

Accountability in Street-Level Organizations

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Abstract: The challenge of managing street-level discretion lies at the heart of the search for strategies of administrative oversight and control. How can management promote accountability without deadening responsiveness and undermining the application of professional judgment on which management also depends? This article reconsiders the problem of accountability from a street-level perspective.

First, it reviews the literature on implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and new public management in order to raise questions about the limitations of current approaches to accountability, including new public management solutions that rely on performance measurement. Second, it makes the case for a street-level approach to accountability and illustrates how it can be used to reveal critical dimensions of organizational practice that are not captured by other means. Finally, issues of street-level practice are placed in broader perspective, as part of an on-going global search for ways to advance transparency and accountability in social provision.

Keywords: accountability, performance measurement, public management, street-level bureaucracy

Accountability is an essential requirement of public management in the democratic state. Yet, all too often, bureaucratic discretion is the nemesis of accountability. The challenge of managing street-level discretion lies at the heart of the continuing search for strategies of administrative oversight and control that can promote accountability without deadening responsiveness and undermining the application of professional judgment on which management also depends.

In the case of social welfare agencies, where discretion is a necessary and even desirable part of the caseworker-client interaction, public management

The author acknowledges research support from the National Science Foundation (#9730821), the Open Society Institute, and the Ford Foundation.

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faces an especially difficult test. How can managers know what takes place in the day-to-day activities of “street-level bureaucrats,” what occurs at the interstices of formal rules and informal practices, and what this means for the provision of social goods and services? How well do available management tools address accountability at the street-level?

This article reconsiders the problem of accountability from a street-level perspective. From this vantage point, it appears that common accountability measures are too crude to capture the complex realities of informal practice. Quantitative measures of inputs and outputs tend to reconstruct policy in its own terms rather than illuminate the qualitative content of what bureaucrats do and how they “make” policy on their own terms. Even advanced efforts to improve accountability by applying New Public Management (NPM) techniques of performance measurement and “pay for performance” contracting, at times, may do more to provide the appearance of accountability than accountability-in-fact.

Admittedly, solutions to these difficulties are hard to invent. In the absence of useful alternatives, practitioners may feel compelled to adopt available strategies even if they oversimplify street-level practice. Given policies and programs that cannot readily be made self-executing, virtually eliminating discretion, the need for better accountability strategies will remain. This article brings the perspective of street-level research to the pursuit of better strategies.

It begins with a review of the literature on implementation, street-level bureaucracy, and new public management in order to raise questions about the limitations of current approaches to accountability. As part this review, it raises doubts about new public management solutions that rely on performance measurement as a means to secure accountability. Next, it makes the case for a street-level approach to accountability and illustrates how it can be used to reveal critical dimensions of organizational practice that are not captured by other means. Finally, the issues examined here are placed in broader perspective, as part of an international search for ways to improve transparency and accountability in social provision.

ACCOUNTABILITY RECONSIDERED

Untangling complex issues of organizational practice and accountability have been fundamental to the field of implementation research in the United States. A brief review of this literature highlights its relevance to the quest for accountability and the salience of a street-level view. The field of implementation research initially developed out of two related concerns. The first was normative, grounded in the constitutional notion of policymaking as the province of the legislative branch. The underlying assumption was essentially Weberian. Simply put, legislators, as policymakers, should authoritatively

determine the “big” questions of national goals, and the bureaucracy should devise the means to put policy goals into practice. Bureaucratic failure to do its job constituted, in effect, a failure of democratic authority. Second, implementation research responded to a fundamentally practical concern. It seemed that good policy ideas often foundered on the rocky shoals of administration. How to prevent administrative shipwrecks?

The rise of a more socially activist American government in the 1960s and 1970s challenged the administrative capacity of the state. An emergent literature documented growing frustration at the apparent noncompliance of government agencies with policy mandates. In one of the first implementation analyses, Martha Derthick^[1] described how lower levels of government frustrated federal housing goals even in the face of strong presidential leadership, clear fiscal incentives, and relatively abundant federal resources and commitment. Other studies documented the more daunting (and more common) task of advancing federal policy under less ideal circumstances, where opportunities for bureaucratic confusion, creative “gaming” for federal dollars, and even resistance bedeviled implementation. In practice, it seemed that the “goodness” of policy ideas encountered the “badness” of bureaucracy with disheartening frequency.

American programs created under the rubric of the War on Poverty and the Great Society offered rich research fodder for analysts seeking examples of good ideas gone astray. Who was to blame? All too often, the finger pointed to public bureaucracies – federal, state, and local — as the graveyard of good intentions. This perspective was vividly expressed in Pressman and Wildavsky’s seminal volume *Implementation*, notably subtitled: *How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; or, why it’s amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the Economic Development Administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes.*^[2] Between “great expectations” and “ruined hopes” lay the uncharted terrain of implementation, the so-called “black box” into which policy ideas disappeared only to re-emerge in unrecognizable form, if at all.

The Implementation Perspective Revisited

The issues raised in this literature were revealing. The translation of policy ideas into practical action could not simply be referred to subunits of government and administrative agencies with orders given and fingers crossed. It required deeper understanding of implementing agencies and how they worked. The central problem for analysis was to determine how public bureaucracies could be made to comply with legislative intent and put policy ideas into action. Underlying the quest for understanding was the normative assumption of a policy hierarchy that demanded bureaucratic allegiance to legislative aims,

that is, it demanded hierarchical accountability. The bureaucracy's job was to bring "neutral competence" to the task of policy delivery and, thereby, secure accountability. But that vision did not square with ample evidence of bureaucratic autonomy and discretion often operating at cross-purposes to political authority. The compliance model that informed the first wave of implementation research generally sought to identify what interfered with the linear progress of policy as it made its way from legislation to realization.

A rich and varied set of studies applying this model began to shine light into the "black box," creating a picture of organizational processes that were highly complex, subject to the idiosyncracies of leaders and "the moment," and confounding to those who would attempt to assert authority over far-flung organizations.^[3] Some of these studies produced common sense — if politically improbable — advice, for example, to keep policy simple, set clear objectives, or avoid "complex joint action." Other advice was hopeful, but difficult to follow, suggesting, for example, that implementation would benefit from good leadership and problem-fixers.

These studies — and the advice they produced — were consistent with normative notions of an authoritative policy hierarchy and directed toward achieving greater allegiance between policymaking and policy delivery. However, the assumptions embedded in the compliance model seemed increasingly doubtful. Perhaps legislated policy should be authoritative, but what if it wasn't? What justified the "great expectations" of policy protagonists and their corresponding dismay at the bureaucracies that "dashed their hopes"? If bureaucracies were the graveyard of good intentions, were they the cause of death or simply its location?

These doubts pointed to two critical problems with the compliance perspective as a guide to research. First, its hierarchical premise requires some degree of policy definitiveness. Yet, both the literature on American legislative policymaking and ordinary experience indicate that policy is often replete with ambiguity, conflicting objectives, and uncertainty. Paradoxically, while the emerging field of implementation searched for bureaucratic deviance from legislative authority, political scientists were documenting and, at times, lamenting the failure of U.S. institutions to provide authoritative lawmaking.^[4] Analyses of legislative policymaking revealed how, in a decentralized, two-party state it is strategic to oversimplify problems, overstate solutions, and mask competing objectives in order to build a legislative majority. Unfortunately, successful coalition-building strategies often produce policies better geared to political credit-claiming and blame-avoiding than to successful implementation. Those policies that survive the legislative fray tend to be creatures of compromise in which policy inconsistencies, ambiguities, and silences constitute a necessary price for passage.

Consequently, it seems too great an analytic leap to impute "authority" to legislated policy. Instead, it becomes apparent that implementation difficulties emerge, in part, out of the dilemmas of policymaking. Oversimplifying

problems, overpromising solutions, and achieving compromise by blurring policy goals are all-too familiar tactics for legislative “success.” As analysts have pointed out, rational political actors have incentives to maximize credit-claiming at the lowest political and fiscal cost, even if that means that organizational resources will be too limited and expectations too high.^[5]

This suggests a second problem with the compliance perspective, namely, that implementation problems cannot readily be separated from problems of legislative politics, especially in the U.S. case. As Lowi has pointedly observed: “. . . typical American politicians displace and defer and delegate conflict where possible,” preferring to delegate its resolution “as far down the line as possible.”^[6] The task of implementing bureaucracies in a decentralized state may be manifestly one of compliance, but functionally the burden is far greater. In the course of converting policy into administrative practices, street-level agencies must, in a practical sense, choose among conflicting objectives and specify abstract policy elements. Consequently, both implementation and choices of who will be accountable for what and how must be understood as far more than a technical administrative enterprise. These choices (whether made explicitly or indirectly through organizational practices) should be understood as the continuation of policy politics by other means.^[7]

The Street-Level Perspective Revisited

Street-level research emerged out of the gap between the normative assumptions of the compliance model and growing evidence of policy indeterminacy and bureaucratic autonomy. If formal policy did not account for the actions of implementing organizations, what did? Researchers employed a variety of analytic perspectives to examine policy delivery as structured within complex organizational systems.

A major contribution to this second wave was Michael Lipsky’s seminal book, *Street-Level Bureaucracy*,^[8] which provided the theoretical template for a research approach that embraced the ambiguities and inconsistencies of legislated social policy, creating an environment in which bureaucratic discretion could flourish. Lipsky’s approach virtually reversed the normative premises of a policy hierarchy. He contended that under certain circumstances, it was analytically useful to regard those bureaucrats at the “bottom” of the ladder as “policymakers.” According to Lipsky, lower-level bureaucrats effectively “make” policy when formal statutes are ambiguous or internally contradictory, policy implementation requires discretionary decision-making at the point of delivery, and the routine activities of front-line workers can be neither fully monitored nor controlled. Lipsky took particular interest in large, public bureaucracies and the mass production of human services under conditions of limited resources and virtually unlimited demand.

The street-level bureaucracy model directed attention to the ways in which policy deliverers actually worked. It sought to understand the world of the lower-level bureaucrat as one in which tensions between management objectives, client demands, and bureaucratic interests were played out. It offered a different view of the policy process, one created from inside the agencies charged with policy delivery. The analytic challenge was to investigate the nature of “policy-as-produced” and the factors shaping its production. Liberated from the deeply-held myth of hierarchy, analysts could reevaluate practices that might seem on their face to be deviant and the product of willful obstruction, indifference, or sheer incompetence in order to understand how lower-level bureaucrats responded to the structural logic of street-level conditions.^[9]

One practical implication of this approach was that recommendations to improve “command and control” seemed both less likely to succeed and, in some measure, undesirable. If policy couldn’t be made simpler – or certainly simple enough to be regimented — then it made sense analytically to recognize discretion as intrinsic and necessary to policy delivery. That recognition prompted a search for alternative strategies that assumed discretion, as in the case of Richard Elmore’s^[10] ingenious strategy of “backward mapping” that built implementation plans from the bottom up and sought to marshal lower-level discretion as a constructive element of policy delivery.

To some extent, this view begs questions of accountability that arise when one does not assume that goals are unilateral or authoritative. If, as discussed, goal conflict and ambiguity are embedded in many social policies, that raises new questions about precisely *what* organizations should be held accountable for and to *whom* they should be accountable (i.e., managers, political officials, the general public, agency clients, etc.). It is, perhaps, a convenient fiction of the rhetoric of accountability to assume that it is self-evident to whom organizations are accountable or that there is a single “public interest.” In contrast, as Romzek and Johnston acknowledge,^[11] “one challenge that accountability poses for public managers is the presence of multiple, competing, and shifting performance expectations held by diverse, legitimate, and often conflicting sources of expectations”^[12] In short, conflicts over goals and interests embedded in policy substantially complicate accountability.

The analytic solution to this problem is somewhat easier to address than the political one. To the extent that the politics of social policymaking precludes goal clarity, then analysis must embrace this ambiguity. This means departing from standard implementation research, which generally begins with formal policy, selectively derives goals from it, and then examines if they were met. The alternative approach offered here begins, not at the policy level, but at the organizational-level, examining what they do in street-level practice, why, and what these practices produce. In effect, it treats “policy” as uncertain and inductively determines policy’s content based on an analysis of street-level practices. Applied street-level theory, used in this way, brings

greater transparency to organizational practices and supports management by identifying *how* discretion is exercised and systemically assessing factors that influence it. This assessment of key factors has the practical benefit of identifying points of leverage for changing street-level practice.

New Public Management Revisited

NPM strategies for improving accountability can be seen as emerging from a shared critique of “command and control” management. Rather than specify rules and process regulation, performance measurement and “pay for performance” incentives in contracting arrangements take an indirect approach. To oversimplify, they specify *what* organizations are to produce without detailing *how* they are to do it. In a sense, NPM appreciates discretion as a necessary part of policy delivery. It assumes that products and incentives can be carefully aligned so that benign uses of discretion will be encouraged and malign uses discouraged. The difficulty here is that neither specification nor alignment is easily achieved, especially in the case of social service provision. This is more than a problem of degree, as there is more at stake than whether performance can be optimized or even satisfied. In practice, design flaws in performance measurement may have the unintended consequence of distorting or even undermining organizational performance. As this review will show, they also may obscure, rather than reveal, significant aspects of maladministration. When this occurs, both transparency and accountability suffer.

Some of the difficulties of crafting performance measures, especially in social service provision, have received much attention.^[13] For example, studies have shown that performance measures tend to selectively identify aspects of organizational practice or outcomes, effectively operationalizing some goals while effectively ignoring others, too often the goals of clients.^[14] One study of public managers in the U.K. found that “many public organizations favour measures of performance that emphasise efficiency and which meet the requirements of institutional legitimacy, rather than the interests of the citizen or client.”^[15] The study’s survey of public managers indicated that “clients are far less important (than higher level government officials) in influencing the installation of performance measurements.” In addition, performance measures may badly skew incentives, leading to distortions such as creaming, goal displacement, and so forth.^[16] Reliance on readily measurable dimensions of performance exacerbates these problems when they leave critical dimensions of performance “unseen.”^[17]

Street-level studies of service delivery offer evidence of NPM strategies gone awry. They show, for example, how quantitative performance standards for placement of welfare recipients into various categories of “work activities” skew lower-level incentives toward “making the numbers” with little regard for how they do it.^[18] Among the significant lessons to be learned from

street-level studies is that performance measures organized around proforma categories of activities cannot reveal whether the “right” people were placed in the “right” programs nor what they received as “training” or “education” when they got there. Nor do measures that are limited to administrative categories reveal whether categorical labels were correctly applied or whether potential beneficiaries were wrongly excluded. Generally, performance measures are too rudimentary to capture these crucial, but qualitative aspects of practice.

Moreover, performance measures that variously set quotas for case processing, participation, or placements can do more harm than good when they create incentives for street-level bureaucrats to take processing short-cuts or exclusionary practices. Yet, these types of organizational practices have been made visible through street-level studies that have illuminated often-subtle, but pervasive, exclusionary practices of administrative “discouragement,” among them, tangling citizens in red tape, excessive proceduralism, maladministration, and cumbersome error correction processes.^[19] Arguably, routine measurement of take-up rates among eligible populations might provide an indication that these kinds of practices are at work. But, in U.S. social programs, they are infrequently used.

Street-level research on U.S. child welfare services also shows the perverse effects of performance-based accountability strategies. Caseworkers, whose performance depends on completing “permanency plans” to move children out of temporary foster care, have little time or incentive to work with parents toward family reunification. One study showed that although a numbers-driven casework staff may give the appearance of responding to the goal of moving children to the best permanent placement, in fact, they may be avoiding precisely the kinds of family casework needed to achieve that end. The researchers reported variants of an all too familiar refrain, quoting caseworkers complaints that “what really counts . . . is how many kids we have. If you’re working with a family, it doesn’t count.”^[20] Street-level studies reveal the secret paradox of performance measurement: it can be quite effective in influencing organizational practice, but numbers-driven practice can be detrimental to performance.

This problem is not limited to policy delivery by public bureaucracies. Under the rubric of NPM, performance-based contracting to private agencies has become an increasingly popular way to extend or sometimes replace public service delivery. Yet, it is vulnerable (perhaps even more vulnerable) to the problems of specification and measurement inherent in crafting performance measures for social services. Research across a variety of policy areas indicates that state government agencies often lack the capacity both to devise and monitor service delivery contracts.^[21] Ironically, demands for greater accountability in contracting have had perverse consequences, similar to those previously discussed. According to one analysis, “Legislatures and state officials seeking increased accountability press for greater reporting requirements

from providers. However, this action only serves to exacerbate the capacity challenges facing public managers . . . as reporting requirements increase, so do program administration costs.”^[22]

Street-level studies have been important in revealing the often subtle ways in which performance-based contracts tax organizational resources, distort performance, and erode the responsiveness of community-based organizations to their constituents.^[23] Somewhat less subtly, research has suggested that performance measures themselves may be subject to political manipulation.^[24]

These illustrative examples do more than show how accountability is harmed by over-reliance on imperfect (at best) and deeply flawed (at worst) performance measurement. They also demonstrate the contribution of street-level research in illuminating otherwise hidden dimensions of organizational performance that are critical to accountability. Street-level research enables analysis to reach beyond formal administrative categories to unpack the policy experience. It examines organizational practices to see what they produce, rather than assuming the product and measuring the extent of its production. It makes transparent practices that are otherwise obscured and provides a basis for assessing their consequences.

**ACCOUNTABILITY FROM THE INSIDE OUT:
A STREET-LEVEL APPROACH**

As this literature review suggests, commonly used instruments are insufficient to achieve accountability in street-level provision of social policy and, under certain circumstances, may even misdirect organizational practices. A street-level perspective, as applied theory, offers a reverse view of accountability. That is, it approaches accountability in organizations, not from the outside in, but from the inside out. It is a distinctive form of management research that directs attention to how policy is produced at the “front lines.” This is most valuable when policy delivery involves lower-level discretion and complex decision-making, features that are quite common to organizations responsible for implementing social welfare, education, and health policies. Used along with other strategic tools, a street-level approach adds an important dimension to accountability research.

The Case for a Street-Level Approach

At its most basic level, street-level research provides a management strategy for separating policy fact from policy fiction. “Policy fiction” refers to the rhetorical or ascribed intent of policy (e.g., to prepare welfare recipients for work) as well as to the administrative constructs used as proxies for program

activities (e.g., “training,” “education”). Implementation research built on the compliance model began to unravel these distinctions by documenting whether and to what extent any policy-relevant activities occurred at all. Subsequently, many social policy evaluations now use administrative data to monitor participation rates and enrollment in program components as a means of identifying policy’s reach, for example, by counting the numbers of people enrolled in training or education programs. Evaluations also may include process analyses that identify basic implementation activities. These descriptive accounts of implementation move analysis in the right direction. But they are not designed to reach deeply or broadly enough into street-level organizational practices to adequately assess how discretion is used, what influences it, and its consequences for shaping policy on the ground.

By investigating why and how bureaucratic practices develop in specific organizational context, street-level analysis can inform the search for improved accountability in policy delivery. It has the distinct advantage of moving analysis beyond the “command and control” assumptions of the compliance model to take empirical account of factors that influence routine practice on the ground. Richard Elmore has pointed out that street-level research “forces us to contend with the mundane patterns of bureaucratic life and also to think about how new policies affect the daily routines of people who deliver social services. Policymakers, analysts, and administrators have a tendency to focus on variables that emphasize control and predictability . . . [which] leads to serious misperceptions.”^[25] Beyond the myth of hierarchy lies the possibility of understanding what front-line implementers do, the systemic features of their work life that shape their practices, how routine practices create policy, and the content of policy as they have produced it.

In this sense, street-level research makes a crucial link in the causal chain. To advance accountability by attributing outcomes to policy, analysts must be able to specify the policy intervention, not as imagined or reconstructed in administrative measures, but as experienced. More broadly, street-level research directly investigates what implementing organizations produce, how, and why. It builds on a theoretical understanding of discretion in street-level organizations. Despite the persistent hopes and preferences of both policymakers and managers, street-level scholarship reveals that caseworkers and other lower-level service providers “do not do just what they want or just what they are told to want. They do what they can.”^[26] For example, street-level studies of welfare-to-work programs have shown that casework practice is a function of capacity, which, in turn, depends on “professional skills, agency resources, and access to good training and employment opportunities for clients. Within that context, their practices are shaped by agency incentives and mechanisms that make staff accountable for clients and to the public.”^[27]

Perversely, management strategies based on imposing rules and regulations may produce undesirable effects, driving discretion beneath the radar where it becomes subject to the logic of street-level practice. Studies of street-level

organizations show that discretion, in itself, is neither good nor bad but the wild card of policy delivery, likely to produce different results in different organizational contexts. These differences are highlighted in street-level studies of policy delivery in a variety of national settings.^[28]

Street-level research offers a lens through which to discover unmeasured dimensions of administrative practice that are critical to accountability and achieving a better understanding policy outcomes. It has the potential to help policymakers and managers confront the fundamental question of how to create policy and organizational structures that are conducive to good street-level work and, in so doing, improve the prospects for accountability.

In addition, this approach has implications for the study of new public management strategies, particularly, for analysis of contracting public functions to private agencies. It can be applied to studies of conventional public bureaucracies as well as to private organizations contracted to perform policy functions. It allows for comparative analysis of street-level practices under different organizational conditions, for example, in private non-profit and for-profit organizations, as well as in public organizations that seek to emulate market models. It provides a strategy for identifying variation in structural features of policy delivery under these types of arrangements and how they influence the street-level production of policy and accountability. When “making the numbers” is insufficient to capture the realities of organizational practice, street-level analysis can be used to examine whether performance-based contracts, in practice, are paying for performance or, instead, “paying for pretense.”^[29]

Overall, a street-level approach to accountability has the potential to illuminate dimensions of policy delivery that other analytic strategies do not capture. By examining how policy is delivered at the “front lines” of organizations, it brings into view those discretionary practices that systematically shape the policy experience. This is important to accountability as it extends management’s capacity to assess dimensions of practice that bear on the content and quality of service delivery and on its distribution (e.g., whether practices advance inclusion or exclusion). When these crucial dimensions of organizational practice cannot be discovered using standard evaluation techniques, street-level analysis provides an alternative.

Toward a Methodology for Applied Research

Although street-level research on social welfare policy is not new, there is no blueprint for its use in applied management research. If street-level analysis is to develop as a mechanism for studying bureaucratic practice and advancing administrative accountability, it will be important to articulate and refine research methodologies. This discussion takes a step in that direction. It identifies a strategy for combining organizational and ethnographic analytic

techniques to investigate the practices of street-level policy delivery. It also takes note of other street-level strategies for investigating accountability.

As a strategy for applied research, organizational ethnographies enable the analyst to get inside street-level practice, understand its logic on its own terms, and explore the policy experience at the ground-level. It is part of a hermeneutic process in which the researcher moves between empirical observation and bureaucratic theory to build a grounded understanding of accountability and its organizational and political boundaries.

As with other modes of ethnographic work, this approach is highly contextual. In a sense, it requires entering into the world of the street-level bureaucrat and finding ways to understand the logic of street-level work in specific organizational and policy settings. It is largely a rationalist project, yet it depends on a highly-textured, qualitative understanding of behavior more often associated with interpretative methods. The strategy of organizational ethnography outlined here combines techniques of organizational analysis and ethnography in order to examine the relationship between organizational structure and the practice of policy delivery. It uses intensive case studies to explore complex processes and patterns that cannot be adequately understood through experimental or quantitative research designs.^[30]

A qualitative case study methodology provides a means of searching for and explaining patterns of practice from situationally-specific data. This type of approach is commonly used in research that emphasizes depth and complexity, rather than seeking to survey surface patterns. It uses iterative processes of interviewing and observation to explore possibilities, rather than test hypothesized relationships among known, quantifiable variables. For example, street-level theory indicates that the structure of work affects the exercise of bureaucratic discretion. But this emerging body of theory is insufficiently well-developed to fully identify structural elements, how to operationalize them, and "what else" may be important. Case study research permits an exploration into these elements and allows for the discovery of other factors that may not have been anticipated. It offers a richly descriptive foundation for exploring the dynamic processes through which organizational patterns of practice develop and how they shape policy "on the ground." In assessing accountability, this is a strategy that, in effect, casts a wide enough net to capture both expected and unexpected dimensions of organizational performance.

The essential objective of street-level analysis is to reconstruct agency practice in terms of its own internal logic, rather than the logic of managerial command and control. This involves a systematic examination of both the conditions of work and the content of practice, moving heuristically between the two in an effort to explain the particular form that implementation takes in specific settings.

In pursuit of that objective, organizational ethnographies combine interview techniques often used by organization researchers with observation

techniques commonly used in ethnography. Observation permits data on interactions between policy “providers” and “receivers” to be generated in the specific context in which they occur. In a sense, it adopts an ethnographic perspective by studying street-level bureaucrats “in their own time and space” and at work in their “natural habitat.”^[31] But it differs from other types of ethnographic work that aim to develop a highly-contextualized understanding of individuals through shared experience. In contrast, the organizational ethnographic approach focuses on the organization itself and aims to discover and explain patterns of practice that emerge within it. It aims to make explicit the links between organizational structures, the individuals interacting within them, informal patterns of street-level practice, and the policy product that emerges from them.

In conducting this type of research, ethnographic techniques of extended observation offer the considerable advantage of its directness. The research does not depend solely on the recall of interviewees or their reconstruction of events. As Michael Burawoy describes it, the advantages of observation “are assumed to lie not just in direct observation of how people act, but also how they understand and experience those acts. It enables us to juxtapose what people say they are up to against what they actually do.”^[32] Coupling observation and interviewing techniques allows the researcher to probe the reasoning and perceptions behind behaviors. Together, these methods enable researchers to dig beneath administrative categories in order to probe their content and understand the development of informal decision rules that shape patterns of practice.

Examples drawn from research on U.S. welfare policy illustrate how these research techniques can be used to investigate casework practice. Among their discretionary tasks, caseworkers have authority to impose sanctions (cutting social benefits) as penalty for individual non-compliance with procedural rules. How do administrators know whether caseworkers are applying sanctions appropriately? Administrative data indicate the reason caseworkers present (usually from a standard checklist) for imposing sanctions, but do not reveal the reasoning behind the decision or whether it is justified.

Arguably, skilled interviewing could probe the decision-making involved in the case and provide a more accurate understanding of how, when and why a caseworker judged an individual to be noncompliant with rules. However, post hoc explanation offered in an interview may say more about how caseworkers justify their actions after the fact than what impelled those actions.

When researchers combine interviews and observation, they can move beyond second-hand accounts in order to systematically document what caseworkers do in practice, preferably in a variety of instances (say over the course of a day, a week, or a month). In the sanctions example, observational methods have revealed considerable elasticity in the use of sanctions, with variation unexplained by differences in rules, ideology, or even the behavior of clients.^[33] Combining observation and interviews can be used to probe for

differences between “what they say” and “what they do.” Although in interviews caseworkers may portray themselves as “tough” or “soft” in applying the rules, their day-to-day practices may be inconsistent with what they preach. Variation and discrepancies signal the researcher to search for other factors that may be systemically influencing street-level practice, testing working hypotheses with additional observation and interviews.

Applying an analytic lens that locates casework within the broader organizational structure, allows the researcher to conduct observation and interviews in order to test working hypotheses and search for informal decision rules that may be systematically shaping practice. This strategy, in the sanctions case, showed that caseworkers generally operated as rational actors, taking the path of least resistance, that is, using discretion in ways most consistent with the logic imposed by the organizational pressures and incentives existing at the street-level. Variation in sanctions use could not be explained simply by assuming increased noncompliance on the part of individual clients. Instead, street-level analysis revealed that the application of sanctions reflected organizational conditions, increasing when caseworkers faced increased risk of being penalized by their managers for failing to catch case errors, when they were largely unaccountable for excessive sanctions use, when they found sanctions were easier to apply, and when caseworkers were rewarded for caseload reduction.^[34] Once qualitative research uncovers these dimensions of organizational practices, they can be further investigated using both qualitative and quantitative methods.^[35]

Assessing the Street-Level Approach: Potential and Practicality

On the whole, street-level research, as applied theory, adds an important tool to the portfolio of accountability research strategies. Its chief strength is that it allows the researcher to get inside street-level practice, understand its logic on its own terms, and explore the policy experience at the ground-level. This permits what might be called “deep dish analysis” that can reach beyond visible policy constructs to see what occurs beneath the surface of policy rhetoric and administrative measures, seek to explain it, and probe its consequences. In its broadest application, it offers a method for probing organizational practice and, ultimately, illuminating how social politics is structured within specific settings. Burawoy refers to this strategy as the extended case method, in which “the significance of a case relates to what it tells us about the world in which it is embedded.”^[36]

As with any methodology, this one, too, has its limitations. These derive from the potential for observer bias and from the limits of the organizational case study approach itself. Although observer bias is always a risk in this methodology, it is possible to limit that risk by using multiple observations in different settings, by utilizing multiple data sources and by

using theory to systematize the collection and analysis of data. It is also useful, when possible, to apply a triangulation method to cross-check different forms of data with each other, subjecting inconsistent findings to special scrutiny.^[37] Generalizability is a second concern, although arguably less relevant to applied street-level research than to theoretical research.

However, practicality may call for a targeted use of this strategy. Because organizational ethnographies are relatively labor intensive, they may be difficult to use in projects requiring large-scale data collection. However, this approach can be incorporated into a portfolio of management strategies and used selectively to obtain a close and systematic look at organizational processes and practices, thereby, enabling management to identify problems occurring in specific organizations at specific times. For example, this approach to street-level research may be used to target particular organizations or subunits that are a subject of concern. Or selective analyses can be used to uncover organizational problems that have wider relevance, say by strategic sampling of agencies with responsibilities for a given policy domain.

In short, a street-level approach to accountability extends, rather than replaces, existing strategies for addressing accountability. It may be incorporated into existing mechanisms, including operational audits and field reviews, as a tool for examining otherwise hidden dimensions of organizational performance that are vital to transparency and accountability. Moreover, as previously noted, the specific street-level approach described here is not the only way, nor in all instances the best way, to investigate questions of organizational practice and accountability. In addition to organizational ethnographies, street-level may use other methods (among them (interviewing, surveys, and analysis of case records) to gain important insights into aspects of organizational practice.

ACCOUNTABILITY RECONSIDERED

The quest for accountability in organizations that deliver public policy has proved difficult to satisfy. The creation of better strategies for advancing accountability continues to constitute a difficult challenge. Disillusionment with “Old Public Management” strategies of command and control have led to “New Public Management” strategies. Under the rubric of NPM, both performance measurement and performance-based contracting have become increasingly popular methods of indirect control, favoring product specification and incentives over procedural rules and regulations.^[38] Yet, it appears that these new strategies may give the illusion of accountability, while leaving crucial aspects performance hidden from view.

As discussed, certain types of performance quotas, such as participation rates or numbers of children assessed for maltreatment, are relatively easy to

measure; but they do not address the content of practice and may even create incentives that undermine desired policy goals. Alternatively, broader outcome measures (such as caseload reductions or unification of troubled families) may hold agencies responsible for things beyond their control, including the adequacy of agency resources and conditions in the external environment. Nor do they make visible the crucial information on *how* measured outcomes were achieved. They can even do more harm than good when badly specified. Paradoxically, performance measures may give the appearance of transparency, but actually obscure a full understanding of how agencies work and the real content of what they are producing.

The urge to find solutions to complicated managerial problems is apt to intensify as globalization and related economic changes create new pressures for the development and implementation of social welfare policies. In this environment, it is increasingly important that technologies of accountability be improved to advance transparency and democratic accountability, not just upward through the hierarchy, but also outward to include those who use and depend on government social welfare programs. Yet, strategies for improving the accountability of street-level organizations remain limited.

Applied street-level research contributes a strategy of organizational analysis that embraces the conundrums of discretion, however complex and daunting that may be. It is built on the premise that management analysis must offer a deeper and more complex understanding of how street-level organizations work and how policy is produced and experienced in everyday organizational life. The street-level approach contributes a distinctive perspective to the portfolio of strategies available to assess organizational performance. It marks, not the end, but the beginning of a broader agenda aimed at rethinking accountability and how to advance it.

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