

Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services

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ABSTRACT

*In **Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services**, Michael Lipsky introduces the theory of street level bureaucrats, in which he portrays a pessimistic view of the power implementers possess and their effect on public policies. Particularly, Lipsky argues that street-level bureaucrats, as front line workers in service delivery, face an ongoing duality between being responsive to their clients' needs and ensuring policies are properly implemented. The dilemmas posed to these actors force them to adopt reactionary strategies in order to cope with the challenges of the job—strategies range from rationing resources to screening and routinizing clients. Indirectly, however, those adaptive strategies in essence become a form of decision making in the public policy realm. Though not a direct argument for policymaking, Lipsky's dark portrayal is a seminal piece on the role and power of implementation on policymaking, underscoring street-level bureaucrats' discretion and interpretative ability.*

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PA715: Politics of Policy Making and Implementation
October 16, 2007

SUMMARY

At the implementation level of all public policies underlies the policy making power of public service workers. Implementers of policies have immense understated capacity to change policy to either conform to the original design of said policies or follow a completely different agenda. Lipsky presents a pessimistic portrayal of these implementers or “street-level bureaucrats” as reactionaries in the policy making process, whose discretionary authority and interpretive ability allow them to hinder or bolster service delivery of public policies.

Street-Level Bureaucrats

Public service workers, though generally regarded as low-level or front-line employees, have a pivotal role in delivering government services and “goods”. Particular are the employees who have constant direct interactions with public citizens, yet possess a significant degree of discretion in execution of their work (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky calls these employees “*street-level bureaucrats*”—public service workers who are confronted with real world challenges in the public sector, yet face inadequacies of under-funded government systems. Public service agencies whose workforce comprise mainly of street-level bureaucrats are considered “*street-level bureaucracies*”. A broad spectrum of civil positions primarily constitute these street-level bureaucracies—including teachers, police officers, lawyers, doctors, health workers and more.

Superficially, street-level bureaucrats constitute a level of implementation of public policies—they are tasked with ensuring policies are carried out. Yet as individuals, public service workers represent a small-scale level of policymaking. They

decide the specific operation and execution of policies. On a larger scale, Lipsky argues the combined actions and decisions of street-level bureaucrats in their bureaucracy amalgamate to form an agenda and heavily influence the direction of policy (Lipsky, 1980).

Nature of Job—Discretion and Interpretive Ability

Lipsky contends that it is the nature of street-level bureaucrat work itself, which empowers them with policymaking ability (Lipsky, 1980). Their employment conditions bring the dual capacity for discretion and the ability to interpret policies to meet specific demands of work. In response to managing workloads and addressing the needs of clients, street-level bureaucrats possess urgency in making judgments and executing decisions (Yvonne, 2000). Though the overarching goal of representing “governmental responsibility” and effectiveness remains, the actual decisions of each street-level bureaucrat can vary from client to client, in effect changing policy as a reaction to the employees’ needs rather than the clients. The necessity for responsive decisions derive from the conditions of work, including the complicated nature of work situations, degree of management involvement, and supply and demand of resources (Lipsky, 1980). The street-level bureaucrat’s role as a policy executioner becomes encumbered as a result of these built-in stipulations. Lipsky likens the challenges as a conflict between meeting the demands of their service recipients, while improving efficacy and efficiency of their programs/services (Lipsky, 1980).

Holding a relatively high degree of discretion enables street-level bureaucrats to make ad-hoc decisions and policy changes. Lipsky asserts that discretion is a relative concept accorded to street-level bureaucrats, since their work often demands a human

dimension and self-direction (Lipsky, 1980). Often times, situations are too complicated to adhere to strict rules and cannot be reduced to a “programmatically format.” A common example Lipsky cites is that of a police officer who cannot approach every single citizen in the exact same format. Public service workers need discretion in order to deal with varying external forces.

Other situations require a human factor—a sensitive observation and judgment to show compassion and flexibility, yet fairness and justice. Lipsky refers to teachers who need to show that an individual child is unique, yet teach all of them in an equal fashion. As Lipsky affirms, the needs of a constantly changing work environment and the conflict of maintaining legitimacy of authority between remaining responsive and flexible, forces street-level bureaucrats to make decisions regarding following public policies. Case in point, police officers have tremendous discretion in giving one person a ticket—and another simply a warning (Lipsky, 1980).

The value of discretion is in the ability to have disparity in perceptions of one situation and subsequently interpret policies as deem fits. The model of disparity extends to management who has a set of expectations, policy goals and outcomes; however, these are often oblique and not clearly stated. In addition, public service employees carry out policies in the best interests of the organization often with little oversight—the more power they have, the less supervision there is. According to Lipsky, the lack of a transparent set of outcomes and less supervision leads to broad interpretations of goals, which street-level bureaucrats take advantage of to adjust policies to meet their own situation specific goals (Lipsky, 1980). The utility of interpretation manifests itself in the ability to resist pressures from authority to further

street-level bureaucrats' goals of meeting clients' needs. Thus, the conflict between management and public service worker's goals is consequential, in which the latter often feels pressured to change policy on the fly to meet their own individual needs.

Nature of Clients—Conceptualization, Control and Routinization

Further work condition limitations include the nature of clients. In order to facilitate a satisfactory level of service delivery, it becomes necessary to conceptualize and manage clients through rationing of resources and "routinizing". Lipsky argues that without such controls, the burdens of the service delivery conflict make street-level bureaucrats ineffective and unresponsive to the public eye (Lipsky, 198). These methods of control change how public service workers execute public policies and become their own form of policies.

By conceptualizing their job and clients, street-level bureaucrats imply differentiation within service and therefore justify any change in policy decisions. Public service workers stereotype clients as a reaction to an unstoppable stream of demand, determining who is worthy enough to receive service or attention—as in the case of a public defender who pushes a few cases to trial, while many other cases languish. Yet as Lipsky states, by modifying goals to best serve a few clients upholds a public image of effectiveness, but is not truly representative of a public benefit (Lipsky, 1980). The primary interests served are only those of the street-level bureaucrats.

Stereotyping justifies rationing of services as a form of policymaking. Lipsky makes a case for effectively identifying clients eligible for service—similar to a triage method in a hospital—as an initial stopgap measure of efficient policy implementation (Lipsky, 1980). Policymaking is effected as soon as the street-level bureaucrat makes

an informal decision in screening applicants—such decisions are made with plausible through the discretionary powers of public service workers. By screening clients, rationing of services occurs at the implementation level and limits the amount and quality of service accorded to applicants. Regardless of resource ability, a street-level bureaucrat is charged with providing the best service possible. However, the rationed outcomes can vary wildly from the original policy's intentions of service delivery.

Screening occurs in different forms, as well, such as “rubber-stamping” and referrals to other services. Rubber-stamping involves blindly adopting the judgments of others, without proper due process. Judges will often accept decisions of police officers or probation officers as do teachers who refer to evaluations from a child's previous teacher. Rationally, it is easy to accept the assertions of others, since a clients' situation may be too complex to investigate completely. Additionally, if a situation is too complicated or a street-level bureaucrat is resource-deficient, they may choose to refer a client to other agencies. According to Lipsky, referrals are a way for street-level bureaucrats to provide symbolic service, while still preserving their own resources (Lipsky, 1980). They skirt around the issue of providing truly equal treatment and assessment for all and in essence, the goals of ensuring clients are receiving service are still achieved, albeit in a subversive nature.

Reactive vs. Proactive

As Lipsky presents, routinization is just one method of policymaking—from screening and changing recipients of service to rubber-stamping and avoiding any decision-making. Street-level bureaucrats make a conscious decision to utilize these methods to cope with the stresses of the job and the clients—two sources of conflict,

which compels public service workers to affect public policy to maintain the perception of order and efficiency. Lipsky's assessment of their role as policy makers is unintentional—the power of policymaking is portrayed as a burden for implementers and is only a consequence of conflict. Conflict and reaction represent a pessimistic motivator for policy changes (Lipsky, 1980). However, Lipsky's dark interpretation of power is limited and avoids the issue of potential policymaking abuses and personal agenda setting—street-level bureaucrats change policy for the overall benefit of self-efficiency and self-preservation. Little in the book discusses the possible implications for truly destructive behavior. This is a major, though understandable, shortcoming of Lipsky's arguments. Being written in 1980, Lipsky's book is a seminal piece in beginning to understand the authority and influence implementers have in the policymaking process.

Additionally, Lipsky provides virtually no empirical evidence for his arguments—his is a strict logical and ideological argument. Lipsky employs broad statements and assumptions about public service positions, including teachers, police, doctors, lawyers, etc. to base many statements regarding discretion and level of interpretative ability. However, the degrees to which these conditions exist vary considerably across positions and are difficult to generalize to all street-level bureaucrats.

ASSESSMENT

There is much discourse on the level of implementation, where street-level bureaucrats have an unlikely role as a policy player with a great deal of policymaking power. Lipsky's assessment street-level bureaucrats and their participation in the policy process as a result of conflict still rings true today. Furthermore, the implications for a

broad interpretation of policy outcomes extend to all levels of governments, including federal. For example, the 1994 passage of the federal Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act broadly stipulated that there be an “increase [in the] number of law enforcement officers interacting directly with members of the community”. However, in carrying out this policy, there were no specific terms for “interactions” or details on what constitutes reasonable expectation for said “increases” (Hill, 2003).

As Theodoulou & Kofinis (2004) affirm, such broad generalizations emphasize the lack of clarity of policy goals—one of the challenges of implementation.

Conjunctively, the authors cite information intelligence (or program evaluation) as another component for ensuring implementation outcomes effectively match policy goals. Without these two components of evaluation and concrete policy goals, policy implementation is open to broad interpretation. The consequent discretionary ability aligns with Lipsky’s portrayal of street-level bureaucrats’ roles, and as Theodoulou & Kofinis would concur, every form of public policy will inevitably see variations from the original intended policy goals as part of the discretionary process (Theodoulou & Kofinis, 2004). Policies do not act in static environments and exercising discretion to meet the changing political and administrative environments is necessary to sustain long-term effectiveness.

Majone and Wildavsky agree that little can be done in terms of discretion in the implementation process—it is a vital necessity in the execution of public policy (as cited in Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995). Implementation is an evolutionary process that expands on Lipsky’s view of power as reaction. Efficient public policies are abstract solutions that exist to control for as many contingencies as possible—“the more general the idea

and the more adaptable it is to a range of circumstances, the more likely it is to be realized...” (Theodoulou & Cahn, 1995, p. 149). Abstract policies are fluid and need discretion to reduce the broad public problems into something less ephemeral and manageable within a public service workers means and resources. Bovens & Zouridis agree that decision-making power helps street-level bureaucrats to constrain broad administrative procedures into concrete situations (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002).

However, Lipsky’s portrayal of street-level bureaucrats’ interpretive ability has almost no limitations—he argues it is due to the complacency of management oversight and the integrated discretionary capacity that such power is automatically built into the process. What power balance exists to counteract this discretionary power? According to Baum (As cited by Garn, 1999), accountability is a major challenge for public service workers—ensuring that implementation outcomes follow policy goals. Policy enactors hold two sources of power over implementers—the ability to investigate and publicize, which “allow legislators to embarrass an agency and its officials.” (Garn, 1999). Additionally, legislators can preserve the original policy intent by maintaining open communication with implementers, establishing limited financial resources that ensure other policy actors cannot interfere, ensuring implementers have aligned attitudes, and establishing a bureaucratic structure that fosters positive development of the statutes (Garn, 1999).

The traditional model of the policy implementation process is top-down—implementation is a function of policy setters. Lipsky contradicts this notion and advocates for a bottom-up approach in which implementers drive the process. Similar to the bottom-up model proposed by Theodelou & Kofinis, the actors directly

responsible for service delivery, have the most influence in directing policy intent (Theodelou & Kofinis, 2004). Street-level bureaucrats (the front-line workers) “determine the path which policies are implemented” and emphasize how they can bargain, accommodate or manipulate policies to their liking (Theodelou & Kofinis, 2004, p. 180).

Yet, Lipsky does not dismiss the role of policy setters. He implies that legislators have immense responsibility to make certain policies are well designed. Theodelou & Kofinis would agree that policy design sets the stage for good implementation (Theodelou & Kofinis, 2004). Good policy design that matches good implementation tools lends itself to effective policy. In addition, Hill makes a case for making sure the proper intellectual resources (trainings, knowledge, etc.) are available as well to bolster implementers’ capacity for success (Hill, 2003). Successful implementation does not necessarily preclude changes in statutory intent and Hill argues that a successful implementation process could be cyclical (Hill, 2003). Implementation changes could drive policy changes, instead of the traditional process of policy dictating implementation.

CONCLUSION

Implementation is often an afterthought in the policy making process, however, Lipsky’s book **Street Level Bureaucrats** underscores the tremendous power these stakeholders have in the development of policies. Lipsky argues that street-level bureaucrats have intimate knowledge of resources and a clearer understanding of their clients. Those resources coupled with strong discretionary capacity and interpretative ability, form the basis for stark influence on the intent of policies.

Though some of our class readings concur with Lipsky's assessment of implementers' influential power, Lipsky portrays this level of control as a burden. Discretion and interpretation are a reactionary consequence of the nature of the job and street-level bureaucrats change policy in order to manage their jobs and sustain their programs. Lipsky does little to explore the truly negative effects or possible positive outcomes for influence at the implementation level. I agree with Lipsky, that the nature of implementation lends itself to interpretation of policy to suit one's needs, however, he is pessimistic about this power and views change as undesirable. I view such implementation-level power as empowering, but it has great potential for abuse. In either respect, Lipsky's book is seminal in really being one of first to explore role of implementers in the policy making process.

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