Review: Reflections on Street-Level Bureaucracy: Past, Present, and Future

Reviewed Work(s): Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services, 30th anniversary expanded ed. by Michael Lipsky

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donor–grantee relationship is both critically impor- tant and easily abused" (3).

On one hand, we may say that throughout the book, Tierney and Fleishman act as indirect advocates of the nonprofit sector, helping reduce potential dam- age inflicted by careless philanthropy. On the other hand, the book underscores the authors' concern with achieving real outcomes, as they keep reminding their readers that at the end of the day, the effectiveness of giving is dependent on the work that nonprofits do on the ground.

While Tierney and Fleishman make it clear that their book is not intended for academia, it could be an inter- esting complementary reading in courses on philan- thropy, even more so as the authors share their practical advice online (http://givesmart.org). Their Web site is structured according to the six questions and offers an accessible way to quickly browse through the myriad case studies and examples used in the book, but also additional ones. An added advantage of the Web site as a tool for the classroom is its blog feature, which allows the authors to take the discussion beyond the temporal limits of the book and gives others, including students, a chance to join in by submitting comments.

Writing in 2002 on the state of institutional philan- thropy, Leslie Lenkowsky pointed out donor activism as the new direction of giving, and today, *Give Smart* captures this development in the authors' choice of target audience. It may be, however, one of the relative weaknesses of the book that Tierney and Fleishman apply the framework of six-level inquiry to both the ultra-wealthy individuals in direct philanthropic engagement as well as foundation officers in such a seamless way that the resulting synergy between deep personal engagement and attitudes of discipline might

be more demanding in reality than the authors are willing to admit.

Another potential weakness stems from the limits of the book as a primer, a genre that is mainly designed to provide a basic overview of a highly complex area. As a result, some of the concepts addressed in the book, such as "theory of change," "scaling up" or "measurement of nonprofit activity," would certainly deserve more detailed explanation.

By way of conclusion, it is perhaps worth noting that many of the successful projects highlighted in the book are the work of philanthropists whose names appear on the Giving Pledge. This may be reassur- ing for the future prospects of philanthropy, but at the same time, it also brings to light the importance of books such as *Give Smart* that do not pretend that examples of effective giving are the work of a magic wand. Instead, striving to help philanthropists overcome mediocrity by making a direct link between high-impact performance and engaged philanthropy, *Give Smart* underscores the fact that any extraordi- nary boom in philanthropy will require the same exceptional hard work and personal commitment of individual donors, trustees, and program officers to produce results that count.

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Reflections on Street-Level Bureaucracy: Past, Present, and Future

Michael Lipsky, Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilem- mas of the Individual in Public Services, *30th anniversary expanded ed. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2010). 300 pp. $18.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780871545442; $28.95 (eBook), ISBN: 9781610446631.*

It is rare but noteworthy when a term so captures a phenomenon that it seems both instantly familiar and equally intriguing. Since Michael Lipsky's book was published some 30 years ago, the term "street-level bureaucracy" has been incorporated into the language of organizational and policy research

and become a subject of broad scholarly interest. The publication of the thirtieth anniversary edition provides a welcome opportunity to reflect on this book, taking stock of the wide-ranging areas of scholarship that it has informed and considering its relevance to contemporary concerns.

Like other iconic concepts, "street-level bureaucracy" is a deceptively simple term, a handy label for the public agencies that we think we know so well. Around the world, it conjures up images, often unflattering, of prototypical bureaucracies. They include those relentlessly routinized people-processing agencies that represent the authority of the state and invite caricatures of *le guichet* (the individual behind the counter) or the officious clerk with the green eyeshades. The term also encompasses the more ambivalent protagonists of the modern state—the social service workers, counselors, police, and educators whose interventions into people's personal lives may be appreciated or reviled and who, at times, become the targets of simmering resentment. It is the varied interactions between private individuals and the purveyors of public authority that make the work of street-level bureaucrats so politically fraught, at once potentially helpful and potentially alienating.

When bureaucracies "go bad," there is a tendency to see them as uncontrollable and subject to random acts of noncompliant behavior. Lipsky complicated this picture. He saw that disparate types of public service organizations had common characteristics and that those characteristics systematically shaped much of what they did and how they did it. He also recognized that street-level work is deeply conflicted, confronting its practitioners with, as he put it, "the dilemmas of the individual in public services." These insights provided the foundation for a theory of street-level bureaucracy. The theory provided a template for empirical investigation that offered not only an analytic payoff, but also a practical one. If one could identify what made street-level organizations tick, it seemed to follow that one could do a better job of managing them and, in the process, build the capacity of the state to deliver on its policy promises.

Street-Level Bureaucracy was especially timely in bringing a growing literature on bureaucratic discretion (Handler and Hollingsworth 1971; Kaufman 1960; Wilson 1967) into direct conversation with an emerging literature on policy implementation (Derthick 1972; Ingram 1977; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973). Lipsky introduced a new melody into the dominant chorus of research, which tended to portray public bureaucrats as villains, resistant to managerial and political control and at fault for frustrating policy goals. To be sure, Lipsky's depiction of street-level bureaucracies reiterated many of the familiar characteristics that so aggravate policy makers and the

public and that have turned the Weberian concept of bureaucracy into a negatively loaded meme of American politics. But anyone who has seriously engaged with this book quickly sees that Lipsky's project had far broader and more important aims than to reiterate well-worn stereotypes.

In a sense, he adopted the term "street-level bureaucracy" as a way to reclaim it from these stereotypes or, at least, to deconstruct it and then reconstruct it with a new, and arguably more sympathetic, meaning. This theme of reclamation offered a counterpoint to an antigovernment symphony that has only increased in volume over the years. Although Lipsky's deep appreciation for those who provide public services may be less explicit in the original volume than it is in his new chapter, close readers will see that it was there all along.

Drawing on Murray Edelman's (1964) profound understanding of the symbolic uses of administration, Lipsky challenged the well-worn symbolism of bureaucracy. He argued that common depictions of public bureaucracies were problematic in at least two key respects. Analytically, they failed to take account of the daily struggle that so many public service workers engaged in to perform their jobs well and, in the process, to do good for their communities and society. Politically, distorted portrayals emphasizing bureaucratic malfeasance fed an antigovernment narrative that threatened to undo the social policy achievements of the New Deal, civil rights movement, War on Poverty, Great Society, and beyond. It is this last concern that Lipsky takes on even more directly in the 2010 addition to the book and in other work (Lipsky, forthcoming).

In *Street-Level Bureaucracy,* Lipsky advanced two significant projects that responded to the limitations that he had identified in the literature. One was an analytical project directed at examining street-level bureaucracies and how they work. He challenged analysts, deeply accustomed to thinking hierarchically about bureaucracy and focused on "gaps" and "compliance," to move beyond these conventional modes of thinking. His novel approach launched a still-ongoing debate about so-called bottom-up and top-down views of policy implementation. In my view, this debate is less relevant to scholarship than the more fundamental question that the book addresses, that is, how to understand complex organizational behavior.

The book's second project is one that I regard as a project of improvement. At one level, it aimed to redeem public bureaucracies by unburdening them of negative stereotyping. It created an analytic framework that contextualized and made more transparent their struggles to do good work. This perspective allowed for the possibility that the fault for problematic practices

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lay not entirely with the bureaucrats themselves but with the structural conditions they faced.

At another level, the project of improvement anticipated using the lessons of street-level research to devise managerial strategies that would enable agencies doing the public's business to do a better job. If realized, this project could yield both practical and political benefits. The implicit logic (simply put) was this: if applied street-level analysis improved the performance of public agencies, better performance would bolster political support for government's social welfare functions and, subsequently, lead to greater investment that could build government's capacity to perform those functions. The project of improvement, in short, envisioned a positive feedback loop that could contribute to building a more just and capable state. In an important addendum to the original book, Lipsky now spells out these larger ambitions in a new chapter.

Taking stock of these two projects—the analytic project and the project of improvement—some 30 years out is both an exciting and a daunting proposition. It comes with an appreciation that it is risky, indeed unfair, to reduce an ambitious and complex book—and the scholarship it advanced—to a neat assortment of discrete parts. Nor is it feasible, given the limited space and scope of this article, to attempt a comprehensive assessment and literature review. My more modest aim is to reflect on how the field of street-level research has matured since the book's original publication, highlighting several areas of significant interest and leaving the remainder for another day and, perhaps, for other scholars.

Street-Level Bureaucracy as an Analytic Project

Although bureaucracy research has long been a staple of traditional scholarship in public administration, with *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, Lipsky took it in a new direction, bringing it into conversation with contemporary questions of interest in public policy and political science. It seems appropriate to begin by briefly reflecting on what made the street-level project so innovative.

Several core propositions, which will be familiar to scholars in the field, constituted the building blocks of the street-level analytic project. First, under certain conditions, policy should be understood not as a fixed construct, but as an indeterminate one. Those conditions are present when formal policy is ambiguous or contains multiple (even conflicting) objectives and when street-level practitioners are able to exercise discretion in the course of their work. Second, under these conditions, the discretionary actions of street-level practitioners become, in effect, policy. Third, discretion is of interest not when it is random,

but when it is structured by factors that influence informal behaviors to develop in systematic ways. It is these systematic, informal behaviors that impart specific practical meaning to policy-as-produced. Fourth, street-level bureaucracies occupy a position of political significance, not only because they operate as de facto interpreters of public policy, but also because they operate as the interface between government and the individual. Although what they do matters most directly for policy delivery, it also has importance for the relationship between citizens and the state.

For the emerging field of implementation research, still in its infancy in 1980, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* constituted a challenge to conventional modes of analysis. Implementation studies had begun to demonstrate all of the things that could go wrong in the process of producing policy on the ground. But they were situated in a normative logic that assumed that the analyst could impute clear policy goals and the operational steps needed to achieve them. Based on these imputations, the analyst could then identify departures from the "prescribed" implementation path. But what if one abandoned the normatively appealing idea that formal policies necessarily had clear, knowable, and operationalizable goals? This idea had become increasingly indefensible in the face of both theoretical and empirical evidence demonstrating that American policy making required compromise, making clarity and coherence unlikely, especially in politically contested areas of social policy. If one could not (or should not) impose a veneer of clarity on policies that actually had multiple and often conflicting goals (or somehow require that policy makers offer more policy clarity), then how could implementation analysis proceed? What exactly were those organizations implementing policy *supposed* to do?

In addition, a large body of bureaucracy research made evident the futility of assuming that discretion could be controlled or simply stamped out by more clever management strategies. Yet "control" had remained central to hierarchical approaches to policy implementation. Street-level theory offered a different perspective. It recognized that discretion was necessary to policy work involving judgment and responsiveness to individual circumstances (as in teaching, policing, and counseling). One might call these *authorized* uses of discretion. But the theory also allowed that discretion could be used in *unauthorized* ways. Although formal policy terms and managerial strategies surely mattered, they could not fully determine what happened at the front lines of policy delivery.

Lipsky's innovative approach effectively liberated analysis from reifying formal policy as coherent and consistent and from treating discretion as potentially controllable. Rather than sticking to unsustainable assumptions about policy clarity and managerial

control, Lipsky abandoned them. It would be a mischaracterization to take the street-level model to indicate that formal policy is irrelevant, that discretion cannot be influenced, or that discretion is necessarily at odds with effective policy implementation. Lipsky's theory was never that simplistic. Quite the contrary, it complicated policy analysis by treating complex organizational behaviors as part and parcel of the policy-making process, not separate from it.

The street-level perspective virtually flipped the script of conventional policy research, focusing not on what formal policy seemed to require, but on what organizations actually did in the name of policy. One central concern was to interrogate discretion in order to understand the factors that shaped its exercise *in patterned ways*. Informal patterns of practices assumed greater interest than random acts of discretion because patterns of practice structured bureaucratic interactions in systematic ways, creating systematic consequences for the distribution and content of policy-as-produced.

A major and, perhaps, underappreciated innovation of the street-level project is that it sought to understand street-level work from the *inside out*. It began not with what others (e.g., managers or policy makers) wanted from frontline practitioners, but with an effort to investigate the realities of work for those directly engaged in policy delivery at the front lines. It recognized that these realities influenced discretion, often in unexpected (and unseen) ways. If one could understand the logic of street-level work *as practitioners experienced it*, it would be possible to understand, and potentially predict, how changes in the work environment could alter their practices and thus affect what they produced as policy through their informal routines.

Street-level theory has provided fertile ground for scholarly studies that extend across several fields and disciplines. In this article, I briefly highlight two major areas—policy-focused and management studies—in which the street-level approach has introduced new questions, insights, and understanding. I also take note of a few emerging areas of study that are not yet as well developed but show promise for the next stages of the street-level analytic project. Although I will discuss these research areas separately, it will be fairly obvious that in many instances, they overlap and inform one another. It also should be obvious that this brief discussion can only scratch the surface of a broad and diverse literature. It necessarily takes up selected areas of research and omits other, equally valuable ones.

Policy-Focused Studies
The street-level approach to policy research has proved remarkably generative. There is now a corpus of studies that investigates how public policies are shaped by

street-level practices in areas as diverse as child welfare, education, prison reform, health care, workplace safety, workforce development, welfare, juvenile justice, corrections, and more. Individually, these studies show that what you see (in terms of formal policy) may not be what you get (in terms of policy-as-produced). More importantly, these studies analyze *what* you actually get as policy and *how* you get it. By documenting the complex matrix of street-level practices, these studies are able to fill in the blanks between nominal policy activities (e.g., assessments, counseling sessions, family interventions) and outcomes, illuminating what occurs under these programmatic labels—often not what one might imagine.

Beyond their individual, policy-specific contributions, these studies, collectively, have tested, refined, and expanded on the theoretical template that Lipsky first elaborated. There is now a fairly substantial base of empirical evidence on factors that shape street-level practice and the types of adaptations that develop under certain conditions. As the body of policy studies has grown and the field has matured, it has begun to reveal recurrent themes that crosscut individual policy areas and concerns. I highlight a few of them here but note that these themes have yet to be fully identified and explored, suggesting a possible research agenda for the next stage of this field's development.

As a matter of theory testing, street-level studies have provided empirical confirmation that the types of coping strategies that Lipsky identified are both prevalent and plentiful. They document varieties of off-the books strategies that street-level practitioners deploy to manage their work lives in a context in which resources are rarely adequate to the demands of the job. This literature shows not only that resources matter, but also, more importantly, *how* they matter. Studies examining the everyday practices of caseworkers in a variety of policy areas demonstrate that resource limitations may virtually overdetermine the development of informal practices, with the effect of robbing services of their substantive value and skewing the distribution of benefits.

In addition, just as the street-level model would predict, when caseworkers lack sufficient resources to be fully responsive to individual needs or to address complex (and time-consuming) dimensions of their work, they develop varieties of "coping mechanisms" that indirectly but significantly shape policy on the ground. The literature is replete with examples. To name only a few, there are the domestic violence caseworkers who avoid learning about service needs that they find difficult to address (Lindhorst and Padgett 2005), disability assessors who reduce complex individual situations to nominal box ticking (Gulland 2011), and child welfare workers responsible for family reunification who circumvent essential but

time-consuming engagement with parents (Smith and Donovan 2003).

Studies also show how street-level practitioners rationalize problematic practices, for example, blaming parents for not pursuing unresponsive child welfare caseworkers or faulting domestic violence victims for reticence in revealing intimate life experiences (Lindhorst and Padgett 2005; Smith and Donovan 2003). This bureaucratic-style victim blaming, like other informal practices documented in policy studies, reveals a logic of street-level work that is simultaneously rational (enabling practitioners to manage their jobs with the limited resources they have) and, at times, even functional for the organization. It is functional, if not desirable, to the extent that these practices help limit and de-legitimate the expression of individual service needs and demands. But there is a flip side to patterns of practice that may be individually or organizationally functional. They may be dysfunctional in terms of policy responsiveness and efficacy. To offer a single, simple example: protection against domestic violence cannot be secured if street-level practices discourage individuals from revealing it.

Cumulatively, policy-focused studies have deepened understanding of what happens to policy ideas when practitioners are confronted by the dilemmas of street-level work, most notably, by conditions in which resources are unequal to the demands of "good" work. These studies reveal that "doing more with less" in the name of efficiency may have hidden, deleterious effects for other important dimensions of policy delivery.

One of the striking things about the growing body of policy-focused studies is that they rarely, with only some exceptions, indicate opposition or resistance to policy aims, at least as street-level practitioners understand them. Even when practitioners favor policy ideas—or at least do not object to them—they may simply find policies that envision deeply engaged and responsive modes of practice incompatible with the realities of their work lives (Lindhorst and Padgett 2005; Meyers, Glaser, and MacDonald 1998; Smith and Donovan 2003). As one domestic violence caseworker explained, she was concerned that her clients might suffer abuse, but "you just don't have time to pull [domestic violence] out of somebody, unless they come here with visible observations [bruises], which doesn't happen often" (Lindhorst and Padgett 2005, 423). Variants on these themes are prevalent throughout the street-level literature.

Such findings are of interest beyond the specific policies under study. As an analytical matter, they suggest that practices that appear "deviant" or "subversive" from a principal–agent perspective may have little to do with practitioners' personal policy preferences

or fealty to organizational hierarchy, but are better understood as adaptations to conditions of work. These studies also point to the limitations of seeking to explain street-level behavior as a consequence of individual-level phenomena (e.g., preferences, training, and so forth) without accounting for organizational conditions that affect what individuals *can* do and *are likely* to do under certain conditions.

The ways in which conditions press down on frontline practitioners are central to the street-level project. At times, their influence may be revealed indirectly, for example, when practitioners recount the heroic efforts that they occasionally make to "bend the rules" in responding to the needs of selected individuals (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). If responsiveness is the exception, what are the organizational conditions that make heroic efforts necessary? In these instances, the proverbial exception may indeed prove the rule. Questions concerning the organizational conditions that shape policy work clearly have animated policy studies. More recently, they have been taken up in emerging areas of management and governance research.

Management and Governance Studies

In the three decades since Lipsky's original book was published, the world that gave rise to street-level bureaucracies has been transformed. The public sector no longer dominates policy delivery as it once did. Contracting and privatization have reshaped the organizational landscape, creating new, mixed forms of provision and complex delivery arrangements. Today, policy delivery occurs not only through public bureaucracies, but also through nonprofit organizations, for-profit firms, and mixed public–private arrangements.

To some extent, these changes have taken place under the rubric of New Public Management, which is premised on advancing market-like approaches to policy delivery. In this new environment, the "old" public sector bureaucracies not only are managed, but also they are the managers, contracting out and overseeing policy delivery in its many complex forms. In this new managerial world, direct provision—and street-level discretion—are subject to different influences, shaped by changing organizational forms and evolving managerial strategies. In light of this transformation, it is not only "street-level bureaucracies" that are of interest, but also the broader array of what I call "street-level organizations" that now are engaged in policy delivery.

The street-level perspective has contributed to understanding changes in governance and management, exploring the mechanisms through which they alter organizational practices, particularly how they change conditions of work and to what effect. Street-level

studies have taken management research well beyond questions of efficiency or control and have brought a critical perspective to bear on consideration of issues such as "performance" and "accountability."

One line of management research has explored contracting as a method of policy delivery. The street-level repercussions of contracting that studies have begun to reveal challenge the notion that private forms of provision are necessarily better than public ones. They show that, whether in public agencies or private ones, street-level practitioners retain discretion to adapt to their environment. The challenge is to determine precisely *how* contract arrangements affect the conditions under which discretion takes place.

One study of contracting in Australian workforce programs, for example, found that contract agencies appeared to perform well according to measured administrative criteria. But it also found that informal patterns of practice, influenced in part by contract terms, introduced inequality and left the most disadvantaged populations the least well served (Considine 2000). Discussing how contract structures influence informal practice, Considine observed that "[t]he reliance upon short-term financial incentives leads agencies to find innovative ways to maximize a very low-cost form of intervention and to ignore other policy values. . . . which do not carry a direct monetary benefit" (2000, 292). This finding is hardly unique to this single case, as other empirical studies in diverse policy domains have produced similar conclusions.

In a second line of management research, studies have closely examined street-level responses to management by performance measurement. As the search for ways to manage street-level organizations has advanced in the past few decades, arguably few strategies have expanded as dramatically as the use of performance measurement. Despite Lipsky's cautionary (and I think wise) comments in the original book, suggesting that performance in social services may be too complex to reduce to quantifiable measures, the practice of managing by performance measurement has become virtually ubiquitous. It is deployed in policies ranging from education, health, and welfare to child protection and policing.

Street-level research has made a distinctive contribution to a growing literature on this phenomenon by investigating the mechanisms through which performance measurement penetrates street-level practice. Studies in this field indicate that performance measurement creates powerful inducements to focus on measured dimensions of work. But when time and resources are limited, attention to unmeasured aspects of performance, even critical ones, are likely to be displaced. Studies adopting a street-level perspective

have begun to reveal varieties of ways in which practitioners use their discretion to adapt to performance incentives. These complex adaptations lead to informal patterns of practice that can reshape policy delivery, albeit in ways that are not readily visible and, certainly, are not made transparent through the performance metrics themselves.

A developing theme in these studies is that managerial demands for efficiency, coupled with perpetual surveillance of performance metrics, are bearing down hard on street-level practitioners. Studies have shown how the discretion that is essential to responsiveness may be squeezed out, reducing opportunities for staff to respond to client needs as they understand them (Brodkin 2011; Jewell 2007; Lindhorst and Padgett 2005; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). In short, they suggest that the dilemmas that Lipsky first identified three decades ago have intensified.

The power of performance measurement is, perhaps, most readily illuminated in those rare moments of resistance to their strictures. One case study of a contracted welfare-to-work agency (Dias and Maynard-Moody 2007) presents a fascinating account of resistance and, ultimately, defeat as caseworkers try to fight back against management's reductionist approach to "services." In this battle, there are signs of opposition to management strictures that border on what Lipsky (referencing Lisa Dodson) refers to as the "moral underground." But in this and other studies, it is striking how little power lower-level practitioners appear to have to shape practices to fit their own personal conceptions of policy, at least to the extent that those conceptions prioritize responsiveness to need. Yes, discretion provides possibilities for resistance to the rules and managerial pressures. But resource constraints, coupled with unrelenting demands to meet performance measures, limit how staff can use their discretion to exploit these possibilities.

These and other studies suggest that if there is an "implementation game" (Bardach 1977), managers may be gaining the upper hand. This is not because they can *control* lower-level discretion, but because they have new and more powerful tools through which they can *influence* its exercise. Conceivably, these tools could be used in constructive ways (some of which Lipsky discusses). However, the empirical literature suggests that the ways they are used may be badly out of balance, too often favoring efficiency at the cost of responsiveness, quality, and even efficacy.

As an analytical matter, street-level studies virtually up-end the classic management *control* versus street-level *autonomy* dichotomy. They show that management's advantages stem less from authority than from opportunities to alter the conditions of street-level work. As Lipsky explains, there is neither

control nor autonomy, but a complex dialectic. For those who might misunderstand his theory to indicate street-level autonomy, a growing body of management studies clarifies that discretion operates within limited degrees of freedom, embedded in organizational context that shapes the possibilities for its use.

This is not to say that other factors do not matter. Studies that focus on the individual preferences or the moral reasoning of street-level bureaucrats usefully illuminate variations in the choice set among different types of practitioners, for example, professionals versus nonprofessionals (Hasenfeld and Garrow 2012; Sandfort 2000; Tummers et al., forthcoming). However, a major contribution of street-level management research is that it also reveals how organizational conditions—and management strategies—affect the probabilities for individuals to act on those preferences or values. They do this indirectly, in effect, by altering the costs and benefits of different modes of action and, thereby, changing what I have called the implicit logic of street-level work. To paraphrase an argument made elsewhere: street-level bureaucrats do not necessarily do what they want, they do what they can (Brodkin 1997).

Emerging Fields of Study
The importance of street-level bureaucracies to the "making" of public policy is now widely recognized. They form the operational core of the state, yet they are more than mere functionaries. Located at the intersection of individuals and the state, these organizations mediate not only the formation of policy, but also broader social and political dynamics (Brodkin, forthcoming). Emerging sociopolitical studies are expanding the range of analytic vision to explore "what else" these organizations do beyond their instrumental function in policy delivery.

One line of research has examined the distributive functions of informal street-level practices, exploring how they influence the possibilities for accessing services and benefits. These studies show that street-level bureaucracies produce disparities in provision, even to the point of excluding access for some populations, especially those that are least well equipped to navigate the barriers of bureaucratic "red tape" and confusing or complex agency processes (Brodkin and Majmundar 2010; Monnat 2011; Moynihan and Herd 2010; Riccucci 2005; Wenger and Wilkins 2009). Other research on administrative disparities is stretching the boundaries of the street-level model to examine whether political control of government's administrative apparatus may be linked to hidden distributive effects (Keiser 1999, 2001; May and Winter 2009). To the extent that these findings indicate a relationship, they raise questions about precisely how this relationship is forged, pointing to the potential for new lines of inquiry investigating the mechanisms

through which politics may penetrate aspects of street-level practice.

Another emerging field of study that is stretching the boundaries of street-level research explores how organizations mediate social status and identities. Studies in this area have demonstrated a turn toward organizational ethnographic research in street-level research. The ethnographic turn takes its inspiration, in part, from the street-level project's implicit encouragement to researchers to get out from behind their desks in order to investigate and even *experience* the realities of everyday organizational life.

Researchers have used these methods to illuminate how racial and gender identities shape street-level interactions and how social status is negotiated in street-level interactions (Korteweg 2003; Morgen 2001; Rosenthal and Pecci 2006; Watkins-Hayes 2011). These studies demonstrate that street-level exchanges may be understood as part of a broader political dynamic of status construction (and reconstruction). Korteweg, for example, examines the dialogues that occur in welfare-to-work programs in order to illuminate how the status of motherhood is constructed through street-level interactions. She probes exchanges in which women raise concerns about trade-offs between parenting and work responsibility and caseworkers dismiss them or (more incredibly) advise single mothers that "work will make your lives easier" (Korteweg 2003, 325).

Patterns of street-level exchange also have been used to shed light on how class status is constructed and contested. For example, studies have, illuminated how the efforts of poor and marginalized individuals to assert rights to assistance from the state are mediated by the organizations that structure claims-making and expressions of social justice (Herd, Mitchell, and Lightman 2005; Lens, forthcoming; Morgen 2001; DuBois 2010). These developing lines of sociopolitical research offer a deeply grounded way to examine how larger social and political structures operate—and the dynamic role that street-level organizations play in maintaining and contesting them. They build on the critical case method (Burawoy 1999) in the sense that they link micro-level experiences occurring within street-level organizations to macro-level phenomena.

Another developing line of inquiry extends the street-level project into international governance research, reaching down into frontline organizations to investigate how governance reforms really work (Hupe and Hill 2007). The street-level perspective has informed European studies of governance, among them studies investigating how reforms have been used to smuggle contested policy shifts in the administrative back door or how contracting arrangements have affected the political power of unions and labor parties,

reorganizing (or at times eliminating) the public agencies through which they influenced employment policies and their implementation (Larsen, forthcoming; Van Berkel, forthcoming). These and other studies are adding new, sociopolitical dimensions to management research and hold the promise for developing a broader comparative agenda.

Street-Level Bureaucracy as a Project of Improvement

In the anniversary edition of his book, Lipsky has added a new chapter in which he explicitly addresses the project of improvement and explains why he regards it as a central challenge for the next phase the street-level project. "Recognizing that the twenty-first century is characterized by a deep skepticism about government, efforts to improve government performance take on new meaning. Improving schools or the welfare system or policing are not just matters of achieving more effective public services at the appropriate cost. They may also be understood as contributing to a more substantial agenda in which government, by improving its public services, across all the divides of race, ethnicity, and class, is perceived as fair and trustworthy" (221).

As Lipsky sees it, government capacity and confidence in government are closely linked. It is because street-level organizations form the operational core of the state that their practices assume deep political importance, potentially building or undermining support for government as a vehicle for advancing social welfare, equity, and justice. This is a big and important argument, and one that explains why the project of improvement is far more than a practical concern. If one agrees with this argument (and I do), it then requires serious consideration of whether the now-substantial street-level literature has had or can have a practical payoff. In my view, the potential is there, although it may be difficult to fully realize. What follows are some reflections on how street-level studies might contribute to the "project of improvement."

Even a cursory examination of the literature underscores that policy making might benefit from giving more attention to matters of policy delivery up front. Applied street-level analysis could be used prospectively to better assess what organizations require in order to create conditions of work that are less likely to generate the kinds of problematic coping strategies that are all too abundant. While "throwing money at problems" is not the answer to policy delivery, neither is starving agencies of the resources they need to do their work well. This suggests that rather than crafting policy ideas and requiring that they be realized with available resources, policy makers and managers might benefit from adopting what I would call an *enabling* approach that is focused on creating conditions that facilitate quality and responsiveness in policy delivery.

This idea recalls the "backward mapping" strategy that was advanced some three decades ago by Richard Elmore (1979), but was not, to my knowledge, put to much use. In order for this kind of analysis to be fully developed, it requires a deep and complex understanding of organizational behavior, which may be a fairly high hurdle. Still, a strategy of *enabling* rather than *controlling* street-level organizations, I believe, holds promise for capacity building and the kinds of investments in government that Lipsky envisions.

Street-level studies also suggest caution (if not a reversal) of the rush to advance New Public Management reforms that substitute incentives for control. Certainly, performance measurement can be a valuable tool for monitoring aspects of practice. But its selectivity is both a strength and a weakness. If one cannot measure and prioritize everything, then choices of what to measure assume overarching importance. As a growing street-level literature has begun to demonstrate, one may get what one measures, but this may come with unmeasured consequences of equal or even greater importance.

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law arguably has become the virtual poster child of the anti–performance measurement movement. News accounts and sophisticated studies have revealed the hazards of the push for performance, showing, for example, how schools achieved higher test scores by cooking the books or influencing educators to use their discretion to "teach to the test." Critics have persuasively argued that better performance scores do not necessarily indicate improvements in education or learning. As Lipsky points out, "the law is distressingly simplistic on what constitutes a good education and it is also more or less silent on how to achieve better results" (233).

In a cogent critique of NCLB, Ladd has observed that although some measures of performance improved, "NCLB has generated a range of undesirable side-effects—including ... a narrowing of the curriculum, low morale among teachers who are facing pressure to achieve goals that they cannot meet, and, as has become abundantly clear ... significant amounts of cheating by teachers under extreme pressure to raise student test scores" (2011, 13). Among other things, Ladd suggests what amounts to the beginnings of an enabling strategy. She pointedly advises policy makers to stop assuming that teachers are shirkers and instead recognize that teachers need the resources to do a tough job, among them "support and constructive counseling" (16). To return to an earlier theme, policy makers conveniently blame street-level bureaucrats for policies that do not deliver, even when the policy makers themselves have failed to provide the conditions that would enable street-level bureaucrats to do their jobs well.

These brief lessons drawn from street-level research are only suggestive and barely scratch the surface of possibilities. A lingering concern, however, is that they do not address what is arguably an even more vexing problem than how to improve policy delivery at the street-level. After all, choices about policy making and policy delivery are more than mere technical matters. They are fundamentally political choices. To the extent that the "rational" legislator has incentives to produce policies with high symbolic value and low visible costs, what is the incentive to adopt enabling strategies that require up-front investment and essentially place greater responsibility for the fate of policy delivery on policy makers' shoulders? What is the incentive to temper the movement for performance measurement when it visibly affords the imagery of managerial control and efficiency, while only invisibly undermining unmeasured aspects of performance?

In this era of divided, partisan government and extended economic crises, the prospects for responsible political action may seem remote. Perhaps it is precisely *because* these political limitations seem so daunting that it is all the more critical to pursue street-level research that reveals how policy delivery works in practice and makes visible the consequences of managerial strategies that would otherwise be unseen.

One might also consider how street-level practitioners themselves could contribute to Lipsky's broader project of improvement. I believe that Lipsky is correct when he observes that practitioners are more the subjects than the architects of the political and organizational environment within which the work. Yet I also believe that he may be understating the value of his book to those positioned at front lines of policy delivery, especially those who are eager to do more. I suspect that some of those who have used this book in classes for practitioners—training the students who will staff human services agencies, schools, and medical centers—have witnessed uncomfortable moments as students encounter analyses of how they actually do their work. As they read about the coping mechanisms that practitioners use to manage their work lives, students' dawning self-awareness of their own practices can produce moments of revelation. From time to time, a shocked student will simply blurt out, "I've done that!"

Perhaps one of the book's less appreciated contributions is that it provides a window on this hidden world that is especially compelling to those who recognize their own experiences in it. By engaging with this book, they can come to better understand how organizational conditions affect what they do and, as significantly, what the broader consequences of their practices may be. In this way, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* supports the development of more reflective practitioners. They may indeed have limited influence at

"the top." But they can learn how to use what degrees of freedom they have more constructively. This knowledge may even encourage some practitioners to participate actively and self-consciously in the "moral underground" that Lipsky contemplates. Or it may motivate them to take action "above ground," using their professional and other networks to advance ideas about reforming the conditions of work in ways that would enable them to do a better job.

Into the Future . . .
After some 30 years in print, *Street-Level Bureaucracy* continues to be an inspiration to scholars and practitioners, advancing an important analytic project and continuing to press for a project of improvement. With the anniversary edition, Lipsky has renewed his invitation to contribute to these projects. If this invitation resonates even half as strongly as it did three decades earlier, it holds great promise for the future of the field.

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