ABSTRACT

In street-level work discretion is inevitable. Scholars have articulated a dominant view or narrative that addresses the role of discretion in the administrative state. This state-agent narrative acknowledges inevitability of discretion and emphasizes that self-interest guides street-level choices: street-level workers use their discretion to make their work easier, safer, and more rewarding. In addition the dominant narrative describes street-level workers as policy makers, yet it worries about the threat that street-level discretion poses to democratic governance.

Street-level workers, themselves, tell a different story, a counternarrative of the worker acting as a citizen agent. These two narratives are not wholly inconsistent but they differ in emphasis and meaning. The description of the street-level counternarrative is based on extensive fieldwork in two states and five agencies. Rather than discretionary state agents who act in response to rules, procedures, and law, street-level workers describe themselves as citizen agents who act in response to individuals and circumstances. They do not describe what they do as contributing to policy making or even as implementing policy. Moreover, street-level workers do not describe their decisions and actions as based on their views of the correctness of the rules, wisdom of the policy, or accountability to any hierarchical authority or democratic principle. They base their decisions on their judgment of the worth of the individual citizen client.

Street-level workers discount the importance of self-interest and will often make their work harder, more unpleasant, more dangerous, and less officially successful in order to respond to the needs of individuals. They describe themselves as decision makers, but they base their decisions on normative choices, not in response to rules, procedures, or policies. These normative choices are defined in terms of relationships to citizens, clients,
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coworkers, and the system. By substituting their pragmatic judgments for the unrealistic views of those with formal and legitimate authority, street-level workers are, in their view, acting responsibly.

Story 1. Midwestern Police Department: “God Protect Me from the Police.”

I’m just relaying back to last week, the seventh of January. I was working in my office. [The storyteller is the second-in-command, the assistant to the chief of police.] The secretary asked me for my assistance because there was a citizen who wanted to talk to the chief of police. So I came out; the chief was out at that time.

So I came out and introduced myself to her and asked how I could help her. And she had shifty eyes, looking around in a very frightened manner like someone was chasing her.

I asked her if there was a problem. She said she wanted to talk to the chief about a problem with a police officer and she wasn’t sure if she was safe to come in and talk to someone in the police department about this problem. So I assured her that I would objectively try to help her, put her at ease, and escorted her into my office.

She said, prior to coming in, “I’ve been praying for three days on whether or not God would protect me to come into the police department and make a complaint.” And I asked her what her fear factor was or what her apprehension was, and she said it was her belief [that her fear came from the fact] that she was an African-American female.

She lived in the northeast area of the city, and she had had an incident with her husband, . . . she had been awakened in the middle of the night a day or two before. And the police came in looking for someone and thought he was the person they were looking for. They treated him very roughly, called him profane names, and after a period of thirty to forty minutes determined that he wasn’t the person they were looking for. They picked him up, brushed him off, said they were sorry and left.

He had had an upset stomach, was very sick, and had some sort of strained muscular problem in his back from the gruff way he was treated. They weren’t sure what to do about the incident. She was employed here in the city and was just afraid of retaliation, that they would come back and hurt her or hurt her husband. And she was very sincere. She had been praying earnestly and continually for three days, and was waiting for God to give

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1The storyteller was, we think, implying furtive rather than dishonest.
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her a sign that it was safe for her to come in and that He would protect her. . . .

I assured her that we would investigate things like that, that we took it very seriously in a straightforward process and our internal affairs process works directly with the chief's office. . . .

And I personally walked up to her and physically held her arm as we walked upstairs to the sixth floor and into the internal affairs office and introduced her to a detective who is very personable and a nice individual. I shared with him her concern, her level of fear and apprehension and indicated our desire to make her feel comfortable and allow her to present her complaint and then explained how the incident would be investigated. But I was sincerely shocked at her level of apprehension of coming into the department.

Story 2. Midwestern Vocational Rehabilitation: "You Can't Win for Losing."

We had a lady named Michelle who was one of my first new clients. I took her in the spring of 1989. . . . She is a lady who used to work insurance as a data entry person, then she developed diabetes and diabetic retinopathy and so her eyes were starting to lose vision. . . . and she wanted to have services so she could go back into that kind of work. She also needed some assistance in taking care of herself at home because she couldn't see well and her vision was going down rapidly.

So we opened a case, and we did all sorts of services. We had a rehabilitation teacher go out and assess her in her home. We provided services to help her take care of herself at home, like label her appliances for her so she could use them, you know with braille language and large print, the microwave, the washer and dryer, and these sorts of things. We helped her learn how to use a cane.

We saw she had a great need for training and vision skills so we sent her to [a residential program] for about five or six months. She learned braille, how to use the cane safely, and how to use the typewriter. With the vision loss she was exposed to talking computers. It was a really good workover. . . .

She was in the hospital quite a bit, and she ended up on [kidney] dialysis. . . . Well, she didn't feel . . . that she had the stamina . . . to work a full-time job. . . . She said she wanted to try medical transcription. . . . We can get the computer equipment for her at home, so she can do it when she felt good and

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when she doesn’t have dialysis because dialysis takes three or four hours and it really tires people out. . . . We helped her with some transportation costs and with the tuition costs of taking a few courses for medical transcription and medical technology.

We finished that . . . and then her health went down again. She had several different hospital stays and when she was finally done, she wasn’t sure she could do the medical transcription . . . and about fifteen months later her husband called and said that she died from complications from her diabetes.

She was a very nice lady, a very motivated lady despite all of the health problems. . . . We did all we can to provide the kind of services to her, . . . but . . . we couldn’t provide the kind of finish to the case because of her health. That is your can’t win for losing story.

These two stories tell of encounters between citizens and the state. The first is told by a police officer who has risen from working the street to the position of assistant chief and the second is told by a seasoned vocational rehabilitation counselor. The power the state has to frighten citizens with late night intrusions and thirty to forty minute “gruff” interrogations is juxtaposed against the power the state has to heal: The officer takes the hand of the frightened African-American woman and assures her that law and due process will sublimate police abuse, if such abuse objectively occurred. The second story tells of the compassion of the state, its mustering of extensive and expensive services to help “a very nice lady, a very motivated lady” deal with her deteriorating vision. The training—some at expensive residential treatment centers—equipment, and counseling never led to independence and a job, the policy goal of vocational rehabilitation, but the state through the actions of this counselor did not turn aside this needy citizen because success was unlikely. The state helped.

These two brief and simple stories touch on a fundamental issue at the foundation of the modern state (Chaney and Saltzstein 1998, 745). The modern state depends on the actions and decisions of a wide range of front-line workers, including police officers and vocational rehabilitation counselors, whose jobs require discretionary judgments but who have little formal authority. These street-level workers operate at the boundary between citizens and the state, and they profoundly shape the definitions of both through the actions they take and the norms they invoke. To the vocational rehabilitation counselor, Michelle was a citizen who deserved help and support. Michelle decided what she

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wanted and needed, and the counselor representing the state provided support, even though such support was not justified from a strict cost-benefit accounting. These actions were inefficient, even wasteful, but they were also caring. In the case of the devout but poor African-American woman, her two encounters with the police underscore the dual nature of the relationship between the street-level worker and the citizen. First the police violated her home and then they embraced her concern.

The modern state is Janus faced, and street-level judgments represent the best and the worst effects of institutional culture in the modern state. This dual nature is especially problematic because street-level decisions and actions are guided less by rules, training, or procedures and more by beliefs and norms, especially beliefs and norms about what is fair (Walker 1993, 151-52). Beliefs and norms are more elusive and resistant to change than rules and procedures; they are shadowy, never fully articulated, and often inconsistent. Street-level beliefs and norms do change, but rarely because of planned intervention by those with formal authority. These norms simultaneously support and further the goals of state programs, yet they are often subversive to formal authority and democratic accountability. Street-level beliefs are, therefore, essential to understanding the modern state.

THE NATURE OF STREET-LEVEL WORK

Street-level workers are a diverse group who share common experiences and raise common concerns. In most policy realms, but most assuredly in human services and criminal justice, governments cannot act merely by passing laws or articulating policies. Law and policy require that some state agency, usually a hierarchically organized state bureaucracy, enact law and policy. Brian Cook (1996, 176) writes, “In a democracy, it is inevitable that the reach of the people, in the guise of the state, will exceed the grasp of the law.” The limits of law, as Cook continues, place a special burden on those on the front lines: “This places public administration at the front lines of the contact and interaction between the state and citizen, confronting administrators with numerous opportunities to exercise discretion” (p. 176).

Those on the front lines of governing occupy the bottom rung of the hierarchy; they are simultaneously the furthest from the centers of power and the closest to the citizens. These street-level workers have the least formal authority. Nonetheless they have considerable discretion not only about which laws, rules, or procedures are applied or enforced but also about the nature and quality of the services delivered (Handler 1986, 2-3). The

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decision of the police to roughly treat the suspect in story 1 and the decision of the police assistant chief to humanely embrace the complaining wife were both discretionary judgments and were likely made within the parameters of rules and procedures. The decision of the vocational rehabilitation counselor in the second story to provide the expensive support and training was also a discretionary judgment that could have gone the other way if another counselor working with a less appealing client had decided that the state shouldn’t invest in such a hopeless case. Both decisions are reasonable and defensible following rules and procedures, but they have divergent consequences for the client and the state.

Thus, one fundamental characteristic of street-level work is that front-line state agents are bound by a long tether of hierarchical relationships, yet discretion permeates every decision and every action. There is some variation—teachers are subject to fewer rules than are police officers—but from the number of coffee breaks to the types of services provided to the manner in which an arrest is executed, nearly every aspect of street-level work is defined by rules and procedures. This is an essential aspect of bureaucratic life, yet rules and procedures provide only weak constraints on and loose parameters around street-level judgments. Street-level work is, ironically, rule saturated but not rule bound. Even the first link, the link to a supervisor, has little constraining influence over street-level decisions and actions (Brehm and Gates 1997, 2-3, 171). What weakens the link between street-level workers and supervisors, limits the reach of rules, and makes discretion inevitable is the second fundamental feature of street-level work, the face-to-face contact with the public and the recipients of services (Lipsky 1980).

A defining characteristic of street-level work and what distinguishes it from other work at the bottom of bureaucracies is the street-level worker’s direct contact with citizens. Unlike elected and other top government officials they do not see citizens as abstractions but as individuals: as clients, students, criminals, suspects, victims, and so on. Their relationships with these various citizen clients are personal and emotional, rarely cold and rational. In the two stories that introduced this article the relationship with the citizen could be caring or brutal but never distant or abstract—whether holding an arm to comfort or to intimidate, the contact is direct. Politicians and top officials talk about the abstraction of youth violence; police must confront the armed teenager. Politicians and top officials change policy to force clients off welfare; the vocational rehabilitation counselor must find the impoverished, disabled person a job. Politicians and top officials rail against social promotion in our schools; the teacher

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must decide whether to pass or to fail the student who is hard
working but hopelessly behind.

While the relationship between the street-level worker and
the citizen-client is personal and direct it is not a relationship of
equal power. Street-level workers are state actors who determine
who is hassled or arrested and who is protected or threatened.
They are also state actors who control resources and opportuni-
ties, especially for poorer Americans who must turn to the state
for basic needs. Joel Handler (1990, 18) reminds us that “depen-
dent people—poor, minorities, the uneducated, unsophisticated—
are often at a serious disadvantage [in their relationships with
street-level workers]. They lack the information, skills, and the
power to persuade. The official has the unfair advantage.” More-
over, the street-level workers manage their relationships with the
citizen clients to sustain and enhance their own power. Citizen
clients must, to a degree, yield to street-level workers to receive
state benefits or to avoid state sanctions.

TWO NARRATIVES

The inevitability of discretion in street-level work and the
questions this raises about the democratic control over bureau-
cracy and the implementation of public policy has long troubled
scholars of government; this issue is, perhaps, the fundamental
issue in theories of the administrative state (Chaney and Saltz-
stein 1998, 745). A dominant view or narrative has emerged that
addresses the role of discretion in the administrative state and
defines street-level workers as state agents. There is, however,
another view of discretion, a second narrative told by the street-
level workers themselves.

These two narratives—one that dominates the scholarly liter-
ature and a second expressed by street-level workers—are not
wholly inconsistent. They share important elements and observa-
tions but differ profoundly in emphasis and meaning. What is
striking is that the language and terms of the dominant scholarly
narrative are foreign and, for the most part, absent from the
street-level workers’ own narratives. It is as if the scholars of
the state and the workers in the state speak a different language. This
is not just the inevitable difference between the dictates of theory
and practice; it is an indicator of contrasting perspectives on the
role of the state.

We use the term narrative to describe these two views for
several reasons. These views are not theories in the narrow,
tested-by-observation sense of the term. Moreover, the issue is
not whether the dominant narrative is wrong and should be

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supplanted by the counternarrative. Rather, both narratives present detailed accounts of the role of street-level workers in the modern state. In places the two narratives tell the same story, yet in other places they present contrasting interpretations of similar observations. On other issues each narrative highlights different aspects of the modern state. Taken together these two narratives—with their areas of agreement, contrasting interpretation, and disagreement—form a deeper, more complex portrait of the modern state. The story of the administrative state cannot be told from a single perspective.

The research that informs this discussion is based on extensive on-site observation, in-depth entry and exit interviews, a questionnaire, and archival research. But street-level worker stories about fairness and unfairness are the primary source for observations about decision norms. Like all methods, story-based research has strengths and weaknesses. Stories reveal information that is rarely found in interviews or especially in other quantitative forms of social scientific information (Bellow and Minow 1996; Dienstag 1997, 7; Yanow 1996, 5). Stories allow the simultaneous expression of multiple points of view because they sustain and suspend multiple voices and conflicting perspectives. They can also present highly textured depictions of practices and institutions. Rather than merely repeating the rules or beliefs, a story can show what situations call for certain routines and how the specifics of a case fit or do not fit standard practices. Stories illustrate the consequences of following, bending, or ignoring rules and practices. They bring institutions to life by giving us a glimpse of what it is like to work in a state bureaucracy or cruise a tough neighborhood in a patrol car. They give research a pungency and vitality because they give prominence to individual actions and motives. Stories are the textual embodiments of the storytellers', in this case street-level workers', perspectives.

We collected 162 stories from street-level workers in five sites—two police departments, two vocational rehabilitation agencies, and one middle school—in two U.S. states, one western and one midwestern. It is important to stress that our observations do not assume that the stories are historically accurate accounts; our research examines norms and beliefs, not events. Moreover, our stories cannot help us understand the prevalence of a problem. Stories are biased toward the memorable and, therefore, the nonroutine and dramatic; they exaggerate the good and egregious and downplay the everyday. The observations reported here are inductively derived from the stories told by street-level workers.²

²This article presents the general argument describing two contrasting narratives about street-level judgments. A full explication of these themes and a detailed discussion of the narratives and other field data are found in Maynard-Moody and Musheno (forthcoming).

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STATE-AGENT NARRATIVE

The dominant scholarly narrative starts from the premise that street-level workers are state agents; they are government employees who are charged with carrying out the plans and policies of government agencies. This is true even when they, like the prison guards in a for-profit prison or teachers in a charter school, work for nongovernmental agencies that are hired by governments to implement policy. The street-level worker in a state-agent narrative has a long tradition in the political science and public administration literatures, going back at least to the classic distinction between politics and administration (for a review, see Rohr 1987, 113-59). The politics-administration distinction deals with the profound, and to many disturbing, influence of administrative implementors over the nature of policy by trying to draw a clear line between the democratic process of making policy and law and the bureaucratic process of carrying out policy and law (Waldo 1984; Wilson 1989).

Many scholars have rejected the separation of politics and administration. Critics argue that it does not describe how government works; it is a normative, not empirical, theory. But like a weed with roots deep in our intellectual tradition, the distinction between politics and administration, though thought to be uprooted, returns in different forms to our theories. In the 1980s it returned as implementation theory, which had an initial focus on policy failures as defined by the wide gap between political intentions and administrative implementation. By examining the role of policy implementors, this literature highlighted the influence of front-line workers but defined their work in terms of implementing the policy preferences of others.

More recently the politics-administration distinction has been reborn as principal-agent theory. Unlike implementation theory, which acknowledges the considerable influence of street-level workers, principal-agent theory attends to the narrower questions: Can, and how can, elected principals require and induce agency agents to implement their policy preferences? Can, and how can, top agency principals require and induce subordinate agents, including street-level workers, to implement their policy preferences? In this view hierarchy and accountability are essential to democratic and bureaucratic control. Even principle-agent theorists who acknowledge the impracticality of top-down control of street-level workers define working as conforming to rules, procedures, and orders. Any deviation from rules and procedures is denounced as "shirking" or "sabotage" (Brehm and Gates 1997; Brehm, Gates, and Gomez 1998). This fundamental rejection of the potentially positive aspects of street-level discretion is

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revealed in John Brehm and Scott Gates’ use of the perverse term “dissent shirking” to suggest positive reasons for deviating from rules or procedures (Brehm and Gates 1997, 21). The counselor in story 2 was not dissent shirking even if he was bending the rules to help a client.

The politics-administrative distinction’s hold on theories of the modern state is sustained because it touches on two core issues. Over the past century the state has taken on new responsibilities and burdens from social security to food safety: “[I]t has spread to all the corners of society and penetrated the intimate relationships between individuals, and the struggle for a decent life” (Handler 1990, 1). In the activist modern state a nagging question eludes answer: How can we retain democratic control over the decisions and actions of administrators, especially street-level workers who are the furthest from the reach of political and hierarchal control? Perhaps an even more important core issue is how the modern state changes the relationship of the citizen to her government. As Handler (1990, 1) asks, “How can the ordinary person maintain some sense of self in the modern state? How can the government be regulatory and caring in these large, complex and dense undertakings?”

The Inevitability of Discretion

Responding to these issues, the dominant, state-agent narrative has four major tenets. The first is that discretion is inevitable. Much agency and street-level work is routine and routinized. Marcia Meyers, Bonnie Glaser, and Karin MacDonald (1998, 13) estimate that 75 percent of the intake interviews with welfare clients they observed were handled by street-level workers with no deviations from the standard script. Nonetheless, the possibility of street-level discretion is constant, pervasive, and to a large extent outside the control of elected officials and government agencies. The issue is not the prevalence of discretionary judgments but the ever present possibility of discretion. “To classify the police task as bureaucratically routine and monotonous ignores the psychological omnipresence of the potential ‘good pinch,’” writes John Van Maanen (1978, 304) in “Observations on the Making of Policemen.” He continues, “It is precisely the opportunity to exercise his perceived policy role that gives the occupational identity of patrolman.”

Discretion is inevitable because of the nature of street-level work. Street-level workers make decisions case by case and client by client. Rules and procedures can never universally fit each individual and every circumstance, so judgments must be made. In many circumstances, street-level workers must decide which

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rule or procedure to apply. The proliferation of rules, often contradictory rules, requires matching the case to the rule or procedure, and this requires discretion. As Janet Vinzant and Lance Crothers (1998, 10) summarize, “Workers operate in a context established by law, or organizational rules, and so forth, but they interpret what these influences mean in specific cases.” Moreover, despite the video cameras in police cars and the detailed reporting required of other street-level workers, much street-level work remains hidden from direct supervision (Brown 1981; Lipsky 1980).

On a more abstract level, George Frederickson (1997, 99) reminds us that discretion is inherent in all acts of administration because “every application of a law involves further elaboration of that law.” Thus, like putty, discretion can be squeezed by oversight and rules but never eliminated; it will shift and reemerge in some other form in some other place. As Handler (1986, 8) writes, “[T]he citizen and state are locked into continual discretionary relationships.” This is a fact of life in the modern state.

Self-interest

The second element in the dominant narrative relates to what it is that guides street-level discretion. While acknowledging the inevitability of a mix of motives, the state-agent narrative emphasizes self-interest. In this view, street-level workers use their considerable and irreducible discretion to make their work easier, safer, and more rewarding. They make their work easier by managing their case loads, by focusing on easier clients, and by avoiding, dismissing, or reducing contact with the unpleasant or impossible cases. In this view they look for quick fix solutions for long-term problems. Often they invent procedures to move clients quickly and as effortlessly as possible through the system. They process rather than engage clients (Prattas 1979).

Street-level work can be dangerous and is often unpleasant. This is especially true for police officers, but teachers fear weapons in lockers and assaults by students. The foyers of many Social Security Administration offices are separated from the workers’ cubicles by bulletproof glass. Applicants are buzzed past the safety barrier only after they are deemed to be harmless; some scary-appearing applicants are interviewed through the glass. (Many of these bulletproof barriers were built after the Oklahoma City bombing of the federal office building. Social Security Administration offices tend to be on the first floor of federal buildings because they serve the disabled; they are literally on the front line.) Even then social security workers are

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quick to recall stories like the one told to us about a knife-wielding “crazy” who got past the barrier and threatened the intake worker. Social workers recount visits in dangerous homes and neighborhoods. Vocational rehabilitation counselors tell of angry or unpredictable clients. These conditions encourage street-level workers to use their discretion to make their work safer and more pleasant, even at the cost of providing better service.

Despite this, at times street-level workers go out of their way to help others. Many entered their professions as idealists, and even after years of overload, uncooperative clients, an indifferent public, and dilapidated, sometimes dreadful, working conditions they still need to preserve some meaning and value for their work. Many use their discretion to select a small number of cases or members of the public for special treatment, the kind of treatment they might provide all citizen-clients if they had the resources and energy, and importantly, if all the citizen-clients were responsive and receptive. At times this may involve extra attention or expedited services. Sometimes a client may receive additional and valuable services that are denied to a less valued client, such as the expensive job training provided to the “nice lady” in story 2. The police may ignore a crime or a drug stash for a hard-working mother while using a trivial offense to hassle a “bad guy.” In all of these cases the individual client, kid, or offender may benefit from these exercises in discretion, but the dominant narrative highlights the benefits to the street-level workers and the states they represent. As Michael Lipsky (1980, xii) summarized, “At best, street-level bureaucrats invent benign modes of mass processing that more or less permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and successfully. At worst, they give into [sic] favoritism, stereotyping, and routinizing—all of which serve private or agency purposes.”

Policy Making

The dominant narrative has a third tenet. It describes the isolated, local, client-by-client, offender-by-offender, kid-by-kid discretionary judgments of street-level workers as tantamount to political decisions and policy making (Brown 1981; Lipsky 1980; Weatherley 1980; Wilson 1989). Rather than making discretionary judgments within policy or at times contravening policy, this narrative views street-level decisions and actions as policy or equivalent to policy. By describing street-level workers, those at the very bottom rung of the administrative state, as policy makers, the dominant narrative turns the standard view of government and bureaucracy upside down. “Public policy,” according to Michael Lipsky (1980, xii), “is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking

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administrators, because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers."

With regard to what government actually does, as opposed to what it says it does, street-level workers are important decision makers. They deliver the services; they actualize policy. In this sense they are policy makers, at least metaphorically. Their decisions and actions are, however, localized and particularistic. It is difficult to identify how these small actions add up to policy. Does, for example, a pattern of police abuse add up to a policy of abuse? In one perspective such a pattern is de facto policy, and stated policies to get tough with gangs or other groups that threaten social order may encourage certain levels of police abuse. In many instances, however, street-level decisions lack the consistency and coherence to be called policy. A street-level worker may handle similar cases in different ways, and different workers in different agencies or regions make divergent choices. Moreover, when the observation that street-level workers modify policy through implementation is extended to the claim that street-level workers are policy makers, the normative questions of legitimacy and control reemerge with a vengeance.

Response to Discretion

Two basic responses have been made to the recognition of the inevitably and importance of street-level discretion on policy, and these responses constitute the fourth element of the scholarly narrative. Some see discretion as a danger that must be circumscribed and controlled to the extent possible; the street-level policy-making role must, in this view, be cut out at the roots. Andrew Polsky (1991) sees the rise of the street-level worker dominated "therapeutic state" as antithetical to freedom and democracy, but short of erasing twentieth century developments of the modern state, he offers little remedy other than trying "to restore to a central place in our discussion of whether a democratic society ought to engage in normalizing intervention" (p. 21).

The more customary (and more realistic) response to our suspicion that street-level discretion is incompatible with democratic governance is to find ways to control it—to somehow tame and tether discretion with a democratic leash (Simon and Skolnick 1989; Walker 1993). This, of course, is precisely the issue at the core of the politics-administration dichotomy. The most commonly tried and advocated controls over street-level discretion are bureaucratic: By increasing the extent and effectiveness of supervision and by elaborating and enforcing rules and

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procedures, street-level discretion can, in this view, be brought under the auspices of bureaucratic control.

This is especially true during a crisis. Most of the time street-level discretion is tolerated and ignored, but when discretion leads to scandal or public concern the response is always to enhance bureaucratic control. Because of the Los Angeles police beating of Rodney King more and more police cars have had video cameras installed to increase supervision. Police abuse in New York City has led to new guidelines for interacting with the public—even pocket-sized script cards to prompt good manners. Despite these efforts, realists lament that democratic control over administration cannot, in the end, really limit street-level discretion (Brehm and Gates 1997, 3). More worrisome is the observation that efforts to control discretion merely push it further underground and thereby weaken control and accountability (Brown 1981; Brodkin 1997, 3-4).

To acknowledge, however, that front-line staff are not and cannot be effectively controlled by supervisors does not mean that they are out of control or that their decisions and actions are inconsistent with public preferences and values. John Brehm and Scott Gates (1997, 197) suggest that there are at least three other sources of control or influence over street-level decisions. First, street-level workers exercise considerable control over their own behavior; to a large extent, their own beliefs, training, and professionalism restrain their decisions and actions. Although we are justified in our reluctance to rely on self-regulation, better selection, more thorough training, and increased professionalism may do more to channel street-level discretion than closer supervision and more regulation (Benveniste 1987). Second, for better or worse, fellow street-level workers exert powerful influence over each other's behavior; peer influence often trumps supervisory control. And last, the citizens with whom street-level workers interact exert considerable influence over street-level decisions and actions. For many, the citizen-client is their primary point of reference—not law, policy, or superiors.

The possibility of citizen influence over street-level discretion brings the discussion back to the broader questions of democratic control. Critics of discretion, such as Polsky, see the danger of unaccountable state agents making policy as they deliver government to citizens. But, as Joel Handler (1986) reminds us, discretion is also a source of creativity and responsiveness, especially when citizen control is strengthened and maintained. Without street-level discretion to interpret rules, procedures, and laws to fit the individual case the administrative state would collapse under the weight of its own rigidity, and

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street-level workers would be reduced to the “mindless technocratic functionaries” so feared by critics of bureaucracy (Harmon and Mayer 1986, 334). The dominant state-agent narrative thus recognizes the inevitability of discretion, and it describes street-level workers as being motivated largely by self-interest and acting as de facto political decision makers as they implement public policy. The need for, and yet the impossibility of, bureaucratic control makes the dominant narrative a cautionary tale; although some scholars acknowledge the creative potential of street-level discretion, most worry about the threat it poses to democratic governance.

CITIZEN-AGENT NARRATIVE

Story 3.
Midwestern Vocational Rehabilitation: “Slammed in the Rear.”

I tried an experiment with a chronic alcoholic fellow; a double amputee in a wheelchair. . . . He keeps talking about getting a job and I tried to get him a car. One thing we can’t do is purchase a vehicle; we can repair but not purchase.

So I tried and tried. Well, I decided he was still drinking. I have had him in and out of treatment. I have taken him to treatment and he was back home before I got home.

I have tried everything. Well, I decide to do whatever it takes to see if it will work. So I spend out of pocket about $1,000 repairing his car. And I was hoping that through all this kind of support and having someone that gave a damn about him [that he would finally turn his life around].

I liked this guy and wanted to try something new. When we first got the car we put hand controls on it. They delivered the car over to the place that puts the controls on it and I said, “Well just follow me home.”

So I got in my van waiting to get out on the road and all of a sudden BAAAMMMMM, he runs right into the back of my van. He didn’t get fifty feet. I thought I converted the man and he runs right into me. Maybe he is trying to tell me something.

People love to tell that story.


The other [story] I will move to is a [vision impaired] lady named Andira and before I started the job, way back in 1988,
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she had already worked with our agency. They put her through tons and tons of exams and ended up buying her some equipment like a talking scale and some items that helped her as a home-maker. And she was probably, I would guess, in her early twenties at that time and when I had first started the job she had already come back on the caseload, come back recycled, we like to call it recycling.

We don’t fail and have to redo clients, we recycle them and she came back through.

Well this time she decided that she wanted to work and she wanted to work in child care. So I went through her case, I wasn’t terribly pleased. I went through the case with the old counselor because there were some tests in there that maybe she had some personality problems and some self-esteem problems that she needed therapy and this sort of thing.

So we started the good old evaluation process and at that time we basically couldn’t move ahead with services for that client unless every single thing that a doctor mentioned could possibly be wrong was evaluated beyond belief. . . .

All together she was probably with me for five years and a good part of that time was evaluation after evaluation. We did physical examines, we did eye examines, we did low vision examines, we did psychological examines. The psychological examines suggest that she might have some learning deficits of some sort, and they weren’t sure what, so they wanted to do another examine, a neurological type of examine. . . .

So they did that and it took months and months because of the case process and I had to wait for each one of those reports to come back. I had to wait for it and then when it came back I had to go through it and figure out what was wrong, as far as the doctor or whoever the examiner was at that time was concerned, had to relay it to the client, the client was becoming very frustrated through the whole thing, very defeated.

Her self-esteem was in bad shape. . . . So the case was moving very, very slow. She wanted to go into child care and in the course of our examinations and in the course of our discussion she figured out child care to her probably wouldn’t be worth the money to go into it, that she would rather maybe explore computers and see if there is some kind of data entry job that she might be able to do. . . . Well we weren’t sure about buying her a computer, because we didn’t know for sure what she was going to need on the job. . . .

Well it got to the point where I was a little more experienced on the job and I had already picked a fight with
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supervisors and won a few battles and I already picked a fight with clients and supervisors and won a few battles so she said I don’t know what to do I can’t go anywhere because I don’t have the equipment that I feel like I need. If I go through training, why should I go through training, is it going to do me any good? Is it going to do anything or not, and I said well why don’t you do this.

I got an idea, and told Andira, “Why don’t you call the client assistance program in [state capitol] and raise holy hell, yell and scream do whatever you want to do, threaten lawsuits do whatever you want to do because you need a computer to do your job,” and I said “you have my supervisor’s number, right?” She said, “Yeah I do.” I said, “Good call him and tell him you are fixing to file an appeal because you are sick of the whole thing, you want a computer and you want it right now and tell him that you are tired of messing with the agency bull.”

And she said, “I have been upset with you from time to time, but is that going to get you into trouble?” She said, “I don’t want to get you into trouble.” And I said, “No, you will not get me into trouble.” I said, “Just don’t say that you heard it from me. Just do it, just call up and raise holy hell.” I said, “I will be right here waiting for my phone call which I am sure is going to come and I will cooperate fully with that phone call if they want me to produce a summary of your case or if they want to review your case that is fine. I will be ready for it. I will cooperate with it. I know how to order the computer for you. I know how to go through the contract and state bid proceedings on how to order the computer. So go to it, let them have it.”

She said, “It will not get you into any trouble?” and I said, “No, they are already familiar with your case, they know what it has been through and they almost expect you to raise hell anyway, so do it.”

So she did. . . . I hang up the phone and laugh to myself trying to figure out how long it would take for the supervisor to call me back and wait about fifteen minutes and bingo there he was on the phone.

And I said to my boss, “I knew she was upset, but she really called you. I’ll be darned. I know, I figured she was kind of mad you know and like you said if the client is upset I’ll give her the phone numbers and stuff and that is what I did.”

I said, “I think she wants a computer real bad, but I am not sure.” And he said, “Oh yeah,” he said, “I think we really don’t need an appeal on this.” And I said, “No I don’t think so.” I said “With all the evaluations and stuff that we have done it can get pretty nasty. I don’t think I would want an appeal.”

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I said, "I think we might lose that one, if I were you I don't think its a good idea. If I were you I would just shut-up and cooperate with her, you know if you want to know what I would do," but I said, "you are the supervisor you let me know. Let me know what you want to do with this thing," but I said, "I think it is going to get pretty ugly if you don't let it go." He said, "Well why you go ahead and do whatever you need to do to get her a computer." And I said, "Oh, OK well I'll do you know if that is where you feel we should go with the case I'll do it, it sounds OK I'll take care of it."

So I called her and I said, "Well it looks to me you must have done a pretty good job," I said, "you are getting your computer." She said, "I am?" and I said, "yeah." I said, "Whatever you said must have been pretty good." She said, "I did my best" and I said, "you did good, you did real good."

So we proceeded to get her a computer . . . and she has succeeded very well as a computer instructor and moved up in their system over there and she just recently applied to me again because she needs to, she needs some assistance with training and computer equipment and up-grading her skills so that she can learn windows applications so she can continue her employment.

I think it pointed out a flaw in the system and part of the reason why I rebelled and pushed her to go ahead in appealing was because I knew it would push the case ahead and I was sick of evaluating it and I was sick of my time and wasting my time and paperwork on it. So I figured that would push the client ahead and it would allow me to move on with that case. So I figured it benefitted everybody and it did and I got by with it.

For much of this century, from Woodrow Wilson to James Q. Wilson, from the politics-administration dichotomy, to top-down versus bottom-up implementation, to principal-agent theory, the state-agent narrative has shaped scholarly discussions of the administrative state. But, ironically and importantly, this narrative has little resonance on the front lines of governing. As we talked and listened to street-level workers—in our research, teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and cops—the language of the dominant, street-level workers as state-agent narrative was rarely spoken. This is not to say that the issues raised and discussed in this narrative are false or unimportant. Far from it. The centrality of discretion, the importance of self-interest, and the policy-making aspects of street-level decisions are central to understanding the modern state.

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Nonetheless, ideas about discretion, hierarchy, legitimacy, and policy implementation that are so central to contemporary political and administrative theory have little currency in the institutional culture of street-level workers. They are important theoretical issues but are not concepts that help us understand how street-level workers understand their role in government. Street-level workers tell a very different story, a counter-narrative, and to fully understand the modern state we must also hear their voices, attend to their own narrative. Joel Handler (1990, 3-4) writes, "[How] the inspectors, social workers, intake officers, police, teachers, health personnel, and even the clerks . . . interpret the rules, how they listen to the explanations, how they help the citizens or remain indifferent all effect the substance and quality of the encounter [between citizen and the state], an encounter made increasingly important because of our widespread dependence on the modern state." How do these street-level workers describe this encounter?

Rather than describing themselves as state agents, street-level workers describe themselves as citizen-agents. The last sentence of story 4 captures the citizen-agent credo, "So I figured it [his decision to bend the rules] benefited everyone [the client, the agency, and society] and it did and I got by with it." Their decisions and judgments exist in the context of rules, procedures, and agencies but are case specific and guided by normative, rather than legal, ordering (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 1999). Rather than using rules and procedures to guide judgments about individual citizen-clients, they make judgements first about the citizen-client and then turn to rules and procedures to help enact or, if negative, to rationalize their judgments. In story 3, the counselor did everything he could to help the alcoholic client, stretching every rule, using his own money, not because it was required but because he "liked the guy and wanted to try something new." Street-level decisions are based on practical knowledge and informal procedures and are improvisational in the face of unpredictability.3

Street-level workers are, as the dominant narrative suggests, influential state actors but, as their own narratives indicate, they don't see their decisions and actions as part of the governmental realm. They don't describe themselves as policy makers, decision makers, or even government workers. They acknowledge that they are government employees—the state pays, and in their view begrudgingly pays, their salaries—but they work for the client and families in human service organizations and for the public in criminal justice organizations. They do not see elected and agency officials, with perhaps the exception of their direct supervisors, as defining the scope and nature of their work; for the

3For a discussion of the need for these characteristics in a functioning state see, Scott (1998).

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most part, they consider them as irrelevant to their work. When legislators and top agency officials are relevant, they are seen as meddling and diminishing, not guiding or legitimating, their work. The word discretion rarely, if ever, enters the street-level vocabulary.

Thus, the street-level workers’ own stories about their judgments, work experiences, and encounters with clients, citizens, supervisors, and the public present a counternarrative to the dominant themes of public administration, political science, and sociolegal studies (Peters and Lankshear 1996, 2). It is important to repeat that we are not arguing that one narrative is true while the other is false. Every narrative, in Sanford Schram and Philip Neisser’s (1997, 5) view, “simultaneously builds . . . ‘structures of attention’ and ‘structures of inattention.’” These two narratives of the modern state, the dominant scholarly narrative and the street-level counternarrative, focus attention on different aspects of and perspectives on the administrative state. The dominant narrative, briefly summarized above, is well known to scholars. The street-level workers’ own counternarrative is less well known.

Critics may argue that the difference between these two narratives is semantics, just words, but the language we use to describe and define observations is central to understanding. Language differences matter. Building on Michel Foucault’s work, John Conley and William O’Barr (1998, 7-8) aptly summarize the importance of understanding various narratives. “The way that people talk about an issue is intimately related to the way that they think about it and ultimately act with respect to it. Discourse is thus a locus of power. . . . Discourse at the macro level . . . must manifest itself at the micro level as talk. It is only through talk, after all, that dominance can be expressed, reproduced, and challenged.” As we look at the modern state from the perspective of street-level workers, as we listen to their stories and their words, a different, and in places conflicting, narrative emerges. This narrative is summarized below.

Limits of Rules

Rather than discretionary state-agents who act in response to rules, procedures, and law—sometimes following the rules, other times bending or ignoring them—street-level workers describe themselves as citizen agents who act in response to individual citizen clients in specific circumstances, such as the likeable but feckless drunk in story 3 or the long suffering vision impaired woman in story 4. They do not describe what they do as contributing to policy making or even as implementing policy. They use

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policy as one of several resources as they do their jobs client by client, citizen by citizen, kid by kid. They do see their jobs as helping the disabled, teaching their students, or, in the case of the police, protecting the good citizen while getting the bad guys. In a general, inchoate form, this is implementing public policy. In the more specific sense of carrying out specific policy mandates—following a new procedure to expedite job placements, conforming to new rules about bilingual education, or complying with police department regulations against racial profiling—the policy implementation metaphor breaks down.

This does not mean that rules don’t permeate all aspects of street-level work—they do—or that most street-level actions don’t conform to agency guidelines—they do as well. The most common situation may be that rules and guidelines effectively fit the situation and are followed. When the rules and procedures fit, street-level judgment is not problematic; there is no conflict, no dilemma, and, not incidentally, no story to tell. Stories and conversation are inspired by and help tellers and listeners deal with ambiguous and conflictual situations, not routine events. Because our research is based on the stories and talk of street-level workers it is biased against the routine.

Thus a fundamental dilemma, perhaps the defining characteristic, of street-level work is that the needs of individual citizen-clients exist in tension with the demands and limits of rules. Like the requirement for endless evaluations in story 4, rules, procedures, laws, and hierarchy define the context of street-level work, but they intrude only superficially into the judgements about problematic, nonroutine cases. Story 4 underscores this issue. When the counselor was new to the job he, like a good state agent, followed rules to the letter and in so doing failed to help the client. As the counselor gained experience, he learned how to subvert the system and thereby serve the client and the system; he became a citizen agent.

Moreover, street-level workers do not describe their decisions and actions as based on their view of the correctness of the rules, wisdom of the policy, or accountability to any hierarchical authority or democratic principle. They base their decisions on their judgment of the worth of the individual citizen client (Maynard-Moody and Leland 1999). The issues of discretion, control, and accountability that preoccupy the state-agent narrative are virtually absent in the street-level workers own descriptions. Simply put, the street-level workers’ frame of reference is not the agency or the state but the citizen-client encounter. They define their discretion not in terms of following, bending, or
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ignoring rules but as pragmatic improvisations in response to these encounters.

Meaning of Success

Street-level workers also discount the importance of self-interest as a meaningful guide to their discretionary choices. (This, of course, does not mean that self-interest is unimportant; it is just not an explicit and prominent motive in street-level workers' narratives.) Street-level workers of all types tell of many cases or situations when they made their work harder, more unpleasant, more dangerous, and less officially successful in order to respond to the needs of the individual. As in the case of the nice lady in story 2 or the drunk in story 3, for some clients street-level workers overinvest their time and the state's resources even though the chance of success is slim. Vocational rehabilitation counselors tell of keeping cases open long after they could have been successfully closed—they postpone earning the valued "26," or case-closed code, by which their work is evaluated—because the client deserved the extra service and extra work.

In a world where case closure is the bureaucratic and policy definition of success, these long-term, open-ended cases are described in street-level stories as the sources' true worker and client successes, even though they could be considered implementation failures in the state-agent narrative. Teachers and cops tell of risking their own safety to protect the good and punish the bad. Other street-level workers tell us of times when they jeopardized their careers to help a citizen client or a fellow street-level worker. In contradiction to principal-agent theory, they ignore orders and challenge their supervisors and the very agencies in which they work to help a needy client. One vocational rehabilitation counselor sued her own agency to help her client, just as in story 4 the storyteller convinced his client to file a complaint against himself to get his supervisor to approve the computer purchase. Cops will ignore serious offenses committed by someone they see as a good person—for example, the minor drug dealing of a poor, hard working immigrant—while treating harshly the trivial offenses of someone they see as a threat to society.

No one would deny that street-level workers make decisions and take actions based in part and at times on their own self-interest, as the state-agent narrative suggests. The point here is that this picture is incomplete and distorts our understanding of governing on the front lines. The street-level workers' own narratives focus attention on other motives and their willingness

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to make their work harder, more dangerous, and in a bureaucratic sense, less successful in their efforts to help citizens. This is a key element to the citizen-agent narrative.

Moral Judgments

Street-level workers do describe themselves as decision makers. In the words of one vocational rehabilitation counselor, “[T]his job is all about judgment.” Whether it is the snap judgment of the patrol officer or the more studied evaluation of a counselor, street-level workers are constantly making discretionary decisions. On this the two narratives agree. The state-agent narrative focuses attention on the disjuncture between street-level judgments and the rules and procedures that come down the hierarchy from elected and top officials. The dominant narrative asks, Do judgments conform to rules and if not do they at least conform to general policy goals? And if the rules are found to have little direct influence on street-level decisions, the state-agent perspective asks, Are street-level judgments sufficiently consistent that they can be described as lawful? For example, Jerry Mashaw (1983, 213) found that the discretionary judgments of Social Security Administration workers were highly predictable and formed, in effect, “an internal law of administration.” These judgments did not always follow the rules, but they were so consistent that he characterized them as law-like.

Street-level workers’ own words about their judgments tell a different story. Rules and procedures are present; they are, like the office or neighborhood, part of the setting. In this way, rules constrain judgment, but street-level workers do not describe their judgments as legalistic and guided by rules, procedures, and policies. Rather they describe their decisions as normative, an exercise in moral reasoning rather than rule following or even rule breaking. They first make moral judgments about the relative worthiness of the citizen client, and then they use rules, laws, and procedures to help those they consider worthy and punish those they deem unworthy. Even when they are merely carrying out a new mandate, such as the automatic arrest in a domestic violence call, street-level workers infuse their actions with morality. As Steve Herbert (1996, 803) observes, “[O]fficers . . . act not just to enforce legal codes but to buttress wider notions of moral correctness. The legal action of, say, arresting a spousal abuser is justified not just as a legal proscription but as a morally laudable act.” One of the issues central to understanding the street-level workers’ narrative is, therefore, What moral standards do they enforce?
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Relationships, Not Rules

In their counternarrative, street-level workers also define their work, and to a large extent themselves, in terms of relationships, not rules. The exercise of discretion exists in the context of social relations, not, as the state-agent narrative emphasizes, in the context of the abstract, formal, and hierarchical duties and responsibilities as defined by law and policy. Street-level workers do occupy specific roles in the formal hierarchy and this profoundly shapes their institutional culture, but their decisions and actions are guided by meaning, not function. Social relations and "different images of the self-in-relationships," to borrow Carol Gilligan's (1986, 239) phrase, shape, guide, and give meaning to their exercise of discretion.

Street-level work is embedded in three key relationships. The first is the worker's profoundly paradoxical relationships with various citizen clients. The different types of citizen clients define the variations of street-level work. Vocational rehabilitation counselors work with the disabled, who for the most part are deemed worthy of state support and intervention, the "deserving poor" (Handler and Hollingsworth 1971, 18-19). Police officers must deal with offenders and others who often are seen as a threat to the community. In the human services the ability for street-level workers to do their jobs depends in large measure on the cooperation and compliance of clients. Police officers are in a greater position to require, even force, compliance. The various relationships between workers and citizen clients define in large measure street-level work. It is the source of the workers' greatest sense of accomplishment, but also the relationship that proves the most difficult, frustrating, troubling, and at times threatening.

Street-level workers also have strong cultural bonds to fellow street-level workers, both within and across agencies. This second key relationship provides the workers with their primary reference groups. After the formal training is completed, street-level workers learn their jobs from their peers. When questions or dilemmas arise, they turn to peers for advice and support. The encounters with citizen clients define their work, but these relationships are fraught with the tension and conflicts inevitable in a relationship of unequals. In contrast, relations with fellow street-level workers is one of mutual support.

There are exceptions. One police officer recalled a generational clash in her department when a motorcycle cop picked a fight with a bicycle cop. Vocational rehabilitation counselors described organizational clashes with rigid welfare workers. In the story "Harder than Brain Surgery," a voc rehab counselor

*This phrase is appropriated from Conley and O'Barr's (1990) study of litigants.

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had a client who needed brain surgery to remove a tumor and then needed additional welfare support during the recovery so he could keep his home. The voc rehab counselor, acting as a citizen agent, was able to pay for the expensive brain surgery but had great difficulty getting a few hundred dollars in housing support from the rule-bound welfare worker acting as a state agent; getting the housing allowance proved to be harder than brain surgery. By showing the absurdity and costs of rigid rule following, this story highlights the importance of street-level workers acting as citizen agents. These examples aside, street-level workers form an organizational caste that shares institutional culture and identities. Caste membership is essential to understanding their beliefs and judgments.

Street-level identities are also shaped by workers' often conflictual relationship with what they call the system. The system is an undifferentiated amalgam of other units in their own agency, other agencies, elected officials, and the media. These institutions and actors, which are the primary focus of the state-agent narrative, are present in the street-level workers' counter-narratives, but they are shadowy, diffuse figures of relatively little importance. Street-level workers see themselves as independent moral actors and in opposition to the system. They rarely describe themselves as part of the system.

To the street-level worker, the system provides limited and limiting resources, but only loose guidance and constraint. The system often intrudes into their work, often in the guise of reform, but street-level workers spend considerable effort sealing themselves off from the demands and dictates of the system. They build and maintain walls between themselves and the larger governmental system. These walls are essential aspects of the us-against-them street-level institutional culture. As in story 4, time and again, street-level workers tell how they get around the system and battle the system to help the worthy and punish or restrain the unworthy, all with little or no cost to themselves—even when they violate direct orders. Street-level identities are thus formed in their encounters with citizen clients, in solidarity with fellow street-level workers (or at least those who act as citizen agents), and in opposition to the restraints of the undifferen-
tiated governmental system.

Pragmatism

Street-level workers are not, however, idealists who impose abstract notions of morality or enforce philosophical views of justice, fairness, and right. They are pragmatists who temper their efforts to do the right thing with a clear understanding of

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what is possible, both for the individual citizen client and the community. Street-level pragmatism is forged in the three relationships we discussed earlier, especially the relationship to the citizen client. Street-level workers do not think abstractly about the deserving poor, they deal with the blind woman who qualifies for assistance but has a personality disorder that will forever limit her ability to function in society. They do not worry about zero tolerance for drug policy when they ignore small-scale marijuana dealing by a hard-working day laborer.

Street-level workers are proud of their pragmatism, their street smarts. Ironically and with humor, story 3 tells how the events (not the agency) punished the counselor who abandoned common sense in his desire to help. The story warns that the impractical get "slammed in the rear." In the view of the street-level worker, this reality-tested pragmatism makes their judgments superior to that of the other actors in the system. Their pragmatism is based on both first-hand experiences and handed-down wisdom from fellow street-level workers—wisdom often handed down in the form of stories. Even hardened police officers often express a surprising idealism about their work, but street-level workers are pragmatists who express disdain for the ungrounded knowledge of politicians, agency officials, and intellectuals. Their direct supervisors may be spared this distrust, but only if they have—as have most of them—risen from the ranks and retain their respect for street-level pragmatism.

In the street-level workers' narratives, law makers and rule enforcers often are portrayed as feckless, completely out of touch with reality, whereas street-level workers portray their own judgments as correct and tempered by experience. Their counter-narrative stresses the superiority of street-level judgments. The abstract and often seemingly foolish decisions and policies of law makers and top officials are, to the street-level worker, an annoyance imposed by an impractical and ineffectual elite to whom they give little respect and deference. By substituting their pragmatic judgments for the unrealistic and untenable views of those with formal and legitimate authority, the street-level workers are, in their own view, acting responsibly. They are taking on the burden of making moral and pragmatic judgments that alter the lives of citizens. They justify their decisions and actions as improvements in policy over the unrealistic decisions and actions of those with formal and legitimate authority.

In the counternarrative the moral and pragmatic judgments of street-level workers have profound and far-reaching consequences for individuals and society. For example, in story 4 the decision by the exasperated counselor to subvert the rules

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achieves lasting success for the client, who gets and keeps a good job. The counselor redeems the system by breaking through the bureaucratic labyrinth. Moreover, the street-level workers’ encounters with citizen clients become the context where core community values of order, rights, and good behavior are defined and enforced. In her study of New England court clerks, Barbara Yngvesson (1988, 444) observed that preliminary hearings "became arenas where particular notions of order are articulated and reinforced: concepts of the good neighbor, the responsible parent, or the brainless 'down-street' person; ideas about vicious and everyday behavior; and beliefs about the kinds of settings where brainlessness, threats, and other behavior are tolerated by the court."

Deciding who is a good or a bad person, who has rights and who is disenfranchised, and what community actions are tolerated or punished—sitting in lawn chairs shooting off firecrackers on the Fourth of July is patriotic; sitting in lawn chairs and listening to loud Latin music is a threat to social order—have material consequences for individuals and society. Street-level workers allocate state-provided resources and services. State-provided resources are often inadequate to the needs of individuals, and this scarcity gives street-level workers enormous power over citizen clients. They must make triage-like decisions as they ration time, money, and participation in programs to individuals. They must decide not only who should be helped but who can be helped. Moreover, if clients, especially poor and dependent clients, want or need state resources, they must yield to the workers’ authority. Street-level workers are also in the position to impose state sanctions as they decide whose behavior is carefully scrutinized, who is questioned, and who is arrested.

In sum, street-level workers are, in their own narratives, empowered citizen agents, who in their decisions to ration resources, provide access to programs, and sanction individuals both communicate and convey social status. As Janet Cole Vinzant and Lane Crothers (1998, 19) observe, "Importantly, by making such judgments, in a very real sense these workers help define what it means to be a citizen in America." More than merely enforcers or implementors of law, street-level workers’ narratives indicate that they are enforcers of values. They are citizen agents who help create and maintain the normative order of society.

COMMENT

The state-agent and citizen-agent narratives are clearly distinct, at key points incommensurable. Each narrative focuses

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attention on different perspectives of the administrative state. The state-agent narrative is told primarily by scholars and elected or top appointed officials. It draws attention to the tension between the inevitability and the threat to democratic governance of street-level discretion. One danger highlighted by the state-agent narrative is that street-level discretion gives front-line workers the unfettered opportunity to make decisions based on their self-interest rather than on law and policy. They are in a position to substitute self for public interest. These discretionary judgments elevate street-level workers from the lowly position of policy implementors to the status of de facto policy makers. The state-agent narrative emphasizes the limits of bureaucratic control.

Street-level workers tell a different story. They do not describe their decisions as based on the correctness of the rules, wisdom of the policy, or accountability to any hierarchical authority or democratic principle. They do not see themselves as policy makers or even policy implementors; policy is not prominent in their decision norms. Street-level workers see themselves as embattled and encumbered by the state; their frame of reference is not the agency or the state but the citizen-client encounter. They see themselves as citizen agents who improvise in response to these encounters. Their decisions and actions are based on their judgments of the individual citizen client, tempered by pragmatism. Street-level judgments are grounded in what is possible to achieve, given the nature of the individual citizen client and the constraints imposed by the state.

The divergence of these two narratives suggests a further complication. One does not need to step back very far from viewing governing from the street-level workers’ perspective to see that they are, even if their own narratives don’t acknowledge it, both state agents and citizen agents. Their decisions and actions do have implications well beyond the cases at hand; they are not independent actors. While their own stories emphasize exclusively their responsibility to the citizen client, the dilemmas of discretion will not be resolved until street-level workers assume similar responsibility for their roles as state agents. Many street-level workers do acknowledge and accept the tension between these two roles, even though this acknowledgment is virtually absent from their own stories. By taking on their role as state agents, street-level workers need to see their work in a larger context and acknowledge the legitimacy of constraints and guidance imposed by other officials. This requires, however, that elected officials and top administrators acknowledge the creative potential and the pragmatic wisdom of street-level judgment. Before street-level workers will take on their roles as state

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This argument is similar to Rosenbloom and Carroll (1990).
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agents, however, their roles as citizen agents must be recognized and granted legitimacy.

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