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STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY: DILEMMAS OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN PUBLIC SERVICES. By *Michael Lipsky*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 1980. Pp. xvii, 244. \$20.

For as long as there have been social services, there have been social service reforms. Michael Lipsky attributes the persistence of social service inadequacies to the difficulties experienced by "street-level bureaucrats" — the government employees such as welfare workers, policemen, and teachers who work directly with the public. Lipsky asserts that it is the day-to-day actions of street-level workers, rather than their agency's official statements, that actually determine policy. Agencies perform inadequately because street-level bureaucrats abandon abstract goals to mitigate the immediate and persistent pressures of their working environment. These pressures frustrate any policy or reform that requires behavior incompatible with street-level workers' daily needs.

Street-Level Bureaucracy begins by describing the jobs and working conditions of social service workers. Lipsky views street-level bureaucrats as the necessary link between government and the needy. Since these employees are in the best position to evaluate the needs of each client, effective assistance requires that they retain considerable autonomy and discretion. Because they realize the importance of this discretion, street-level workers resist attempts by agency

management to curtail it. Although in theory, managers can dictate work methods, in fact they generally respect the workers' autonomy because such an attitude increases productivity (p. 19). Street-level workers are thus able to choose their own working patterns. In an ideal world, they would give their clients individualized and thorough attention. However, their working conditions are far from ideal.

Lipsky describes two conditions that restrict the discretion of street-level workers. The first and most constraining is a chronic shortage of resources that persists because the demand for a service always increases to match the supply (p. 33). This elastic demand perpetuates a "cycle of mediocrity": new clients absorb resource increases and the quality of service deteriorates or remains the same (p. 38). Since it cannot help all potential clients, the bureaucracy must ration its service supply (p. 39).

The second condition described by Lipsky is the absence of clear guidelines for this rationing process. Agency goals are often so ambiguous or conflicting that street-level workers cannot set clear priorities (p. 40). Even when agency goals are clear, they often provide no useful managerial guidelines because they require consideration of too many unmeasurable factors (p. 49). And simple performance measures, such as the number of cases processed, may distort worker priorities. Thus, neither agency objectives nor managerial controls guide street-level workers, and expediency, rather than principle, shapes the rationing process.

These working conditions limit the street-level workers' ability to provide high quality service to their clients. Lipsky asserts that they respond to this frustrating situation by trying to minimize the pressures that they face and by trying to preserve their ability to serve at least some clients to some extent (pp. 81-83). He identifies a change in worker attitudes as one such response. To reduce the gap between their objectives and their accomplishments, street-level bureaucrats restrict their concept of their jobs. To make that gap more acceptable, they form new opinions about their clients (pp. 140-42). A teacher who abandons the ideal of helping all children in a class, and who instead concentrates on a few, manifests the first attitude change. A teacher who explains a student's problems by referring to the student's background or lack of motivation, rather than to the quality of the teaching services, evinces the second.

In addition to changing their attitudes, street-level workers also respond by developing patterns of practice that enable them to re-

duce demands for services.¹ For example, agencies may discourage clients by making application procedures complex and time-consuming (pp. 88-104), while bureaucrats may reduce their workload by becoming unresponsive (p. 100). Street-level workers further reduce stress by assisting only those clients whose problems seem tractable (pp. 105-07).²

By focusing on street-level workers' responses to the resource shortages and inadequate guidelines inherent in social service delivery, Lipsky convincingly explains the persistent shortcomings of social service bureaucracies. He then considers a number of reform proposals in light of this explanation.³ Lipsky advocates measures designed to bolster the enthusiasm of street-level workers: increased salaries and rewards for effective performance, development of a supportive peer environment, and official recognition that street-level workers do shape policy (pp. 204-07). But Lipsky's own model highlights the weaknesses in his proposals. Although his thesis is that day-to-day pressures restrain the street-level workers' exercise of discretion, his reforms offer no way to mitigate those pressures. In fact, one measure he favors — increased client input (p. 204) — might actually increase them. In the conclusion of the book, Lipsky recognizes the weaknesses of his position. He asserts that most reforms are ineffective because they are developed by only one of the three interested groups: managers, street-level workers, and clients. Only an unlikely coalition of these groups, he says, can devise effective reforms (pp. 210-11). Thus, in the end, Lipsky offers no solutions because he finds the causes of social service failures in the services' fundamental and unalterable characteristics.

Finally, two minor shortcomings of *Street-Level Bureaucracy* are worth noting. First, Lipsky attempts to explain certain patterns common to all social service agencies. His analysis suffers from the inevitable difficulty of fitting into one mold such diverse services as

1. The agency's management seems to have consciously chosen most of the practices Lipsky describes. This is inconsistent with his overall approach, which asserts that the pressures affecting street-level workers differ from those affecting management. P. 18. Here, he apparently assumes that those pressures operate on both workers and management in the same way. Although this does not necessarily damage his model, he should have explained his focus.

2. Lipsky illustrates these patterns by referring to Hosticka's study of legal services, which shows that legal services lawyers behave like other street-level bureaucrats. See C. Hosticka, *Legal Services Lawyer Encounter Clients: A Study in Street-Level Bureaucracy* (Ph.D. Dissertation MIT 1976). The norms of the legal profession require that lawyers protect their clients' interest, respect and encourage their autonomy, and treat each case individually. But legal services lawyers tend to dominate their clients and attempt to fit each case to a preconceived pattern.

3. Lipsky notes that his analysis of the causes of bureaucratic problems lends itself to defeatism: "To identify a set of social relations as a political system is to draw attention to the relative stability of the patterns of interaction that make it up." P. 188.

police patrols, elementary school classes, and legal services interviews.⁴ The argument might have been stronger had Lipsky examined a few agencies in depth and compared them at each step of his analysis.⁵ Lipsky's method emphasizes selected similarities but does not highlight the differences that might have provided additional insights. In addition, the author never reconciles his ideas with contemporary bureaucratic theory. Lipsky relies on a number of empirical studies of specific social services, but he fails to compare the theories generated by those studies with his own conclusions. While he states that his work differs from studies of interaction within bureaucracies, he never describes the differences.

Despite these shortcomings, Lipsky's insights into the structure of street-level bureaucracy could be useful, if unencouraging, to anyone with an interest in social service organizations. His theory of street-level bureaucracies is insightful, and his book should help clarify the debate over social service reform.⁶

4. Lipsky recognizes this problem: "Some readers may find themselves distracted by their recognition of exceptions to the generalization presented here. It is only to be expected that an elaboration of central tendencies such as the description of street-level bureaucracy cannot apply evenly to all the cases from which the generalizations are drawn." P. xvi.

5. A graduate student who worked for Lipsky has taken this approach. See J. PROTAS, *PEOPLE-PROCESSING* (1979).

6. Other reviews of this book include: Mollenkopf, Book Review, *NEW REPUBLIC*, Sept. 27, 1980, at 37.