate street-level bureaucracies, excuse their deficiencies, or urge their support as currently structured. Rather, I locate the problem of street-level bureaucrats in the structure of their work, and attempt to identify conditions that would better support a reconstituted public sector dedicated to appropriate service and respect for clients—one that would be more likely to produce effective service providers. In developing the street-level bureaucracy framework, I identify the common elements of occupations as apparently disparate as, say, police officer and social worker. The analysis of street-level bureaucracy helps us identify which features of people-processing are common, and which are unique, to the different occupational milieux in which they arise.

Moreover, this essentially comparative approach permits us to raise questions systematically about apparent differences in various service areas. For example, recognition that all street-level bureaucracies need to control clients gives perspective to police officer shows of force and raises questions about precisely what in the work context of police officers makes client control so dominant a theme.

Just as one of the most important contributions of the concept of “professionalism” is to facilitate understanding of the differences between, say, doctors and nurses, in the same way the concept of street-level bureaucracy should encourage exploration of important differences in public services as well as contribute to an understanding of central tendencies that they share.

Street-level bureaucrats are major recipients of public expenditures and represent a significant portion of public activity at the local level. Citizens directly experience government through them, and their actions *are* the

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policies provided by government in important respects. I start by summarizing the importance of street-level bureaucrats in contemporary political life and explain the sense in which these low-level workers may be understood to “make” the policies they are otherwise charged with implementing (part I). Then I treat the common features of street-level work and explore the implications of these conclusions for client outcomes, organizational control, and worker satisfaction (part II).

The utility of the street-level bureaucracy approach can be tested only in efforts to understand whether common features of the framework lead to common behavioral outcomes. I explore this general question with reference to street-level tendencies to ration and restrict services, control clients and the work situation, and develop psychological dispositions that reduce the dissonance between worker expectations and actual service outcomes (part III). In the next section, I provide an assessment of the effect of fiscal crisis on street-level bureaucrats, and a discussion of the potential for reform and reconstruction of these critical public functions (part IV).

These latter chapters may be of particular interest to readers of this new edition for the insight they may provide on developments over the last thirty years. On the one hand, the implications that reform movements within the professions might play a restorative role today seem more farfetched than they did thirty years ago. On the other hand, the choices available to the society for managing street-level bureaucracies toward greater responsiveness and democratic accountability remain reasonably intact. It is also noteworthy that the theme of fiscal crisis, which dominated discussions of cut-backs in public services as a result of tax revolts of the late 1970s, are still with us today. These themes are reviewed and account taken of recent developments in public services in the final chapter, which was written especially for this edition.