

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL

Name: Tiffany Wright

For
Project:

College: Arts & Sciences Department: Public Administration

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Robert Cunningham

PROJECT TITLE: Bringing Michael Lipsky's Theories
into the 21st Century

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Robert B. Cunningham, Faculty Mentor

Date: 5-7-03

Comments (Optional):

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - PROSPECTUS

Name: Tiffany Wright

For Project: College: Arts & Sciences Department: Public Administration

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Robert Cunningham

PROJECT TITLE: Bringing Michael Lipsky's
Theories into the 21st Century

PROJECT DESCRIPTION (Attach not more than one additional page, if necessary):

This project will be about the attitudes and behaviors of street-level bureaucrats as they pertain to Michael Lipsky's book Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services. We will conduct a series of interviews with the Department of Children's Services and the Community Services Agency to see how they manage their relationships, case loads, and stress.

Projected completion date: Fall 2003

Signed: Tiffany Wright

I have discussed this research proposal with this student and agree to serve in an advisory role, as faculty mentor, and to certify the acceptability of the completed project.

Signed: Robert B. [Signature], Faculty Mentor

Date: 5-7-03

Return this completed form to The University Honors Program, F101 Melrose Hall, following your first presentation in the Senior Project Seminar.

Abstract

Whether or not Michael Lipsky's theories about the attitudes and behaviors of street-level bureaucrats presented in his book are still prevalent in bureaucracies today, some twenty years later, is being investigated. A series of interviews with the Tennessee Department of Children's Services (DCS) a public agency that serves children who have violated the law, who are at risk of violating the law, or whose parents cannot or will not care for them properly, and the Community Services Agency (CSA) a non-profit agency that serves as an administrative arm of DCS, are being conducted to gather specific information from the SLBs themselves. This information will tell about how they deal with their relationship, caseloads, and stress. We expect the data to show that there is a significant relationship between DCS and CSA that is directly related to Lipsky's theories. The findings will allow us to understand the system and provide helpful suggestions to better the system as a whole.

Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services, written by Michael Lipsky in 1980, is an analysis of street-level bureaucracies which describes the process whereby lower ranking employees of human service agencies utilize some level of discretion to determine actual public policy. He calls these workers “street-level bureaucrats (SLB)” and defined them as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (Lipsky, 1980, p. 3). A few examples of these type of workers include teachers, police officers, judges, and in this study, social workers. Lipsky argues that these relatively low-level employees should be viewed as policy makers, rather than implementers of policy. This is because policy reform is nothing but paper until street-level bureaucrats have delivered it to the citizens (Winter, 1997). Once it is delivered to the citizens, it is in the form that the street-level bureaucrat wants them to see it, therefore the actual policy or what is specifically told to them to do, can be distorted because of the substantial level of discretion the SLBs have in doing their daily job. As Lipsky puts it, “the decisions of SLBs, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policy they carry out” (1980, p. xii). However, they are supposed to enforce or manage the services and programs by the state or federal government. Lipsky goes on to argue that the organizations that serve dependent populations, disadvantaged individuals who need the services given by the specific organization, cannot fulfill their full work capabilities because of low funding and large work loads.

Dr. Robert Cunningham, professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, concludes from his research that “Street-level bureaucrats, facing pressures from clients caught in difficult personal situations, pressures from the agency to improve the lives of clients, yet restricted in terms of their resources, burn out quickly” (2001). This relates to Lipsky’s central point that SLBs feel overburdened with work and try to make their life easier or bearable by rationing their work and distorting their behavior from the policy intentions of the law and their potential superiors. The purpose of this research is to see whether or not the theories on street-level bureaucracy projected in Michael Lipsky’s book still hold true today. We would like to see if these theories about a public agency serving a dependent population are prevalent by focusing on a single system. We chose to study the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services (DCS), which serves children who have violated the law, who are at risk of violating the law, or whose parents cannot or will not care for them properly. We would like to understand the way the system works, comment on Lipsky’s generalizations about the attitudes and behaviors present in bureaucracies that serve disadvantaged segments of society, and to offer any suggestions appropriate for the study of the theory of street-level bureaucrats (Cunningham, 2001). I will be specifically analyzing the relationship between the Department of Children’s Services and the Community Services Agency, which is a non-profit agency that works closely with DCS, the SLB workload, and the stress that they face. To provide a better understanding of what exactly will be addressed, I will begin my paper with an overview of Lipsky’s book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*.

Lipsky begins the book with a discussion of the points of controversy regarding the street-level bureaucrat. In doing so he gives the reader an understanding of how street-level bureaucracy and bureaucrats affect people's behaviors and actions, which is through the giving and taking away of benefits and opportunities. He then goes on to explain their significance. There are a number of reasons provided on this topic, but one that will be directly related to this paper involves the amount of public money it takes to fund these services, pay for the personnel, and the added responsibilities of the SLB. These added responsibilities are a direct result of increased public expectations on government to provide services at an affordable cost. Since the bureaucrat will be the only one delivering these services, they will decide on their specific method to deliver the services, which will then have a direct impact on the client's life and way in which they perceive the government. This is an example of Lipsky's reasoning that SLBs determine the actual policies of the programs or services provided by the state. Collectively, bureaucratic decision-making and behavior are reflections of the agency to the public. Lipsky supports this part of his theory by describing the relationship between managers and workers, which is what initially affects the bureaucrats' behavior and decision-making. He also discusses several conflicts within the system, one of which stems from this relationship because sometimes managers and their employees do not agree on either the organization's goals and objectives, or on how to carry out these goals and objectives (Lipsky, 1980, p. 17). The result is two people working with different interests in mind, which leads to disagreement. "...Street-level

bureaucrats will perceive their interests as separate from managers' interests, and they will seek to secure these interests" (Lipsky, 1980, p. 19).

The next section of the book describes conditions at work. The first element Lipsky looks at is the inadequacy of resources. Examples of these include the following: lack of time, lack of information, big caseloads, constant pressure to make decisions quickly, the cost of getting information, and a lack of experience in the field. According to Lipsky, demand will always meet and exceed supply in street-level bureaucracies. "A distinct characteristic of the work setting of street-level bureaucrats is that the demand for services tends to increase to meet the supply. If additional services are made available, demand will increase to consume them. If more resources are made available, pressures for additional services utilizing those resources are forthcoming" (p. 33).

This brings up the question of quality of services. He explains that services would not improve because of the inadequate resources even if the number of caseloads decreased. The limited resources will have a negative impact on the bureaucrat's work experience, which will then determine the impact that the client will face.

The second element Lipsky discusses is the presence of conflicting, unclear, or ambiguous goals, and difficulty in measuring performance. For any organization to run effectively and efficiently clearly written goals and predetermined performance measures are essential. Without these, the SLB has more discretion to do the job as he or she sees fit. However, if the goals of the agency are provided and certain individuals simply decide to make other things priority, major conflict may arise. The performance

of the organization or agency as a whole may also be affected if too many people decide to do this. Lipsky gives three sources from which goal conflicts arise. The first one is client-centered goals versus social engineering goals. The second source is client-centered goals versus organization-centered goals, and finally, role expectations of bureaucrats are expressed through several conflicting groups (p.41).

The third element among street-level bureaucracies is the dynamics of the bureaucrat-client relationship. In most cases, SLBs provide services that some citizens cannot get anywhere else, which lead to a co-dependency relationship (Lipsky, 1980, p. 54). Clients depend on bureaucrats to receive benefits, and bureaucrats depend on clients to comply with their expectations and decisions. The next element evaluated is the presence of alienation and the conflicting role of being an advocate and a bureaucrat. This is a major cause of stress among SLBs. When one is an advocate for something they care about it, and in these cases, work to ensure the client the best possible treatment they can receive from that service. Bureaucrats, however, are supposed to be detached and treat everyone equally so no claims of special treatment can be made. They are supposed to act as if they have fixed limits on resources, whereas, advocates act as if there are no limits on resources (Lipsky, 1980, p. 73). Therefore, being an advocate and a bureaucrat can get to be very stressful for most.

Alienation as defined by Lipsky is "the relationship of workers to their work, from which...attitudes arise" (p. 75). Job dissatisfaction will increase when one is working in alienated jobs, which, in turn, will lead to negative affects of the workers' commitments to the client and organization.

The next section of the book focuses on patterns of practice and whether or not these common elements lead to common behavioral actions. In order to accomplish their tasks, SLBs develop routines to simplify the complexity of their jobs. These routines become significant because SLBs make policies. In other words, these routines start out as a means to deal with the job tasks, but in reality they are reflections of the agency, which add up to policy (Lipsky, 1980, p. 86). Lipsky goes on to describe four routines that are as follows: rationing of services, control of the clients, conservation of personal work resources, and management of the consequences from routine practices (p. 86).

In the last section of this book, Lipsky discusses the future of street-level bureaucracy. He concludes with discussions regarding what impacts the fiscal crises may have on these bureaucracies in respect to accountability and the potential for reform. Lipsky argues that bureaucratic accountability is virtually impossible to achieve in street-level bureaucracy where discretion is widely used (p. 159). Fiscal pressures make managers cut personnel resources and programs, while at the same time provide some sort of incentive to workers to accomplish the goals of the organization. All in all, Lipsky is basically saying that accountability will not get better under these conditions. In order to deal with the new situations, more routines will be added as coping mechanisms to deal with stress and as a means to simplify the complexity of the street-level bureaucratic job.

Literature Review:

As stated earlier, the premise of this research is based on the theories presented in *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* by Michael Lipsky. Since there has been little research that directly relates Lipsky's theories to anything, my previous research materials are limited. Also, because this study involves a specific agency in Knoxville, Tennessee, further limitations were incurred. However, the following journal articles and papers proved to be helpful.

Soren Winter's paper Street-Level Bureaucrats and Implementation of Social Policy Reforms: Welfare and Employment Policies in Denmark discussed the relevance of Michael Lipsky's theory on SLBs for the implementation of social policy reforms in Denmark. She examined the theory by applying it to three Danish social policy reforms, which are as follows: 1. a very comprehensive reform of the entire social welfare system in 1976, 2. an experimental youth employment and training program which ran from 1980-1983, and 3. a major employment and training reform for long term unemployed people in 1989 (Winter, 1997). Winter speaks specifically on one universal problem facing street-level bureaucrats, which is the feeling that their own resources are chronically and seriously insufficient to meet the demands placed on them. Her response is to employ coping strategies. These range from limiting information about services, to making access difficult, to making clients wait for an extended amount of time. She suggests using Lipsky's mechanism of "creaming." This "creaming" mechanism implies that "street-level bureaucrats often choose (or skim off the top) those clients who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success

criteria,” even if they are not the ones who truly need the help (Winter, 1997). Winter goes on to state that higher priority is given to cases where the client is demanding a decision, rather than to cases involving preventive action, reaching out, or follow up activities. This may be because the caseload size is so large that their only real concern is getting the clients in and out and not ever having to spend too much time on them. Many SLBs feel the cases became hard to handle because the added stress of having to document all interactions with clients. In Denmark the SLB tended to focus on giving cash assistance to the clients because they claimed this was all they need to move forward. As a result, the SLBs focused less on preventive measures and rehabilitation, which were the emphasis of the reform and also emphasis of the Community Services Agency in this research, because they are more time consuming. Winter also discusses their caseload size in detail. In Denmark, as in Knoxville, Tennessee, caseload size for SLBs is large. This large caseload prevents the workers from performing their job functions properly because they have to spread themselves too thin to really do a good job on anything. This situation was seen in all three cases and provided me with a better understanding of the seriousness of the problem by applying it to other real life scenarios. Winter also uses the interview technique in her studies to gather information, which is the same methodology used in this research as will be stated later in the paper.

Governing the Hollow State by H. Brinton Milward and Keith Provan of the University of Arizona proved to be quite useful. This article discusses the hollow state, which is a metaphor for the increasing use of third parties, often non-profits, to deliver

social services and act in the name of the state (Milward and Provan, 2000). The authors discuss how no one organization can provide all of the services clients need. This has proven itself true through my research because of the joint relationship between the Department of Children's Services and the Community Services Agency. Basically, the hollow state refers to any joint production situation where a governmental agency relies on others to jointly deliver public services. This article also directly explains solving social dilemmas, which is an issue addressed in Lipsky's book. These occur "whenever individuals in interdependent situations face choices in which the maximization of short-term self-interest yields outcomes leaving all participants worse off than feasible alternatives" (Milward, 2000). This article also verifies issues on funding by providing data on how reasonable funding leads to reasonable outcomes overall.

The American Review of Public Administration published an article entitled *Board Practices of Especially Effective and Less Effective Local Nonprofit Organizations* in 2000. The authors of this work, Robert Herman and David Renz, suggested that non-profit organizations' effectiveness is related to the effectiveness of their board of directors. They concluded that organizations that contribute a lot to the community and have a positive affect on the public welfare, have more effective boards, that in turn use a set of recommended board practices. This would appear to be only logical. If one's superior is excelling at their job and as a result is motivating their employees to want to excel also, it seems logical that the employees would want to do the same. However, this article takes that issue deeper. "The extent to which non-profit

organizations are capable and reliable partners depends not only on the skills of the managers, employees, and service volunteers in those organizations but also on the commitment and skills of their board of directors” (Herman, 2000). In relation to the study at hand, the state would be the “board of directors” for DCS, and DCS would be the “board of directors” for CSA. This is because CSA is dependent upon DCS financially, etc. and DCS is dependent on the state to supply money and resources. If the state lacks on something to DCS it has a direct affect on CSA and also the clients.

The next article that was of assistance to me during my research experience is *The Hidden Costs of IT Outsourcing*. Jerome Barthelemy discusses four kinds of hidden costs that can erode the benefits a company anticipates from outsourcing. These costs are as follows: 1. vendor search and contracting, 2. transitioning to the vendor, 3. managing the effort, and 4. transitioning after outsourcing. Companies often try to spend as little as possible when searching for a vendor or someone to work with. However, spending more at the search stages reduces hidden costs throughout the outsourcing effort and saves a lot of expenses later. Barthelemy suggests companies include certain clauses in the contract, select a trustworthy vendor, and be certain about the vendor’s role. This relates to my study in that, DCS and CSA contract with each other. They also have considerable money issues because they are funded by the state, so if they watch for costs in the beginning stages of conducting business, both agencies may be able to cut back on costs and expenses.

Julie Bundt’s article published by the Journal of Public Administrative Research and Theory in 2000 examines professional accountability systems as a potential source

of conflict in the relationships between librarians and their supervisors. *Strategic Stewards: Managing Accountability, Building Trust* relates to Lipsky's book because they both analyze the nature of accountability when professionals are the public servants carrying out delegated tasks. Bundt lists four types of accountability and discussed each in detail. She then went on to make suggestions on how the system she was studying could improve by understanding the dynamics of the accountability environment of libraries. This ties in to my research when looking at the matter of discretion. Discretion allows the SLBs to basically do whatever they want to do, so since people will do things differently each person has to be held responsible or accountable for his or her actions.

Moving Beyond Discretion and Outcomes: Examining Public Management from the Front Lines of the Welfare System by Jodi Sandfort is the last article I used. In this article one could observe the front-line worker differences in the delivery of social welfare programs in public bureaucracies and private contractors. She discovered a significant difference between these management frameworks and day-to-day front-line operations. This article was useful because it examines how management methods influence daily street-level bureaucratic actions, which come from state public policies that need to be implemented and directly impact the public's view of the government. This article also offers a new explanation for why street-level bureaucrats resist change within the public bureaucracy. The fact that most managers in this study focused on administrative rules and performance indicators helped convince the SLB of their separateness. From the interviews that were conducted for my study, the overall

generalization about the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and their managers is true.

The last source of information that I used was Dr. Robert Cunningham, Brian Russell, Robert Schneider, and Alissa Warters' working paper Bringing Lipsky into the 21st Century. This was very helpful because it provided me with the information I needed to get a clearer picture of the research. Since this paper is based on the same information as the Cunningham paper, it allowed me to see what I was supposed to be working with and pull my own conclusions away from it.

Methodology:

Most of the information for this research comes from direct interviews with the front-line workers and managers at the Department of Children's Services and the Community Services Agency. A series of questions ranging from how the workers feel about their relationship between the two agencies, to how much contact they have with their department, to their caseload size, to how they deal with the stress of the job, were asked to get a full understanding of how the system works. The information that we got from the interviews was not restricted to what was recorded on the cassette tape or written down, but it also includes the context and the nonverbal messages of the interviewee as the process transpired. When the interviews were completed we would transcribe them, or type them, word for word. Next we would compare the new information to the previous information gathered in other interviews in order to draw conclusions. From this information, we discuss the relationship between DCS and CSA and relate it to their caseload size and views on stress. Because this is qualitative

research, there will be no statistical data or any type of numbers affiliated with my study.

Discussion:

As stated earlier, we decided to evaluate the Department of Children's Services and the Community Services Agency in order to find a distinct relationship between Lipsky's theories. The two organizations are totally different in relation to their functions. DCS is a civil service, state agency, while CSA is a non-profit agency. Also, DCS implements the orders of the court, checks on the children, and monitors their progress through the system. CSA, however, provides planning, contracting, oversight, and prevention services. They are also involved in the placement of the children, the database management system, home studies on people petitioning for custody, and the DCS health care unit (Cunningham, 2001). Another difference between the two is that CSA depends solely on DCS for funding.

The two organizations were united around 1992 because DCS thought CSA would be a good mechanism for expansion into the community. Plus, since CSA is not a state agency, they can do things a lot faster than DCS. An example of this is if someone is fired or quits their job at CSA and they need a person right then and there to help with business, they can hire someone that day. Contrary to this, if DCS wanted to hire someone it could take up to thirty days for their application to process. One might think that the two agencies would have a good working relationship because one can not succeed without the other one, however, this is not the case as one respondent says, "When they were first brought in it was almost a dual system and it was a lot of

controversy. There was a lot of arguing back and forth between state employees and the community health agency.” From the information I gathered, there is not a consistent view about the relationship that exists today. Some respondents feel as if the relationship has gotten better, while others say it has gotten worse. A SLB from the Department of Children’s Services said, “We *should* have a good hand in glove relationship, but we don’t.” An opposing SLB from the Community Services Agency states in reference to their relationship, “...Best resource management unit in the state.” These quotes portray a clear example of just a couple of the varying viewpoints.

When asked about the caseloads of the workers, not one person responded by saying that their caseload size was at a stable level. The Child Welfare League of America came in and implemented a three-year plan to help decrease the caseload size for both organizations. The three-year plan wanted to get caseloads down to twenty-five the first year, twenty the second year, and fifteen the third year. We are currently in the third year of the plan and if approved by legislature, there is a possibility that the caseload size will be dropped again. This is very good because just about five years ago, some SLB caseloads ranged from 50 to 60 per person. With such high caseloads the SLBs cannot really do their job well. This is because something has to get neglected when there is a lot going on. Most CSA SLBs said that their paperwork would almost always be the thing to get pushed to the side, because the children are first priority. However, the impression given by the SLBs at DCS is that they put documentation first and foremost, even if they try to say that they do not. Someone said that if it is not documented then it never really happened. Many CSA workers tended to agree with

Preliminary Findings:

Results from this study show that there is a significant relationship between DCS and CSA that is directly related to Michael Lipsky's street-level bureaucrat theories. A possible flaw in the system involves the contact that the managers have with the SLBs, which influences their perceptions about their responsibilities and the level of stress they intake. By providing our insights on how managers can go about their decision making process and interaction with their employees differently, we hope to give helpful solutions that will contribute to the betterment of the manager-employee relationship. Also, we would like to get a good insight into these organizations so we may provide some helpful suggestions to better the system as a whole.

This project is an ongoing process. Time constraint limitations that I faced will not allow me to finish my section of the project. We still have to interview SLBs at the juvenile justice system and parents of the clients. This will allow us to draw conclusions about the system without having any biased feelings toward one side of the population. Also, the people we interviewed were selected at random; therefore, the conclusions that are made cannot be put on the entire system currently because we did not interview a representative sample. Upon completion of this study, accurate suggestions should be able to be applied to the system. From the information we have already gathered, however, we think the end results of this study will be very similar, if not the same, as the results we project now.

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