Citation:

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**Abstract**

In *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, Michael Lipsky presents a theoretical framework for understanding the role public service workers play in policy implementation. Lipsky uses the term “street-level bureaucrats” to describe teachers, judges, police officers, health workers, social workers, public defenders and more. They provide benefits and sanction directly to citizens, possess common traits such as discretionary decision-making, and have relative autonomy from management. It is through their discretionary powers they are able to shape public policy on the spot. Their work conditions are inundated with clients and lack sufficient resources, which lead them to create unsanctioned coping mechanisms, tending to bias the policy intent. He exposes the difficulty of implementing public policy and the disconnect between intended legislative goals and actual policy outcomes.

In order to process large numbers of clients, street-level bureaucrats develop routines and simplifications to ration services and control clients. These coping tools manifest themselves in decisions which limit services. Through stereotyping, screening, and rubberstamping, they make access difficult, require clients to wait for services, and withhold information, all intended to decrease demand for services and make their jobs manageable. Through observations and interpretive accounts, Lipsky contends the actions and decisions of low-level public servants become the public policies they implement. The assessment critiques theories of implementation, generalizability, and degrees of discretion. Throughout Lipsky’s work, he does not attempt to distinguish how the use of discretion impacts different public service workers, leaving the reader to assume they all function in a similar paradigm.

**Key Concepts:**

- Street-level bureaucrats, through discretion and autonomy, are pivotal actors in shaping public policy.
- Street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms to deal with their work environment which inadvertently affects the intent of the policies they are tasked to implement.
- Street-level bureaucrats’ roles are dichotomized. They must follow a “rigid” script emphasizing organizational policies and goals, yet they are expected to be compassionate treating each client on a case-by-case basis (Lipsky, 2010)
- “The actions” of street-level bureaucrats “become, or add up to, agency policy, and effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky, 2010)
I. SUMMARY

Street-Level Bureaucrats: Role and Dimension in the Policy Arena

Panels of Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services by Michael Lipsky presents a theoretical framework for understanding the essential role public service workers play, transcending different government agencies, in the policy implementation process. Lipsky provides a comprehensive account of how public worker-citizen interactions create a wide variation in both benefits and sanctions received. He exposes the difficulty of implementing public policy and the disconnect between the legislature’s intended goals and eventual policy outcomes.

Front-line public service employees, who interact directly with citizens and capable of applying discretion, are defined as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010). These positions encompass teachers, police officers, judges, welfare workers, health workers, social workers, public defenders, etc. The commonality these workers share in their role as street-level bureaucrats goes beyond their positions as public servants. Such positions uniquely embody similar work conditions, allowing for discretionary decision-making, and their ability to provide benefits and allocate sanctions. Through their interactions with citizens, utilizing discretion, they have the capacity to shape public policy on the spot, which can directly impact the lives of citizens. Government agencies, whose workforce is comprised mainly of these types of employees, are considered street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 2010). It is not always the laws written by legislatures, rather the daily decisions of street-level bureaucrats through their interactions with clients, which become public policy.

Lipsky asserts that street-level bureaucrats are not only tasked with implementing public policy, they actually mold it as the pivotal actors in the delivery of public services. Judges
determine who gets probation and who goes to prison, teachers decide what students get special attention and “who is teachable”, and parole officers decide who gets sent back to prison and who gets a second chance (Lipsky, 2010). The nature of their work requires flexibility because unique situations arise, necessitating quick decision-making based on limited information. Their roles are dichotomized; management requires them to follow a “rigid” script emphasizing organizational policies and goals, yet simultaneously, they are expected to be compassionate treating each client on a case-by-case basis (Lipsky, 2010). Along with exhibiting discretion, street level bureaucrats also have a degree of autonomy from the demands of management due to the nature of their work. Ultimately, their decisions have the ability to alter or skew the policy intent.

**Street-Level Bureaucrats: Nature of the Work and Coping Mechanisms**

Most front-line bureaucrats enter government out of a measure of public spiritedness. Once inside the system however, the work environment is overwhelming and “conditions the way they perceive problems and frame solutions,” where common conditions “give rise to common patterns of practice” (Lipsky, 2010). They create shortcuts – unsanctioned coping mechanisms – to help compensate for a never-ending demand for services, elusive organizational goals, deficient resources, and work related stress. In order to mask the inequities of their work and validate their decisions, they develop perceptions of their jobs, their clients, and themselves. Consequently they “develop patterns of practice that tend to limit demand [and] maximize the utilization of available resources” (Lipsky, 2010). They work in constant discord, expected to work with clients in a compassionate manner yet the services are delivered through a detached bureaucracy, which lacks empathy and has limited resources. Lipsky claims that through routinization and simplification of client processing, street-level bureaucrats ration services and
control clients by imposing costs and client differentiation. (Lipsky, 2010). These adaptations manifest themselves in decisions, which limit services to those they deem favorable and/or restrict services to those they deem problematic or disruptive, thereby interfering with legislative intent. These dynamics reflect the relationship of power between street-level bureaucrats who have control over resources and citizens who seek them.

Coping mechanisms, such as imposing costs on clients, are intended to limit demand and depress client participation. They take on many forms, such as making access difficult, waiting for services, and withholding information. If a social worker finds a client likable, he/she may provide “privileged” information so the client can manipulate the system and avoid all the red tape, whereas another client may not receive the same information (Lipsky, 2010). Another way costs are imposed is by “queuing,” which operates on a first come, first served basis. Although it is viewed as a “fair” approach, it requires clients to wait, therefore limiting services to only those who can afford to do so (Lipsky, 2010).

Street-level bureaucrats further ration services by differentiating among clients. As a result, clients are mass processed through stereotyping, screening, and rubberstamping. Lipsky argues stereotyping categorizes the client population and is a tool allowing differentiation of potential clients. This enables public service workers to simplify their tasks, reduce the pool of clients to a manageable size, and offer the illusion that the public policy in question is being effectively implemented (Lipsky, 2010). Additionally, labeling clients permits street-level bureaucrats to condition their response by the stereotype rather than neutrality. “Thus the ‘troublemaker’ in school, the ‘drunk’ in the emergency room, and the ‘rotten apple’ in juvenile court” receive treatment meted out by street-level bureaucrats conditioned not by the objective circumstances of the client, but by the pejorative label attached (Lipsky, 2010).
“Creaming” is another technique street-level bureaucrats use to ration services. To establish organizational credibility, they assist those they deem the likeliest to succeed. Although they are charged with equal treatment of clients, employment counselors, for example, will send those considered most hirable to job interviews while disregarding more marginalized clients (Lipsky, 2010). The process of client differentiation allows street-level bureaucrats to maintain for a subset of the clientele a level of performance in line with the job ideal, thereby rationalizing work contradictions. In an attempt to bridge the gap between public expectation and management’s drive to achieve organizational goals, front-line bureaucrats’ use of routines and simplifications “nonetheless add up to street-level policy,” with which clients must contend (Lipsky, 2010).

Street Level Bureaucrats: Discretion and Accountability

Discretion is a necessary evil for street-level bureaucrats. It is the aspect of their work that makes it hard to hold them accountable and difficult to manage. If they did not have discretionary power, it would eliminate unsanctioned responses and their ability to shape public policy. Lipsky contends that bureaucracies require that all clients shall receive equal treatment; however, the ability of street-level bureaucrats to apply discretion may elicit inequitable results (Lipsky, 2010).

In Lipsky’s 30th Anniversary Edition he reveals the necessity to evaluate service delivery and increase accountability among front-line workers. The onus here rests with management and their ability to align the actions of street-level bureaucrats to intended legislative policy outcomes. A solution offered by Lipsky is to “narrow” the scope of the front-line workers role by limiting their ability to intercede for clients, leading to greater accountability toward legislative intent by reducing their autonomy and discretionary powers. This was accomplished in the
welfare department by “converting the job of a social worker from counselor to greater emphasis on the clerical” (Lipsky, 2010). Since the 1980’s, government’s role in providing direct services has diminished, a void filled by non-profit organizations. The resulting implications of governance now revolve around issues of accountability for these contractors. As budgetary constraints impact services to clients, government will need to embrace the use of information technology to facilitate oversight and client processing, enabling public services to be more efficient and effective (Lipsky, 2010).

Lipsky’s work has been a major contribution to the study of public policy. Embedded in qualitative analysis and observations, demonstrated through examples and stories, his theoretical framework is supported by significant evidence assessing the complex roles of front-line public service workers and their ability to shape public policy. Lipsky’s book lacked empirical research applying his theory, although he did use empirical examples and secondary literature to illustrate his argument (Winter, 2002). His work summarizes the dilemmas of street-level bureaucrats and their necessity for grappling with unique situations, resulting in decisive “actions [that] become, or add up to, agency policy, and effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky, 2010).

II. ASSESSMENT

Michael Lipsky presents a compelling critique of the role street-level bureaucrats play shaping public policy. On a daily basis numerous citizens are directly impacted by the decisions made by public service workers, some adversely, some beneficial. The premise of Lipsky’s work, “Street-Level Bureaucracy,” is based on the sole facet of the implementation of public policy. Lipsky builds his theoretical framework based on the assumption that “public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high ranking administrators,” rather,
public policy is best studied in the “crowded offices and daily encounters of street level workers” (Lipsky, p. xiii). His theories are based on policies that are distributive in nature, that is to say implicitly, benefits and sanctions (Anderson, 2011).

Policy implementation occurs in challenging and ambiguous environments. The disconnect between the intent of the policy as foreseen by lawmakers and those charged with its implementation is a reaction to the “broad and ambiguous statutory mandates” and the need for “flexibility in implementation” (Anderson, 2011). Lipksy’s work does little to remedy this condition. He concludes that performance measurements, clear objectives, and management’s ability to “narrow” the scope of the street-level bureaucrats’ positions could alleviate this, yet he stresses difficulty of these actions due to street-level bureaucrats’ interpretive ability, discretionary authority implementing public policy, and lack of accountability.

Public policy that contains interpretive language, ambiguous goals, and discretion in its implementation, always holds the possibility that subversion of policy intent will take place regardless of the sector of government. According to Anderson (2011), “Congress usually does not attempt to define fully the intended impact of a law nor try to anticipate all of the problems and situations that may be encountered in its implementation”. Legislation is often a compromise of political foes filled with “ambiguous language” and “contradictory goals” (Matland, 1995). Anderson’s and Matland’s examples echo Lipsky’s claims by identifying the situations street-level bureaucrats’ face when implementing policy.

Another noteworthy application to remedy this problem would be a policy evaluation. This process would allow law makers and administrators to determine whether the policy was filling its intended mission as it allows for “accountability to be measured empirically” (Theodoulou & Kofins, 2001). Theodoulou & Kofins (2001) confer with Lipsky, noting, “the first
factor that clearly causes problems in any evaluation is ambiguity in the specification of the objectives and goals of the policy”. Additionally, they contend “vagaries of implementation” and “unclear or incompatible goals” are reasons why policies eventually fail (Theodoulou & Kofins, 2004). Unfortunately, if the aforementioned conditions exist, policy evaluation will be difficult to conduct, and may yield erroneous results.

**Generalizability**

Lipsky sets narrow parameters of who qualifies as a street-level bureaucrat. The term only applies to public service workers with discretionary power, relative autonomy from management, whose decision over public benefits and sanctions can shape public policy (Lipsky, 2010). Although this is the case, his assumptions are still found across all branches of government today, as his theoretical framework transcends to federal, state, and local governments. A noteworthy critique of Lipsky’s assumptions would be in his lack of gradation of discretion and public service worker’s accountability to job-related decisions. Decisions made by a district attorney, public defender, or a judge are all public record, recorded in court minutes, which may limit or impact how they use their discretion. Judges adjudicate cases and hand down sentences, district attorney’s offer plea bargains and dismiss cases, and public defenders file motions on their clients’ behalf. Adversely, a police officer can look the other way and not be held to account. Is the discretion of a social worker the same as a district attorney? Lipsky makes no attempt to rate the degrees of discretion amongst public service workers leaving the reader to assume they all function in a similar paradigm.

Two recent examples of street-level bureaucrats shaping public policy at the implementation level concerned the current IRS controversy and the case of ten year old Sarah Murnaghan, who from complications with cystic fibrosis needed a lung transplant. In the IRS
situation, it has been reported that conservative groups were discriminated against while filing their 501(c) 4’s. Low-level IRS workers actively targeted applications with the words “tea party” and “patriot,” a vivid example of Lipsky’s argument. This form of “stereotyping” is implicit in Lipsky’s work. Secondly, in the case of Sarah Murnaghan, in June 2013, after Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius wouldn’t intervene and sign a waiver to the law that only allows children twelve and over to receive an adult lung transplant, U.S. District Judge Michael Baylson ordered Sebelius to put the ten year old dying girl on the adult transplant list. A few days later she received a new pair of lungs (Huffington Post, Reuters).

I agree with Lipsky’s theoretical framework on the basis of his definition. On one level it is generalizable across sectors, on the front-lines, where public worker-citizen interaction takes place. Under Lipsky’s criteria, his principles do not hold true to upper levels of government. Although Lipsky does not assess the role of contract service providers, it would hold true that front-line service providers in those organizations would meet his criteria.

**Policy Implementation Theorists**

Two competing theories have defined public policy implementation: top-down and bottom-up. Top-downers focus on policy architects who examine issues that are centrally directed, while bottom-uppers analyze those on the front-lines who deliver services locally. The critique of top-down theorists is their focus on the designers of policy as the critical actors (Matland, 1995; Anderson, 2011). Sabitier (1986) argues that the flaws inherent in the top-down model is that it fails to embrace strategies used by street-level bureaucrats to subvert policy and divert it to reflect their own interest. Lipsky’s assumptions regarding the role of street-level bureaucrats are based on the bottom-up model of policy implementation. His critique and evidence support his claim that the actions of these front-line workers “become, or add up to
agency policy” deriving “their actions effectively become the public policies they carry out” (Lipsky, 2010). Rowe (2012) contends that studying policy from the street-level defines the policy and policy failure. Additionally, it is critical to understand how written laws, coupled with budgetary constraints, and mass processing of clients shape the actions of street-level bureaucrats. The bottom-up model suffers however from a democratic deficit, as decision making should reflect as closely as possible to the will of the voters through legislation drafted by their elected officials (Matland, 1995). Ideally policy makers should heed advice from those who deliver the services in order to gain a better understanding of the impact of ambiguous language, the difficulty measuring performance, and the challenging environment in which street-level bureaucrats work. It’s problematic that implementation studies from top-down theorists direct little interests to the coping mechanisms of street-level bureaucrats (Winter, 2002). If they would it may lead to a comprehensive understanding and well-defined public policy.

Reflections

In 1980 Lipsky set out to understand how front-line workers experience their work. His observations set in motion a new way to study policy implementation and uncovered the influence street-level bureaucrats have in their ability to grant access to government programs and allocate sanctions. In Lipsky’s 30th Anniversary Edition he does little to add to his original critique of policy implementation and accountability at the street-level. A critique of the new age of information technology’s role in accountability, the expanded role of public sector unions, or the vast government contractors providing services in lieu of government, could have added to a further comprehensive analysis of the challenging environment providing public services.
References


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