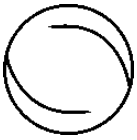

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Working within Discretionary Boundaries: Allocative Rules, Exceptions, and the Micro-Foundations of Inequ(al)ity

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Abstract

Organizations tasked with allocating limited resources face obvious distributive dilemmas. Allocative rules – when applied universally – seek to limit the discretion of organizational members and mitigate disparate treatment. Yet, particularistic needs often warrant exceptions to such rules and accept unequal treatment in the interest of equity. I argue that organizational members engage in a form of boundary work, which I call *discretion work*, to manage discretionary boundaries around the application of allocative rules versus exceptions. Discretion work functions through semi-institutionalized 'rules of exceptionalism,' which involve continual boundary-testing. Relying on ethnographic fieldwork at a French social service organization, enriched by interviews with service providers, I identify three types of discretion work – *procedural*, *symbolic*, and *evaluative* – which govern how, for whom, and for what purpose allocative decisions are made. The article contributes to institutional perspectives on inequality by a) articulating the micro-practices that (re)produce inequitable resource allocation at the bottom of the social ladder, and b) theorizing the often overlooked distinction between principles of equity and equality.

Keywords

boundary work, discretion, equity, inequality, institutional theory

'After a while, by trying to stay flexible, you end up being trapped.' (Case Manager, Fieldnotes)

'There are no privileges for certain people over others; simply, everyone's situation is highly distinct.' (Director, Fieldnotes)

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Introduction

At The Day Center (TDC),[1] a welcome center in Northern France providing services to homeless and at-risk adults, every welcomed individual is entitled to a cup of coffee. As the center opens each morning, beneficiaries filter in and receive a token for the coffee machine. One token; only in the mornings. At least in principle.

Like all organizations charged with distributing scarce resources, TDC operates according to a set of principles and rules governing its allocative decisions. As a non-profit organization free from direct government oversight, TDC's allocative rules fall largely to the discretion of organizational members. Rules serve to limit the abusive potential of such discretion (Weber, 1928/1978) and to promote equality via consistent treatment across cases (Heimer, 2008). The simple 'one-person-one-token-until-noon' principle ought to minimize differential treatment based on case-by-case judgments as to who is more or less deserving (Will, 1993) of a cup of coffee.

Unsurprisingly, the reality of even such simple rules is more complex. Sometimes beneficiaries can't make it to TDC in the morning and request their coffee in the afternoon; other times, gaining the trust of a distressed individual requires bending the rules and offering an extra cup for comfort. The one-person-one-token principle is hardly immune to staff emotions (Graham, 2002), discretion (Lipsky, 1980), and the need to make exceptions (Brady, 1987). As organizational members exercise discretion in deciding when (and to whom) to apply allocative rules or to grant exceptions, they affect the (unequal) allocation of organizational resources. In their everyday, mundane application, allocative rules and exceptions thus form the micro-foundations of inequality, in pursuit of equity. Yet, despite their ubiquity and importance in organizational life, micro-practices remain peripheral to institutional accounts of inequality (Amis, Munir, & Mair, forthcoming; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013).

Moreover, allocative rules highlight a critical dilemma often overlooked in scholarship on inequality: that between principles of equality/universalism versus equity/particularism in conceptions of fairness (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983; Guy & McCandless, 2012; Heimer, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Olsthoorn, 2013; Weber, 1928/1978). Since universal application of rules aims to guarantee equal treatment, exercising discretion to grant ad hoc exceptions implies potential favoritism and distributive injustice (Weber, 1928/1978). On the other hand, discretionary practices can facilitate 'fair' treatment based on principles of equity that acknowledge individuals' particularistic needs (Olsthoorn, 2013). In undertheorizing this distinction and typically using equality and equity interchangeably, existing work struggles to articulate what reducing inequality would look like in practice. By studying allocative micro-practices in an organizational setting, this article considers how discretionary practices can both mitigate and exacerbate unequal/inequitable treatment (Heimer, 2011; Watkins-Hayes, 2011).

Although less prominent in institutional theory, discretion is of key concern for scholars of street-level bureaucracies (Lipsky, 1980) – organizations charged with interpreting and implementing social policies through direct contact with citizens 'on the ground.' This article argues that the exercise of discretion relies fundamentally on drawing boundaries between the appropriate application of allocative rules versus exceptions. As such, it is closely related to boundary work (Gieryn, 1983; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), referring to the creation, maintenance and disruption of boundaries between actors or groups of people in the interest of preserving autonomy and key resources. I introduce the concept of *discretion work* as a form of boundary work aimed at delimiting the realm of application of rules and exceptions in order to achieve the organization's allocative goals. In focusing on the negotiation of jurisdictional spaces between actors, existing scholarship has often ignored boundary-setting activities pertaining to objects (e.g., rules, exceptions) and to their realm of application. Exceptions include studies of boundary spanning (Bechky, 2003; Kellogg, Orlikowski, & Yates, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009) and of the relationship between

boundary and practice work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). Unlike practice work, however, discretion work is less concerned with the creation, maintenance or disruption of taken-for-granted objects and more with the ongoing negotiation involved in determining their realm of application. Moreover, boundary work scholarship adheres to the basic assumption that boundaries exist between a focal 'us' and an outside 'them.' Hence, existing studies offer limited insight into how boundaries between objects can be used to create distinctions *within* the 'them,' as in among beneficiaries rather than between the latter and social service providers. To advance our understanding of the micro-foundations of inequality, I therefore draw on the literature on street-level organizations (Evans, 2011; Lipsky, 1980; Watkins-Hayes, 2011), which deals explicitly with actors' daily navigation of boundaries between formal rules and the gray areas open to professional judgment.

At the core of discretion work are what I call *rules of exceptionalism*. These differ from simple rule-breaking (Martin, Lopez, Roscigno, & Hodson, 2013), which implies unsanctioned deviation from commonly-accepted rules. Rather, rules of exceptionalism internalize the persistent tension between organizational needs for order and flexibility (Canales, 2014). Neither rules nor exceptions constitute the agreed standard for arbitrating 'deviations'; instead, they represent continual boundary-testing between the two, implying neither their perfect malleability nor complete institutionalization. Unlike other forms of boundary work, discretion work thus focuses less on distinctions between rules versus exceptions and more on the appropriate boundaries of their application. It is through the daily negotiation of these boundaries that inequality – and its possible antidotes – are constituted. To understand these processes, this article asks, *how does discretion work affect the allocation of scarce organizational resources?* and *what are the implications for beneficiaries' unequal/inequitable access to such resources?*

The article proceeds with a review of the theoretical frameworks connecting boundary and discretion work to rules, exceptions and inequality. I then describe the data collection methods and analysis and present findings based on ethnographic fieldwork, supplemented by interviews. Specifically, I identify three types of discretion work – procedural, symbolic, and evaluative – which operate through rules of exceptionalism to expand, preserve or limit organizational members' discretion with respect to allocative decisions. I conclude with a discussion of contributions and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Background

Boundaries, professional discretion and 'discretion work'

In their review article, Phillips and Lawrence (2012) point to the 'turn to work' in management theory, highlighting such currents as boundary (Gieryn, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2009), institutional and practice work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), to explain how actors 'create, maintain or change boundaries in order to simplify and classify the world around them' (Kreiner et al., 2009, p. 705). Among the latter, boundary work is particularly applicable to the study of organizations operating within the 'under-resourced and over-ambitious' environment of social services (Evans & Harris, 2004, p. 872). In such settings, allocative priorities must constantly be set. Boundaries must be drawn to determine who receives which scarce resources and in what order. As such, boundary-setting processes can be intimately tied to (re)producing 'unequal access to an unequal distribution of resources' (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Yet, how patterns of structural (dis)advantage and resource allocation (Marwell & Mcquarrie, 2013) are enacted daily remains relatively underspecified.

Despite their contribution to understanding processes of classification and inclusion/exclusion, existing boundary work studies often remain at a level of abstraction removed from actors' everyday

practices. An exception is Zietsma and Lawrence's (2010) study of tree harvesting practices in British Columbia, which proposes a recursive relationship between boundary and practice work. However, where the authors draw implications for cycles of field-level stability and change, I identify an important derivative of boundary work – discretion work – which takes place inside organizations and is particularly relevant to managing allocative dilemmas *within* rather than *across* populations.

By contrast, scholarship on street-level bureaucracies has long examined the micro-practices of frontline workers who mediate between institutional policies and citizens 'on the ground' (Prior & Barnes, 2011). Since Lipsky's (1980) seminal work, scholars have debated the degree of discretion enjoyed by frontline workers. Some claim that trends towards managerialism and rationalization in public organizations have drastically reduced actors' discretionary power (Lymbery, 2000; Pollio, 2006). At the same time, Lipsky's followers (Baldwin, 2000; Ellis, 2011; Evans, 2013) find that the very proliferation of rules creates sufficient ambiguity and gray areas where service providers still exercise considerable judgment. In this environment, allocative dilemmas are often settled through 'shadowy, never fully articulated, and often inconsistent' discretionary practices based on normative notions of fairness (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 333). To reconcile these divergent views, Evans and Harris (2004) suggest that discretion is not an either/or phenomenon but operates along a gradient.

Surprisingly, despite their apparent affinities, the concepts of boundary work and discretion have not explicitly been linked. Notably, both deal with actions that seek to expand, maintain, or contract professional jurisdictional spaces (Gieryn, 1983) – whether across or within occupational groups. Yet, whereas discretion has typically been studied from the perspective of individuals' concrete decisions, boundary work has usually been situated at the level of fields. Moreover, where boundary work tends to consider divisions *across* groups (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) discretion work untangles the more subtle divisions *within* otherwise similar objects or actors. Beyond an us/them narrative, discretion work thus highlights how one group of actors can use boundary-setting processes to subdivide the population of 'them.'

Importantly, although rules certainly guide organizational practices, discretion work is not simply reducible to a form of practice work (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). The latter refers to actors' efforts to affect 'shared routines of behavior' (Whittington, 2006, p. 619) considered legitimate in a field. Conversely, the focus of discretion work is less on the creation, maintenance or disruption of shared objects (e.g., allocative rules, exceptions) and more on affecting the boundaries of their realm of application. As such, discretion work also emphasizes ongoing questioning with respect to – rather than the shared or taken-for-granted nature of – organizational objects. A contribution of this article is thus in extending the concepts of boundaries and discretion by introducing discretion work as a form of boundary work, appropriate for understanding allocative micro-practices within organizations.

Organizational rules, exceptions and the quest for equ(al)ity

If discretion denotes the area between formalized constraints and the ability to exercise agency, it is closely related to the application of rules and exceptions. Rules are a vital component of organizing social interaction (see Becker, 2004 for a review). As such, scholars have highlighted the negative consequences of failing to follow rules (Robinson & Bennett, 1995; Weick, 1990), including poor organizational performance (Inoue & Koizumi, 2004) and loss of trust (Elangovan & Shapiro, 1998). Yet, a growing body of scholarship considers the potential benefits of 'constructive deviance' for promoting the welfare of organizational stakeholders, as well as for accomplishing tasks more efficiently (Dahling, Chau, Mayer, & Gregory, 2012; Morrison, 2006; Vadera, Pratt, & Mishra, 2013).

Concurrently, a long intellectual line inspired from Weber's (1928/1978) work on bureaucracies has sought to understand the relationship between institutionalized rules, individual discretion, and the potential for (un)equal treatment. In its ideal form, Weber's rational-legal bureaucracy mitigates unequal treatment rooted in particularism by delegating decision-making to universalistic rules and structures. Studies have suggested, for instance, that greater formalization can decrease social disparities in such contexts as judicial sentencing (Engen & Steen, 2000), salary attributions (Elvira & Graham, 2002), and women's employment in start-ups (Baron, Hannan, Hsu, & Koçak, 2007). On the other hand, scholars point to the role of routinized actions, such as 'class work' (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013), in institutionalizing unequal treatment and access to resources across social groups (Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey, & Skaggs, 2010). Lamont et al. (2014, p. 19) thus argue that through the very institutionalization of standard routines 'inequality is reproduced via a rationalized process and is generally legitimized as a consequence.'

These ambiguous conclusions reflect two key oversights in existing accounts of inequality. The first is insufficient attention to micro-foundations. As Amis et al. (forthcoming) contend, scholarship needs to 'investigate the ways in which inequality is experienced and reinforced from repeated, often mundane, everyday organizational practices.' Examining how actors' 'mundane' resource allocation decisions affect inequality within organizations is a key aim of this article. In so doing, the article makes several related contributions. First, the focus of institutional accounts has – quite naturally – been on the institutionalization and rationalization of practices that contribute to or mitigate inequality (Mair & Hehenberger, 2014). Instead, discretion work specifically draws attention to the semi-institutionalized state of rules of exceptionalism, subject to constant renegotiation through processes of reflexivity. Rather than identifying taken-for-granted allocative practices that reinforce unequal resource allocation, discretion work illuminates the reflective processes that contribute to inequality in pursuit of equity. Second, most studies investigate settings in which the social groups subject to unequal treatment are well-defined (e.g., women, racial minorities, non-elites), and the basic 'deservingness' of individuals (Will, 1993) is taken for granted or statistically controlled for (e.g., using employee qualifications, performance reviews). This article examines the negotiation of more ambiguous social categories of deservingness, such as the needy and the *exceptionally* needy.

A second major shortcoming of the literature is inadequate distinction between equality/universalism, on one hand, and equity/particularism on the other (Heimer, 2011; Olsthoorn, 2013), as a basis for determining 'fair' treatment. A universal application of rules implies restricting discretionary space to promote equality of treatment. Conversely, expanding discretionary spaces to allow for flexible application of the rules recognizes particularistic needs in the interest of equality of *outcomes*. Although the latter implies unequal treatment, it may prove more *equitable* when social circumstances call for differentiated responses. Consider the case of hospital emergency rooms. Perfectly equal treatment might mean that patients are seen on a first-come first-serve basis, eliminating front-line staff's judgment as to whose medical situation is more urgent. Instead, medical triage relies on principles of equity – recognizing patients' different (unequal) needs and the importance of professional discretion in determining priority of care. By focusing primarily on income inequality as a proxy for diverse social disparities (Goldthorpe, 2010), most institutional accounts of inequality avoid the important question of 'fairness' and distinctions between equity and equality (see Guy & McCandless, 2012).

Missing from the inequality literature is thus an understanding of dynamic boundary and discretion work processes that take place in daily micro-interactions within organizations. Such a perspective would be more attuned to how boundaries are actively constructed not only between social groups, but also within them; how rules and exceptions exist at varying degrees of institutionalization; and how organizational actors enact principles of equality and equity. By asking how

discretion work affects the allocation of scarce organizational resources, this article offers a micro-foundational perspective on the relationship between professional discretion, the making of rules and exceptions, and the effects on inequality and inequity. To answer this question, I turn to a description of the methods and analysis below.

Methods

Data were derived from over 300 hours of full-time ethnographic fieldwork at TDC. These data were supplemented by interviews with directors, case managers, volunteers and interns, and a review of archival documents to provide organizational and field-level background information.

The case for the case

Between July and September, 2013, I was a full-time volunteer at TDC, part of a regional network of organizations targeting at-risk or currently homeless adults and severely marginalized individuals. Within the network, certain organizations are run by municipal governments, while others – including TDC – operate as non-profits, though the majority of their funding comes from public sources. Importantly, whereas government-run organizations impose strict criteria for access (e.g., excluding non-legal residents), TDC enjoys considerable slack (Cyert & March, 1963) in managing its target population. Yet, TDC is not equipped to handle all populations equally (e.g., families, abused women, children), and severe resource constraints limit members' actions. In addition, field-level changes – notably the centralization of emergency housing supply and demand within a new agency – affected social workers' roles. As a case manager explained, '[For] someone who's been here for 10 years, their expertise and skills and all that work that has gone into [building direct relationships with housing institutions] isn't really valued anymore or even possible to use' (*Interview*). These combined organizational freedoms and constraints constitute an apt setting for the study of discretion work.

Fieldwork

A typical workday at TDC involved time spent informally with colleagues prior to opening hours, as well as during lunch breaks and daily debriefing sessions. Most mornings I was stationed at the reception desk, typically the first point of contact with beneficiaries. I performed many of the same duties as case workers, including informing and interviewing beneficiaries, and presenting their cases before colleagues. I further rotated among key positions in the organization, from managing the shower and laundry room, to running the internet space, or serving as a language interpreter during beneficiary appointments. Like all organizational members, during quieter periods I sat down for informal conversations with beneficiaries. Administratively, I was granted access to team meetings, workshops, and debriefings, during which I offered my own updates regarding individuals with whom I had interacted. I presented myself as a summer volunteer, studying in the United States, who had previously lived and worked in France. If individuals showed additional curiosity, I indicated my interest in studying services for the homeless and how the latter could be improved.

While I did not engage directly in action research, my role as researcher-volunteer could be described loosely as 'insider research' (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Participating as a volunteer allowed me to experience first-hand many of the challenges and allocative dilemmas faced by TDC staff. In 'learning on the job' as an outsider, I was obligated to constantly seek instructions and clarifications from colleagues in order to perform tasks, thereby inviting them to verbalize rules, procedures and leniency with respect to the latter. Colleagues thus articulated forms of discretion

work in ways that would have been harder to capture through interviews or non-participant observation alone. At the same time, being directly involved in allocative decisions presented challenges to my role as a researcher. To mitigate the associated risks, I rely predominantly on observations about the actions and decisions of colleagues in which I was not directly involved. On the remaining occasions, I either worked alongside, or debriefed with colleagues during/following a distributive dilemma to understand their justifications for allocative decisions.

Interviews

To contextualize my fieldwork, I conducted 10 semi-structured interviews encompassing approximately two-thirds of TDC's full-time staff. I interviewed regular organizational members (those working at TDC for at least one full day per week), excluding auxiliary members (e.g., psychologists, doctors, attorneys). I selected interviewees on the basis of their tenure in the organization (a minimum of one month) as well as in the interest of capturing a maximum range of experiences (Weiss, 1995). Interviews lasted between 20 minutes and one hour, were audio-recorded, and relevant sections were translated into English.

Analysis

As typical of inductive research, I entered the field with a somewhat different focus. Initially, I was interested in how ambiguous concepts such as 'solidarity,' 'unconditionality,' and 'integration' – common to French social service organizations – were enacted. As I spent more time in the field, however, it became obvious that TDC was not (nor considered itself to be) in a position to permanently re-integrate the homeless into society, nor to foster sustainable solidarity. Instead, members' more pertinent daily concerns involved questions of resource allocation and management of scarce resources.

Analysis proceeded in an iterative fashion moving between the data and theoretical frameworks (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As I developed an understanding of the role of rules, procedures and exceptions in allocative decisions within TDC, I referred to the organizational literature on rules and rule-breaking as well as more targeted literature on discretion in street-level bureaucracies. The realization that discretionary practices seemed to be taking place not only with respect to resource allocation but also to defining internal population boundaries, and to interpreting the limits of fulfilling the organization's mission, led me to further integrate insights from the literature on boundary work.

In analyzing the data, I relied on multiple readings of ethnographic field notes and interview transcripts, followed by software-assisted qualitative coding of the texts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). An initial reading through the material resulted in over 200 first-order concepts, subsequently organized into second-order thematic codes, then consolidated into aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013). As the research focus evolved, I returned to the field notes and interviews, (re)coding new instances of boundary and/or discretion work. A number of initial codes (e.g., *experiences of (dis)trust*, *conditions of uncertainty*, *role of emotions*) did not prove consistently relevant to the research question and are thus excluded from the present analysis. Table 1 illustrates the transition from first-order concepts to the aggregate dimensions discussed in the findings below.

Forms of Discretion Work

Based on the case study of TDC, I identify three types of discretion work involving the construction and application of rules of exceptionalism for determining how, for whom, and for what purpose limited organizational resources are allocated.

Table 1. Data structure and representative examples.

Representative examples	First-order categories	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
'You have to compose together with the beneficiaries and other colleagues [because] there are certain people who will never manage to fit within the boxes.' (*Fieldnotes*)	(a) Not every beneficiary can follow the rules	(1) Invoking need for flexibility in rules	***Procedural***
It was important to make it very clear for everyone that putting their name down on a piece of paper did not automatically entitle them to a meal card renewal … it was meant to give them the chance for a short consultation interview to evaluate their situation. (*Fieldnotes*)	(b) Allocation of certain goods requires case-by-case assessment		
[Member of organization that shares office space with TDC] agrees that they had fostered bad habits among beneficiaries who started getting the hang of coming straight to them to ask for coffee tokens instead of going through TDC staff first. (*Fieldnotes*)	(c) Organization has lost handle on procedures	(2) Attempting to restore consistency	
Several days later as I was looking through the organizational summary book, I noticed a note from the evening of the first meal card distribution day in bold capital letters 'NEVER DO THAT AGAIN.' (*Fieldnotes*)	(d) Procedures need to be reexamined and revised		
'Our goal is precisely to … remain a place where everyone can come, I think that's *the* primary mission of the organization … we introduced this notion of unconditionality, of anonymity, of free services. I think that with those three points we are able to say that anyone can come here.' (*Interview, Director*)	(e) 'Unconditional welcome' as basis for inclusion	(3) Defining boundaries of ideal/ target population	***Symbolic***
Rationales used to re-orient someone to another social service: 'they don't depend on our structure,' 'they don't fall within our target population.' (*Fieldnotes*)	(f) Re-orientation where possible		
For the East Asian man who uses the internet space to falsify papers, the decision is that his administrative address won't be suspended quite yet, but he can no longer make internet appointments. (*Fieldnotes*)	(g) Causes for exclusion despite 'unconditional welcome'	(4) Stretching boundaries of target population	

Table 1. (Continued)

Representative examples	First-order categories	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
[Regarding a former beneficiary whose case was taken up by a transitional housing center but who was just released from a hospital] 'We are not here to abandon people; we shouldn't let go of [X] until [center] has taken over, even if it's their responsibility.' (*Fieldnotes*)	(h) Inclusion despite possibility for re-orientation		
'If tomorrow we were to have only people who were legalized, we could really bring out this re-integration aspect.' (*Interview, Case Manager*)	(i) Re-integration of current beneficiaries virtually impossible	(5) Defining limits to achieving organizational mission	***Evaluative***
'Perhaps the somewhat ungrateful aspect of this work … is that in the end you never really know [the outcome].' (*Interview, Case Manager*)	(j) Organizational success is hard to truly know		
'For the undocumented immigrants who have been here for years and who – in principle – won't ever obtain a resident permit, it's complicated. The [organizational] mission is more on a day-to-day basis.' (*Interview, Volunteer*)	(k) TDC successful at providing daily assistance		
If someone seems to be 'fleeing,' we shouldn't send them to 50 different sites but rather focus on slowly getting them hooked to someone or a few people at TDC who can follow their case. (*Fieldnotes*)	(l) Prioritize new beneficiaries who can *become* attached to TDC	(6) Re-establishing priorities in meeting organizational mission	
The principle [the Director] proposes is that the people we've gotten to know a bit more – who are already part of our structure – receive priority in terms of appointments, medical visits, etc. *(Fieldnotes*)	(m) Prioritize existing beneficiaries who are *already* attached to TDC		
'Our role is not to discourage people but to tell them the truth about the reality in France … to accompany [them] in their reflection.' (*Director, Fieldnotes*)	(n) Explain to beneficiaries their limited prospects (in France)	(7) Managing beneficiary expectations	

Procedural discretion work

I define *procedural discretion work* as the management of discretionary boundaries in applying rules and exceptions for *how* to allocate organizational resources among beneficiaries. Procedures for allocating resources are perhaps the clearest example of institutionalized rules capable of limiting professional discretion (Weber, 1928/1978). At TDC, such rules govern – among other things – the allocation of coffee tokens in the morning, and of shower, laundry, and internet use appointments (i.e., the first 15 individuals to sign up on a given day gain access to the service). In theory, once the daily appointment slots fill up, beneficiaries are either placed on a waitlist or invited to return the following day and (attempt to) make a new appointment.

In each of the above cases, however, a limited number of appointments are reserved for 'emergency' cases. This is the first step at which the boundaries of procedural discretion are tested. The principle is to leave emergency slots open and allocate them on that same day to persons in 'extreme' need. Yet, determining whose needs are extreme (relative to other beneficiaries) is inherently a matter of judgment and discretion. As an intern explained, 'you have a framework that says we do this, we do that. Then there's always the issue with the emergency slots…the exceptions, because who's the exception for? Why is someone more in need [than another person]?' (*Interview, Intern*). At the extreme, new 'temporary' procedures may be enacted to accommodate the particularistic needs of severely excluded individuals. For instance, in reference to a North African woman who was exceptionally (but repeatedly) allowed to take long showers in the mornings without prior appointment, we discussed that in the long-term:

> The … idea was to get her to accept the practice of making an appointment for showers in the afternoons rather than the mornings and slowly to work on limiting the shower time to 30 minutes. In the short run, it was decided that in the interest of developing a relationship with her, it would be best to let her be and see where that takes us. (*Fieldnotes*)

Moreover, not all resources lend themselves to allocation based on a strictly procedural, first-come first-serve basis. Such is the case for more substantive resources such as monthly meal cards for soup kitchens or appointments with a social worker. Hypothetically, TDC could distribute meal cards to the first 50 beneficiaries who sign up; no further questions asked. However, as became evident during the distribution cycles I witnessed, the system of rules and exceptions governing this procedure proved far more complex.

The standard procedure is as follows. Towards the end of each month, local soup kitchens send a certain number of meal cards to TDC and similar organizations within a geographic area. TDC conducts an inventory of the number and type of cards (dinner/lunch, location), and establishes a binder to record attributions. When the meal card distribution period begins, beneficiaries must make a consultation appointment with a case worker, who assesses their current situation and needs. The distribution period usually lasts five days, with the first three reserved for returning beneficiaries having obtained a card from TDC in the previous month. Any cards not attributed at the end of this period are left aside for 'emergencies' liable to arise throughout the month. Besides the returning user criterion, several other principles apply to meal card distribution: only one card per person; priority given to individuals who don't already have (or claim to have) a card via another social service (*Fieldnotes*).

Despite relatively clear principles for resource allocation, discretionary boundaries can expand significantly when prioritization rules are based on competing rationales. For instance, during the July distribution period, the TDC Director instructed staff to assign even unattributed cards to returning users rather than newcomers. The rationale being that absent an established client relationship, it would be difficult to know whether beneficiaries would make use of the card (*Fieldnotes*).

During a subsequent distribution period, however, meal cards were allocated to two newcomers who had been receiving free meals at the local mosque during the month of Ramadan. Following the required consultation appointment, the TDC Director justified allocating cards to them by reasoning that the men needed some form of attachment to a formal structure to prevent their destabilization at the end of Ramadan (*Fieldnotes*).

Aside from competing rationales, there are logistical challenges to anticipating how many cards should be reserved for emergencies. During the August distribution, I was staffed at the reception desk and initially instructed to take 15 consultation appointments per day. Consequently, once all of the Tuesday appointments were full, I had to turn people away and ask them to return the following day. However, towards the end of the day, the TDC Director and Co-Director revised the estimate of necessary spare cards, judging we could take up to 20 appointments daily. For beneficiaries who were still lingering at TDC, the adapted procedure proved beneficial, as five additional people could now make an appointment. Meanwhile, the procedural change proved detrimental for those turned away earlier. In the end, the number of daily appointments stood at 25, as I repeatedly redrew the 'bottom line' and increased capacity based on my colleagues' revised judgment. During that day's debrief, we agreed that it would have been far preferable to establish the procedure with perfect clarity ahead of time (*Fieldnotes*).

Despite a manifest determination on the part of TDC staff to make allocative procedures more rule-bound, the reality is that an expanded discretionary space is necessary for adapting to evolving resource constraints and possibilities. During a weekly staff meeting, the Director brought up the need for a major revision of basic procedures, judging that we were 'too much into [direct] distribution.' As she explained, some of the more established procedures for distributing hygiene kits or clothing had led the organization to lose control over resources. The procedures no longer made sense financially (due to limited resources) but also ethically, as we ended up giving three razors per day to some people and having none left for others (*Fieldnotes*).

Procedural discretion work thus operates in the familiar context of a dual need for consistency and flexibility enacted through rules and routines (Canales, 2014; Feldman & Pentland, 2003). Procedural rules guiding how scarce resources are to be allocated limit organizational members' discretionary space, temporarily relieving them of the need to assess who is more or less deserving of a shower, a meal or internet access. Yet, such rules often confront organizational and moral realities. The difficulty of anticipating 'emergencies,' the need to adjust to evolving resource needs and capacity, and the reality of staff members' individualized actions all imply an expanded discretionary space, with organizational actors prone to making procedural exceptions.

Procedural discretion work thus reflects Heimer's (2012) distinction between official ethics and 'ethics on the ground.' Where the former operate via policies, statutes, rules and standard operating procedures, the latter function as on-the-spot decisions that 'cumulate over time into routinized but not fully codified ways of doing' (Heimer, 2012, p. 374). Similarly, procedural discretion work operates through an unsettled balancing act between allocative rules and exceptions in the interest of maintaining relative order and flexibility. Having examined the management of discretionary boundaries around *how* resources are allocated, I next look at the application of rules and exceptions that guide *whom* resources should be allocated to.

Symbolic discretion work

I refer to *symbolic discretion work* as the management of discretionary boundaries around an 'ideal' population among which organizational resources are to be allocated. That is, *who* should be subject to allocative rules and who should be granted favorable exceptions? More generally, symbolic discretion work governs the application of rules of exceptionalism to define

who has access to the organization. In this sense, it is related to the concept of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Nevertheless, it differs from the latter in that symbolic discretion work does not distinguish between social groups on the basis of 'us' versus 'them' but rather manages internal boundaries within the 'them' to determine the realm of application of allocative rules and exceptions.

At TDC, the question, 'Does s/he fall within our target population?' was frequently used to establish whether a potential beneficiary would be best served by the organization or re-oriented elsewhere. As a rule, the ideal client is someone who has nowhere else to go – for whom TDC is the only or last resort. Organizational members spoke of this as part of the core value of unconditional welcome/access. As one longtime volunteer explained, 'there's our specificity of unconditional access; for the most part, the people [we admit] are people that couldn't be accepted elsewhere' (*Interview, Volunteer*). A case manager agreed, 'our mission, really, is to welcome people, all people unconditionally' (*Interview, Case Manager*). Such typical comments articulate the organizational construction of its ideal population.

The notion of unconditional welcome was primarily used at TDC as a contrast to organizations that are either legally obligated or otherwise inclined to turn certain categories of individuals away. For instance, municipal social services are unable to serve undocumented immigrants. As one interviewee commented, 'unconditional welcome only really exists in non-profits, not in public institutions' (*Interview, Intern*). The basic principle is therefore that individuals who have more appropriate options (e.g., European Union citizens with access to public institutions; asylum seekers, etc.) ought to be re-oriented to such alternatives. A caseworker explained 'now, it's really integrated [into our work] that if there is a possibility to re-orient towards a [public institution] it should be done' (*Interview, Case Manager*).

The principles of unconditional welcome for the most severely excluded, and reorientation otherwise, constitute boundary-setting rules around TDC's target population. In their most rigid application, they limit social workers' discretionary space by setting precise criteria for who can access organizational resources. Yet, given the fundamental nature of the question of 'who belongs' at TDC, it is hardly surprising that organizational members engage in symbolic discretion work to push boundaries and make exceptions.

Exceptions come in several forms. On one hand are limits to the unconditional welcome principle itself – a narrowing of organizational access. The majority of cases in which access is restricted are a consequence of violent or severely disrespectful behavior. In one incident, a relative newcomer to TDC (evidently drunk) initiated a verbal confrontation, which escalated into a physical fight with another beneficiary, forcing staff members to intervene and escort both outside the building. Most telling was an intern's reaction to the incident, who reflected that it's especially difficult to deal with such people because they have nowhere else to go, and who questioned whether a drunken homeless person was safer on the street or in a place like TDC (*Fieldnotes*). On another occasion, a long-time TDC beneficiary was excluded for a week for disrespecting and pushing a staff member (*Fieldnotes*). In less severe cases, beneficiaries may be excluded from certain activities only (e.g., access to cultural workshops or laundry services). Exclusionary boundaries thus proved fairly porous, with direct access denied only in extreme cases and as a temporary measure.

On the other hand are exceptions to the practice of reorientation – an expansion of organizational boundaries to include individuals who wouldn't typically belong to TDC's ideal population. In some cases, beneficiaries judged too vulnerable are not immediately redirected, despite having access to alternative institutions. As a caseworker explained, reorientation is 'fine if we feel the person is sufficiently independent to present themselves and be attended to [elsewhere]' (*Fieldnotes*). Otherwise, the fear is that vulnerable individuals may be denied due rights at public

organizations characterized as places of 'zero tolerance, filters [that are] super square' (*Fieldnotes*). TDC thus claims responsibility for certain beneficiaries who technically fall outside of their jurisdiction, prompting exceptions to the principle of reorientation.

Such was the case, for instance, with several beneficiaries who were either French citizens or legal residents, whose dossiers were managed by TDC despite the fact that the organization was *not* their last resort. One was a West African student who lacked sufficient funds to pay his university registration fees – on which the renewal of his student visa and legal status in France depended. Unable to find housing for over a month, TDC case managers suspected that his student status might, in fact, be hurting his case by signaling a lesser degree of precariousness. Staff pushed their professional boundaries by suggesting, 'that the only reasonable way to get through … and find emergency shelter … is to call the [housing hotline] and simply create another identity for him … create another registry with a separate name, date of birth and situation – changing precisely the fact that he is a student' (*Fieldnotes*). Going to such extremes to bend the rules is an illustrative example of TDC's symbolic discretion work.

Importantly, despite its reliance on certain rules and principles, symbolic discretion work remains reflective. TDC members periodically questioned the limits of the unconditional welcome principle. At the end of a six-month review of organizational practices and policies, the TDC Director commented:

> We revisited a bit, relaxed or questioned the concept of unconditional welcome … because [it] is a notion that has always sparked debates … What is unconditional welcome? … Can we really accept everyone? And if yes, how do we do it? We are well aware here that we can welcome everyone but at the same time we have certain limits. Everything rests on knowing what those limits are, so it remains a notion that is debatable … It's an important value … and at the same time how do we do it, and also what's the purpose of welcoming everyone? (*Interview*)

Periodically questioning fundamental values related to the ideal population and organizational access implies boundary-setting processes around professional discretion. To what extent should unconditional welcome be limited? For which individuals or social groups? Which organizational members have the authority and legitimacy to make decisions regarding inclusion and exclusion from the organization? The answers to these questions begin to paint a picture of how symbolic discretion work affects unequal treatment among TDC beneficiaries. The next section sharpens this picture.

Evaluative discretion work

Evaluative discretion work captures the management of discretionary boundaries to assess the organization's success/failure in achieving its mission. It therefore speaks to the purpose and function of rules and exceptions in light of (re)defining organizational goals.

For TDC, a key basis of self-evaluation relates to the mission of unconditional welcome and to the organization's extremely limited capacity to accommodate undocumented immigrants. As the Director explains:

> It's really an odd profession … I think the hardest part is managing to preserve the meaning of our work … Because sometimes things are so ludicrous that you think to yourself, why am I doing this again? Why am I ruining my health for a system that I know with 70% certainty won't change; and 70% is if I'm being generous. Because there will always be foreigners who arrive without legal status, we can never solve all of that; because poverty will go on existing. (*Interview*)

In light of these daunting challenges, TDC members circumscribed the organization's mission by relying on a fairly broad and ambiguous notion of success, including such aspects as restoring beneficiaries' willpower or enhancing their autonomy. One social worker explained this re-centering around more attainable goals:

> (Re)integration through employment – sure – but when there's no housing, it's complicated; housing without employment is complicated. It's always the same pattern; you don't know by what means to help people bounce back. From time to time we do manage – thankfully – but it's very rare … It could be social integration, through activities and such, to make [beneficiaries] feel a bit better within society and in their daily life, but those are small objectives. (*Interview, Case Manager*)

This cautious attitude was further reflected in how TDC rationalized the basis for prioritizing beneficiary needs and demands. As described in relation to monthly meal card distribution, the purpose of rules of exceptionalism in attributing such resources is twofold. On one hand, assigning cards to newcomers can be a tool for getting them attached to the organization, with the hope that this may eventually lead to a *suivi* – formalized case management. On the other hand, newcomers are sometimes explicitly *de-prioritized* for receiving meal cards, given their lack of established ties to the organization. It is at this intersection – between two competing logics in the interest of a single mission – that evaluative discretion work takes place. Organizational members rely on an expanded discretionary space to determine when each rationale should be applied to achieve organizational goals. As the Director summarized, attribution of resources is 'really case by case. The only common thread across all these situations of immense injustice is prioritization of the *suivi*' (*Fieldnotes*).

Conversely, a colleague poignantly pointed out that prioritizing individuals already attached to TDC may jeopardize the very long-term mission of curbing beneficiaries' reliance on social services. He explained:

> The person who shows up and says he's been on the street for two days, that's who we need to attend to first … that's when there's something to be done … grab onto that person, not those that have been coming to TDC for the longest time … But currently, that's not how it is at TDC – even at other organizations … that's not how the reasoning goes. (*Interview, Volunteer*)

In other words, if the organization's mission is to re-integrate the homeless, priority should be given to those most likely to 'succeed': i.e., *not* the most severely marginalized, *not* those for whom TDC is the last resort, and ultimately *not* members of the 'ideal' population.

Evaluative discretion work is not only evident in how organizational members reposition (overly) ambitious goals towards more attainable objectives; it also manifests in setting client expectations about organizational capabilities. Thus, it delimits the realm within which organizational members may be evaluated or held accountable. For instance, we were asked during a debrief to not only be careful with what we say to beneficiaries but also in our body language and demeanor so as to avoid giving beneficiaries false hope (*Fieldnotes*).

Exchanges with case managers also provide opportunities to manage beneficiaries' expectations about their prospects in France. During an interview with two prospective beneficiaries, the Director remarked 'there is no judgment on my part about whether [coming to France] was the right decision for you or whether life is better here or more difficult in Algeria or Morocco.' She followed this by inviting the men to think about the prospect of an uncertain life with no legal status in France; 'they say the street wears you down; that one week on the street costs you a month of life.' The aim was not explicitly to scare the men but to provoke realistic reflection on their part (*Fieldnotes*).

Evaluative discretion work thus captures both how organizational members manage discretionary spaces to (re)define organizational goals, as well as how they set limits on beneficiaries' expectations regarding the same. Unlike procedural and symbolic discretion work, evaluative discretion work does not rely directly on rules of exceptionalism. It does, however, build on the other two forms of discretion work. Namely, organizational evaluations of success and capacity for mission fulfillment depend on how TDC defines its ideal population (symbolic) and determines the application of allocative rules and exceptions (procedural). It thus represents a key component of how organizational actors use discretion work to define and accomplish the organization's purpose.

Consequences of Discretion Work for Inequality at TDC

The three identified types of discretion work are not simply important for understanding organizational processes of resource allocation; they carry implications for the (re)production of social inequalities. If we understand discretion work as fundamentally enacted through rules of exceptionalism, it is worth asking whether systematic differences exist between beneficiary groups treated on the basis of equality (via universalistic rules) versus those entitled to considerations of equity (via particularistic exceptions)? Do different kinds of exceptions apply to distinct groups? I argue that for TDC, rules of exceptionalism apply at the margins – not necessarily for the average client but for outliers on both ends of a spectrum.

On one end, beneficiaries typically subject to exceptions present the most severe profiles of exclusion: psychological, behavioral and/or health problems, no alternative sources of assistance, and a long history of street life. Absent a long-term assistance strategy for such beneficiaries, rules of exceptionalism take the form of leniency with regard to specific allocative principles (e.g., longer shower time, an extra cup of coffee, attribution of the emergency time slots). The purpose of exceptions is to foster organizational attachment so as to mitigate beneficiaries' extreme experiences of exclusion. At the other end of the spectrum are beneficiaries who – relative to their peers – are rather advantaged. They may enjoy legal status in France, have come to TDC under exceptional rather than chronic circumstances, and typically come with a concrete request (e.g., updating a résumé, job search, obtaining specific legal advice) (*Fieldnotes*). Exceptions here imply short-term, but intense, interventions by organizational members, with the potential for substantial payoff in fulfilling TDC's mission of re-integrating the homeless. The goal of granting such exceptions is not to create stable organizational attachment but rather to curb beneficiaries' reliance on social services altogether.

What, then, about beneficiaries 'in the middle'? Rules of exceptionalism at the extremes imply that for the average client, the standard rules apply. An intern characterized this profile as the type of person 'you see passing by all the time; you have the impression that everything is going well … they get along well with everyone and are integrated into the structure, but in reality, it turns out … we know nothing about them' (*Fieldnotes*). The warning is that individuals seemingly least in need (and demand) of help are sometimes those whose situations most warrant assistance. Under rules of exceptionalism, this is precisely the category of people least likely to be actively discerned.

Exceptionalism at the extremes further supports two distinct visions of organizational success – one based on promoting organizational attachment; the other on fostering beneficiaries' autonomy. The trajectory from attachment to autonomy is far from straightforward, however. As extremely marginalized individuals access the organization, procedural discretion work is applied and organizational rules bent for the purpose of establishing a relationship. Meanwhile, among those already attached to the organization, far fewer develop sufficient autonomy to permanently

exit the social service safety net. Individuals in the middle, with developed ties to the organization, thus find themselves in a liminal space with marginal prospects for detachment and exit. Recognizing this tenuous reality, a case manager commented, 'you should always leave the door open for [people] to come back if they need to' (*Fieldnotes*).

Moreover, TDC and similar organizations clearly exercise more control over one end of the attachment-autonomy trajectory than the other. Fostering organizational ties is more within employees' discretionary realm than engaging in forms of institutional work (Currie, Lockett, Finn, Martin, & Waring, 2012; Lawrence & Dover, 2015; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006) to affect whether and which individuals manage to get out. The model for success enacted through rules of exceptionalism is thus based on the dubious aspiration of individual progression from extreme marginalization, through organizational attachment, strengthening of autonomy, and exit from the social safety net. In reality, different points along the continuum correspond to distinct social groups, with symbolic discretion work applied to delimit the boundaries between them. Meanwhile, while not purposefully ignored, the average client in chronically resource-constrained environments has to do considerably more to secure staff responsiveness than those subject to rules of exceptionalism at the extremes. The latter ultimately serve as imperfect organizational justifications for why some beneficiary sub-populations receive exceptional assistance while others are subject to ordinary rules (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). For the countless beneficiaries who play by the rulebook on a daily basis, rules of exceptionalism translate into (at best) suboptimal and (at worst) inequitable allocation of resources. Below, I consider the broader implications of discretion work for inequality beyond the case of TDC.

Discussion

This article has developed the concept of discretion work, a particular type of boundary work describing actors' efforts to expand, contract, or stabilize their discretionary space by negotiating the limits between the application of allocative rules and exceptions. I propose that such negotiation occurs through the enactment of rules of exceptionalism in order to achieve organizational goals. In this sense, rules of exceptionalism do not simply constitute rule-breaking but rather more dynamic, semi-institutionalized processes of navigating tensions between consistency and flexibility, universalism and particularism, equity and equality in achieving a 'fair' allocation of limited resources.

Using the empirical context of a social service organization, I have discussed three types of discretion work governing *how* (procedural), *to whom* (symbolic) and *for what purpose* (evaluative) scarce resources are allocated within disadvantaged populations. Discretion work thus involves managing boundary processes with the dual goals of ensuring equality – premised on a universal application of rules – and equity – dependent upon the use of exceptions to accommodate particularistic needs. I have further argued that the enactment of rules of exceptionalism – when applied to outlier profiles – contributes to unequal treatment for the average beneficiary.

Although evidently applicable to street-level bureaucracies charged with allocating scarce resources among disadvantaged populations, the three types of discretion work carry implications for inequality across a broader range of organizational realities. Procedural discretion work most directly exemplifies the micro-foundations of unequal access to resources. It suggests that even the best intentions – maintaining a balance between equal treatment and equitable outcomes – can contribute to new forms of inequality. Positive discrimination – such as through affirmative action and diversity programs (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006) – provides one related context in which differential treatment aims to mitigate unequal outcomes, while at the same time contributing to inequality through stigmatization and reaffirmation of group differences (Lamont & Molnár,

2002; Leslie, Mayer, & Kravitz, 2014). With respect to symbolic discretion work, scholars have identified similar processes of channeling resources to population outliers (individuals at the top/bottom) in public schools, legal institutions, and hospitals (Archbald, 2004; Côté, 2005; Lara-Millán, 2014). Where common accounts of the basis of modern-day inequality point to an ever-widening gap between the extremes – e.g., between low-wage workers and the '1%' (Stiglitz, 2013) – symbolic discretion work identifies a distinct pattern. Rather than simply the poor getting poorer relative to the rich, who are getting richer, it is the obstructed path between the 'middle' and the 'top' that sustains inequalities. Finally, evaluative discretion work can reinforce patterns of inequality by providing justifications for the latter and curbing mobilization efforts against them. By helping to reframe organizational discourse around mission success and capacity to mitigate exclusion, such work may instead contribute to a 'discursive legitimization of inequality' (see Amis et al., forthcoming).

In identifying the micro-practices that reproduce (or reconfigure) boundaries of inclusion and exclusion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002), the article offers several contributions to the institutional literature on inequality. First, by integrating scholarship on boundary work and discretion in street-level organizations, it deepens our understanding of the everyday practices that amount to semi-institutionalized forms of unequal treatment, albeit mobilized in pursuit of equity. Concrete decisions about how, to which categories of beneficiaries, and for what purpose to allocate scarce resources constitute the micro-foundations of potential inequalities. The article furthers understanding of their *modus operandi* at the level of interactions between social service providers and beneficiaries, and beyond simple group divisions into 'us' versus 'them.' Additionally, where existing literature tends to examine inequality among clearly defined social groups based on gender, race or class, I examine how differential treatment operates when the very boundaries of groups are dynamically constructed through symbolic discretion work. Thus, against the common narrative of disparities between those in positions of power and the underprivileged, the case of TDC illuminates how inequalities among the underprivileged can be (re)shaped by third parties, even when the latter's privileges are not directly at stake. With respect to boundary work, the article thus sheds light on: 1) boundary-drawing *within* rather than across groups, as managed by external actors, and 2) boundary distinctions in the realm of *application* of objects (rules, exceptions) rather than among objects themselves.

Relatedly, the article introduces the concept of rules of exceptionalism to tease apart persistent debates about the role of institutionalized routines in reproducing inequality. Institutional scholars have suggested that as everyday practices become routinized over time, they enshrine social distinctions (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Lamont & Molnár, 2002). At the same time, scholars have pointed to the improvisational quality with which actors apply abstract rules to concrete cases (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012). In the first account, discretionary practices acquire a taken-for-granted nature; in the second, they constitute pragmatic responses without ambitions of formalization. Rules of exceptionalism tell a different story. They capture the constant productive tension (Canales, 2014) between actors' need to articulate rules and exceptions, while preserving discretionary spaces for dynamically revising both. As a member of TDC summarized, 'The same goes for everything here – we have a general framework, but that can be shattered in the interest of getting someone attached … As long as we know why we're going beyond the framework, we remain within [it]' (*Fieldnotes*). That is, micro-practices need not be fully institutionalized in order to reproduce inequalities; they may persist even where reflective discretion work actively questions the legitimacy of allocative principles.

Second, the article theorizes the often overlooked distinction between equality/universalism and equity/particularism (Cook & Hegtvedt, 1983; Heimer, 2011; Olsthoorn, 2013). Without such nuance, current perspectives have limited potential to articulate organizational conceptions and

practices of 'fairness.' For instance, what would it look like concretely to reduce gender inequality in the workplace or racial inequality in social and economic outcomes? Interchangeable use of the terms compromises the ability of scholars and practitioners to devise measures for combatting both unequal treatment and inequitable outcomes. The present article demonstrates how organizational actors grapple with this undertheorized question, attempting to strike a balance between universalistic principles of equality and particularistic principles of equity, acknowledging that differential treatment is sometimes necessary to achieve fair outcomes. Combined, these contributions aim to paint a more complex picture of the foundations of inequalities, and the inherent tensions and unintended consequences of efforts to reduce them.

Future research

The case of TDC also leaves a number of questions open for future research. First, one can imagine various organizational configurations along a continuum prioritizing rule-bound versus contingency approaches to allocative decisions. In some cases, organizational rules themselves may be left purposefully vague (Eisenberg, 1984), so that there is little need to formalize rules of exceptionalism separately. Conversely, discretion itself may be institutionalized through formal organizational policies (Kelly & Kalev, 2006). Among such configurations, which are more likely to lead to differential or 'unfair' client treatment? When does it make sense from the perspective of organizational members and/or beneficiaries to adopt versus avoid rules of exceptionalism? Comparative case studies could examine how different organizational approaches to discretion work mitigate or exacerbate inequalities.

Organizational systems for regulating discretion may also be related to the professional identity of organizational members (Watkins-Hayes, 2011). Among professionals whose identity is endangered, expanding or preserving discretionary spaces may represent forms of identity work, resistance, or institutional maintenance work (Currie et al., 2012; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Weiss & Huault, 2016). This may be particularly true among professionals whose core activities are increasingly out of their hands, such as humanitarian workers in the context of mass migratory crises, or doctors faced with unprecedented global epidemics. Future research could thus more explicitly focus on the role of identity in discretion work and its relationship to different forms of counter-agency (Prior & Barnes, 2011), both within and across organizational boundaries.

Scholars could also give greater consideration to the perspective of beneficiaries, possibly uncovering alternative forms of work. For instance, beneficiaries may exercise a considerable degree of their own discretion in maneuvering the organizational landscape of rules and exceptions to their advantage. Individuals may deliberately carve out a space for themselves 'in the middle' in order to remain relatively undisturbed within the organization. Illuminating such dynamics by including the beneficiary perspective constitutes a fruitful avenue for investigation. This also raises further questions regarding perceptions of inequality and unfair treatment by beneficiaries themselves, particularly when the latter engage in social comparison (see Buunk & Gibbons, 2007). Moreover, certain types of unequal treatment (e.g., granting an extra cup of coffee) are more visible than rules of exceptionalism applied behind closed doors (e.g., more employee time devoted to case management). For social workers, it can be extremely difficult to justify apparent differences in treatment before beneficiaries. The formulation of rules of exceptionalism may thus be one means of providing a social account (Belliveau, 2012) to enhance perceptions of allocative justice. Future work could investigate how perceptions of inequality mitigate or exacerbate substantive forms of marginalization, and the role of relative (in)visibility in unequal or exceptional treatment.

Conclusion

The case of TDC contributes one piece of a much bigger puzzle of how organizations may reconfigure boundaries of inequality, even while members try to remedy the latter within the confines of their own discretionary space. Originally, allocative rules and exceptions may have represented organizational attempts to ensure equity by encouraging differential treatment based on beneficiaries' varying degrees of marginalization. In reality, different forms of discretion work constituted through rules of exceptionalism seem to have marginalized the average client – caught between two extremes where favorable exceptions are granted. Ultimately, this highlights a fundamental paradox of designing organizations – particularly those that allocate social goods – to be simultaneously more consistent and adaptive, more equal and also equitable.

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Note

1. To protect the identity of the organization and its members, TDC is a pseudonym.

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