

**INVESTIGATING POLICY'S 'PRACTICAL' MEANING:  
STREET-LEVEL RESEARCH ON WELFARE POLICY**

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## ABSTRACT

In the post-reform era, the production of welfare policy is taking shape in an increasingly devolved and discretionary environment. Street-level workers are "making" reform through their day-to-day practices in public, quasi-public, and private agencies, extending even into the private workplace. In order to adequately understand the "practical" meaning of reform as it is made in specific organizational settings, it is necessary to utilize research methods that permit "deep dish analysis." That is, analytic methods must enable the researcher to probe beyond visible policy constructs to assess production routines, how they develop in alternative organizational contexts, and how they shape the policy experience.

The street-level approach described in this paper is grounded in a theoretical logic designed to assess how street-level practice and, ultimately, social politics is structured within specific organizations. In a practical sense, this approach also addresses critical gaps in our understanding of policies and how they work. It is most valuable when policy implementation involves changes in organizational practice, discretion by front-line workers, and complex decision-making in a context of formal policy ambiguity and uncertainty. By focusing on specific institutions and the informal, lower-level routines through which they create policy at the point of delivery, it is possible to give greater transparency to policies that are otherwise opaque and to provide a fuller picture of how policy is produced and experienced.

The first section of this paper reviews the analytic foundations of implementation research and traces the evolution of the street-level perspective as an alternative to hierarchical analytical models. The latter sections consider the application of the street-level approach to research on welfare policy. <sup>1</sup>

## **From the Old to the New: Evolving Approaches to Implementation Research**

The field of implementation research 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 that 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.

### ***Preventing administrative shipwrecks***

The rise of a more socially activist government in the sixties and seventies 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 (1972) 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.

The programs 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* (1973), 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*. 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 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. The bureaucracy's job was to bring "neutral competence" to the task of policy delivery, 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 implementation 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 bureaucracies (Bardach, 1979; Bullock and Lamb, 1984; Derthick, 1972 and 1975; Murphy, 1971; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973; Sabatier and Mazmanian, 1979; Van Meter and Van Horn, 1974). 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 model as a guide to research. First, the hierarchical premise of the model requires some degree of policy definitiveness. Yet, both the literature on 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, bemoaning the failure of authority in lawmaking (Arnold, 1990; Lowi, 1979; Mayhew, 1974; Price, 1978). Analyses of legislative policymaking reveal how, in a pluralist policy system, 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.

From this perspective, it is 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. As I have discussed more fully elsewhere, "the strategic imperatives of social policymaking present difficult dilemmas...First, constructions of 'the problem' that advance the issue onto the policy agenda...may mobilize groups with competing views of and interests in the matter that are difficult to reconcile at the policymaking stage. Then, too, constructions of policy solutions that enable coalitions to form around specific proposals and potentially permit political credit-claiming at low costs may produce policies containing ambiguous or contradictory objectives and resources insufficient to deal meaningfully with problems...Third, strategies used to overcome indifference to social problems and political stalemate, by overstating problems and understating the resources needed to address them, may lead to disappointment and backlash." (Brodin, 1992: 171)

This suggests a second problem with the compliance model, namely, that implementation problems cannot readily be separated from problems of legislative politics. 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" (Lowi, 1979: 55). The task of implementing bureaucracies may be manifestly one of compliance, but functionally the burden is far greater. In the course of converting policy into administrative practices, implementing agencies must, in a practical sense, choose among conflicting objectives and specify abstract policy elements. Consequently, implementation must be understood as far more than a technical administrative enterprise. It also must be understood as the continuation of policy politics by other means (Brodin 1987-88, 1990).

This phenomenon is not limited to the case of welfare policy, but is well illustrated by it. Gilbert Steiner has somewhat wryly observed that welfare raises issues of race, class, and gender, issues that politicians normally would prefer to avoid (Steiner 1971). These contested issues are precisely the type that politicians generally prefer to elide in policymaking and "delegate down," imparting discretion to states, localities, and street-level bureaucracies. The difficulty occurs when the political logic of policymaking confronts the administrative logic of implementation. Ambiguous, complex, and discretionary policies are unlikely vehicles for producing consistency, certainty, and transparency in policy implementation.

A second wave of implementation 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 implementation as structured within complex organizational systems.<sup>2</sup>

A major contribution to this second wave was Michael Lipsky's seminal book *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (1980), which provided the theoretical template for a new approach to implementation research 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 cannot be 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 have seemed 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.

One practical implication of this second wave of implementation research was that recommendations to improve "command and control" seemed both less likely to succeed and, in some measure, undesirable. If policy could not 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 to create "workable" policies. Richard Elmore (1979) took up that challenge, offering an 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.

Unlike the first wave compliance model, which sought to examine deviation from hierarchically-imposed mandates, the second wave street-level bureaucracy model sought to examine lower-level practice in organizational terms. Extending that view, a third wave of implementation research has emerged that investigates policy delivery, not only as an organizational phenomenon, but also as an extension of policy politics (Brodkin, 1987-88, 1990, 1992; Lin, forthcoming; Meyers, Glaser, and Mac Donald, 1998; Sandifort, 1998; Stone, 1984). Building on the theory and techniques of street-level bureaucracy research, this analytic model directs attention to how conflicts over the terms and scope of social policy are reconfigured and advanced within the context of implementing institutions. It also extends the range of street-level analysis beyond the large, public bureaucracies featured in second wave research to incorporate privatized forms of policy delivery. A key question for third wave implementation research is to consider what difference these alternative forms make, both for the production of policy and also for the pursuit of social politics.

### ***Street-level Analysis in Policy Evaluation***

As I have attempted to show in this brief review of the field, street-level research is best understood as part of a fundamentally theoretical project. It provides an analytic point of departure for the study of complex organizations and for the study of social politics, locating those studies within the variety of institutions that put policy into practice. Beyond its theoretical purposes, I believe that street-level research, as applied theory, can be used to extend the range of policy evaluation and the assessment of social policies in welfare and other areas.

Although street-level research on social welfare policy is hardly new, there is no blueprint for its use in applied research. Although still in its formative stage, there is now sufficient experience to begin formulating a rough guide that can help identify when and how to use this research approach. The rough guide outlined here is not intended to be a definitive statement of the field, but rather a work-in-progress aimed at stimulating its further development. For the simple reason of familiarity and to highlight issues specific to welfare policy, most of the examples used here draw on my own research experience. However, as noted earlier, there is a rich, emerging literature that offers more, and undoubtedly better, examples of street-level policy research.

### ***When should street-level research be used and why***

Street-level research helps address critical gaps in our understanding of policies and how they work. This approach is most valuable when policy implementation involves change in organizational practice, discretion by front-line workers, and complex decision making in a context of formal policy ambiguity and uncertainty. By focusing on the informal, lower-level routines that create policy at the point of delivery, it is possible to give greater transparency to policies that are otherwise opaque. The analytic challenge is to understand what is produced by policy, how, and, most importantly, why.

At its most basic level, street-level research provides a strategy for separating policy fact from policy fiction. By policy fiction, I refer 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, most welfare evaluations now use administrative data to monitor participation rates and enrollment in program components as a means of identifying policy's reach, for example, counting the numbers of people enrolled in training or education programs.

But data organized around pro-forma categories cannot reveal whether the "right" people were placed in the "right" programs nor if what they received as "training" or "education" when they got there was adequate. Take public school education as an example. We hope that children will be placed in the classes and special programs most appropriate to their needs. But we recognize that children may be inappropriately placed or excluded from useful programs. (See Weatherly and Lipsky, 1977, for a street-level view.) Although it is possible to keep count of various types of school placements, that hardly takes account of the content of the educational experience. Certainly, it is not particularly meaningful to compare hours spent in the overcrowded and ill-equipped classroom of an inner-city public school to hours spent in the stimulating environment of a selective and affluent private school. An advantage of street-level research is that it allows analysis to reach beyond formal administrative categories to unpack the policy experience.

In this sense, street-level research makes a crucial link in the causal chain. If we wish to attribute outcomes to policy, we need to be able to specify the policy intervention, not as imagined or reconstructed in administrative measures, but as experienced. Street-level research directly investigates what implementing organizations produce. Let me briefly offer a case-in-point from my research on the Family Support Act, predecessor to the current welfare reform.

Early findings from MDRC's experimental studies of job programs in California indicated that job clubs, as a policy component, were producing earnings improvements and that the program in Riverside County was an exemplar of this strategy.<sup>3</sup> I had been observing job clubs in Chicago, where no experimental data on outcomes existed, but administrative data generally gave little indication of increasing employment. My observations did not lead me to be sanguine about this strategy. Caseworkers were conducting job clubs with little guidance or supervision. Their sessions ranged from no more than a pro-forma sign-in and go-home arrangement to extended, free-wheeling group conversations of no particular content.

The notion that job club constituted an effective strategy for employment seemed remarkable in that context, leading me to extend my observations to Riverside and two other California counties for purposes of comparison. In practice, the program experience of "job club" in Riverside bore little resemblance to the Chicago experience, or to that of other California counties in which I conducted street-level research. The Riverside program was highly-structured (designed by an outside consulting firm), short-term (lasting only several days), and conducted by carefully selected staff specialists. In addition, material supports were abundant: including video cameras for practice interview sessions, telephone banks for making job calls, computers and copying machines for preparing resumes. While there is considerably more to this story, it should at minimum be apparent that to evaluate "job club" as a general welfare-to-work strategy or to generalize from an exceptional operation is apt to mislead (Brodin, 1995 and 1997).

The more interesting and important questions are how and why policies-as-produced assume the forms they do. This requires more than casual observation. It necessitates a theoretically-grounded strategy for detailed and systematic data collection. One such strategy is comparative, selecting multiple sites for investigation that allow the analyst to distinguish the general from the idiosyncratic and explore variation in the production of policy.

With respect to the job club story, the challenge was to account for the differences between "job club A" and "job club B." Riverside County managers, when interviewed, tended to ascribe their results to their ideological values, determination, or "office culture." However, a comparative street-level approach guides the analyst to probe beyond such claims. Do the same personal motivations or beliefs produce the same results under different organizational conditions? What organizational conditions account for different modes of street-level practice? In this case, were Chicago's harried caseworkers—who lacked not only computers, consultants and videos, but pencils, paper, and access to supplies for jobs for their clients—undermined by a failure of belief or a failure of organizational support?

These questions require a deeper and broader understanding of the organizational context within which implementation occurs than permitted by interviews alone or even interviews plus casual observation. The analyst must be able to trace the links between key organizational features, street-level practice, and the caseworker-client interaction. In this case, my research led me to conclude that neither formal rules nor personal beliefs accounted for differences in the production of "job club." In short, variations in practice were better understood as responses to the organizational conditions within which implementation occurred (Brodin, 1997).

### ***Some practical benefits of street-level research***

By investigating why and how bureaucratic practices develop, street-level analysis can inform the search of improved implementation and accountability in policy delivery. Street-level analysis moves beyond the "command and control" assumptions of the compliance model to take empirical account of factors that actually influence routine practice. 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. Policy-makers,

analysts, and administrators have a tendency to focus on variables that emphasize control and predictability...[which] leads to serious misperceptions" (Elmore, 1978). Beyond the myth of hierarchy lies the possibility of understanding what front-line implementers do, the systemic features of their work lives that shape their practices, how routine practices create policy, and the content of policy as they have produced it.

Despite the persistent hopes and preferences of both policymakers and managers, street-level research reveals that "caseworkers...do not do just what they want or just what they are told to want. They do what they can" (Brodkin, 1997: 24). In studying the implementation of work-oriented programs, a street-level perspective revealed 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" (Ibid). 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. Discretion, in itself, is neither good nor bad but the "wild card" of implementation, likely to produce different results in different organizational contexts.

This perspective offers a cautionary tale for those searching for simple "performance-based" solutions to achieving accountability. In the case of job clubs described earlier, I was led to conclude that caseworkers in Chicago welfare offices did what they could under adverse conditions, with uncertain "technology" for advancing employment, and given accountability for "making the numbers" and not much more. The form that discretion took was circumscribed by measured dimensions of performance, namely, federal participation rates specifying minimum quotas for enrollment and hours, used to determine the disbursement of federal funds to states. Ironically, these quotas, ostensibly designed to hold states accountable for policy implementation, distorted the implementation process by skewing attention to "making the numbers" without regard for *how* quotas were achieved. In practice, caseworkers did what they could to fill their job clubs with "participants" and to somehow fill the hours spent in them—for better or worse. Although this counted as "successful implementation" by federal performance measures, it is hard to support such an assessment except in the most superficial and mechanical sense.

The creation of meaningful accountability measures in welfare continues to constitute a difficult challenge. Certain types of performance quotas, such as participation rates, are easy to measure and enforce; but they do not address the content of practice and may even create incentives that undermine it. Alternatively, broader outcome measures (such as caseload reductions) may hold agencies responsible for things beyond their control, including the adequacy of agency resources and conditions in the external environment, and they, too, neglect to take account of the means through which such outcomes are produced.

In the first two years of welfare reform, administrators and their staffs have been understandably eager to claim credit for plummeting welfare caseloads. However, relatively little is known about how those reductions have been achieved—whether by helping recipients improve well-being through work or by diverting them into problematic jobs or simply removing them from welfare. These claims will be difficult to resolve

without recourse to a variety of strategies that take analysis beyond the confines of administrative data, including careful and detailed street-level research in a multitude of settings. Street-level research offers a lens through which to discover unmeasured dimensions of implementation that have critical bearing for understanding policy outcomes and broader policy effects.

### ***Understanding new modes of policy production***

Beyond credit claiming or finger pointing, the harder and more important question is how to create policy and organizational structures that are conducive to good street-level work. I recently visited a welfare office where water was dripping down the wall, computers functioned erratically, phones rang incessantly with no workable system for taking messages, the heat could not be regulated to a comfortable level, and manila case files overflowed their stacks on the floor. After a day in that setting, it was hard to blame caseworkers for much of what appears at face value to be bureaucratic carelessness, indifference, and error. Street-level research forces the analyst to contend with the realities of policy delivery as they are experienced by those charged with the task and acted out in interactions between caseworkers and their clients.

Another important challenge for the analysis of welfare policy in the post-reform era is to understand how it is being created in a newly-devolved and increasingly discretionary environment, where street-level workers produce policy in public as well as private non-profit and for-profit organizations. What are the structural features of policy delivery under these evolving arrangements and how do they influence the street-level production of welfare policy? These are some of the questions that researchers are beginning to address through a variety of strategies. They are central concerns for our Project on the Public Economy of Work, which is investigating how the relationship between welfare and lower-wage work is being restructured in welfare offices, community welfare-to-work organizations, and private workplaces.<sup>4</sup> In developing this project, we, like other researchers, have faced difficult methodological issues. The following section highlights some of these issues, with the hope of building methodologies that will advance street-level research.

### ***How can street-level research be done? Methodological issues***

Street-level research combines the 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 (Campbell and Stanley, 1966; Yin, 1982).

In general, qualitative case study methodology provides a means of searching for patterns of practice and constructing social explanations from situationally-specific data. It 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, bureaucratic theory indicates that the structure of street-level work affects the exercise of bureaucratic discretion. But this emerging body of theory is too insufficiently 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. Moreover, it offers a richly-descriptive foundation for exploring the dynamic processes through which bureaucratic patterns of practice develop and shape policy.

### ***Case selection***

Cases are selected to extend theory by focusing on a particular organization or set of contextual conditions and by making those conditions "transparently observable." This method of theoretical sampling differs from that used in research seeking to generalize from a sample to a population. For example, in our Project on the Public Economy of Work, case selection criteria were designed to extend theoretical and empirical research on bureaucratic practice and welfare reform in the specific context of urban poverty. Prior work in these fields suggested that policy delivery in the context of concentrated urban poverty and big city welfare administration would be apt to differ from that which would occur under other conditions (e.g., in a small-town agency or low-poverty area). We designed our Chicago study to examine how policy emerges in specific urban neighborhood settings and within specific types of organizations that mediate between the public economy of welfare and the private economy of the market, namely: public welfare agencies, private welfare-to-work contractors, and workplaces. This methodology could be, and I hope will be, used in other settings over time.

Although the validity of case-based analysis is in some respects problematic (the reverse of the problem of abstracted generalization in large-scale quantitative studies), case selection can contribute to validity by incorporating a comparative perspective—in our project, between differently located and differently structured welfare offices, organizations and workplaces. This strategy builds in variation and allows the analyst to distinguish particular from systematic features of organizational practice.

### ***Research techniques***

The 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, street-level analysis combines interview techniques often used by organization researchers with observation techniques commonly used in ethnography.<sup>5</sup> It adopts an ethnographic perspective, in the sense that it studies street-level bureaucrats "in their own time and space" and at work in their "natural habitat," seeking to make explicit the links between organizational structures, the individuals interacting within them, and their policy product. Observation permits data on interactions between caseworkers, employers, and recipients to be generated in the specific context in which they occur.

In contrast to organizational studies that rely on interviews and survey data, observation has the considerable advantage of its directness: it 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" (Burawoy, 1991: 1).

Interviewing is particularly effective as a method for probing the reasoning and perceptions behind behaviors. It enables researchers to dig beneath administrative categories in order to probe their content and how they are used. For example, analyzing administrative data on the imposition of sanctions cannot provide insights into how caseworkers use discretion in applying sanctions. Although a caseworker must identify a cause for a sanction in the formal case record, usually selecting a reason from a checklist, administrative records do not reveal the actual reasoning behind the decision of whether or not to apply a sanction. Skilled interviewing can probe the decision-making involved in the case and provide a more accurate understanding of how, when, and why an individual's behavior is labeled "noncompliant" and sanctions are used.

However, the analysis is still incomplete at that point. Combining interviews and observation provides a method of searching for the discrepancies between "what they say" and "what they do"—discrepancies that raise a red flag for the researcher. What is producing this divergence? This dual strategy was useful in exploring the application of sanctions. In interviews, caseworkers often portrayed themselves as "tough" or "soft" in "applying the rules." However, my observations showed their practices to be inconsistent with what they preached. Why? Comparing practices across workers, offices, and over time, I discovered considerable elasticity in the use of sanctions, with variation unexplained by differences in rules, ideology, or even the behavior of recipients.

Applying an organizational lens that located casework within the institutional structure helped explain the apparent anomaly. It revealed that caseworkers generally sought the path of least resistance, using discretion in ways most consistent with the logic imposed by the organizational pressures and incentives existing at the street-level. If sanctions were too complicated or time-consuming to apply, other things being equal, they tended not to use them. However, sanctions' use increased when caseworkers faced increased risk of being penalized by their managers for failing to catch case errors or when sanctions became easier to apply (Brodin, 1986, 1997). Combining interviewing and observation makes it possible to cross-check alternative explanations of informal bureaucratic practices. Once qualitative research uncovers variations in practice underlying administrative indicators, dimensions of those practices can be further investigated using both qualitative and quantitative methods (See, for example, Hasenfeld and Weaver, 1996).

### ***"Deep Dish" Research: Pros, Cons, and Considerations***

Implementation research has evolved from first-wave, formalist studies that take a normative view of the policy process to second- and third-wave behavioral studies that bring organizational and political perspectives to bear. Street-level research has comprised an important strategy in the development of these behaviorally-based studies and, in particular, in directing analytic attention to how policy is produced at the "front lines."

Any assessment of the street-level research approach requires a careful weighing of its strengths and limits. The chief limitations of this method come from the potential for

observer bias and from the limits of the 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 to apply a triangulation method to cross-check different forms of data with each other, subjecting inconsistent findings to special scrutiny (Denzin, 1989). A second obvious drawback of this method is that it is very labor intensive and difficult to use in projects requiring large-scale data collection. Bate, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, advises: "Rule 1 for aspiring organization researchers surely has to be: keep away from organizations; fieldwork takes too long!" (Bate, 1991: 1151)

The chief strength of this approach 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 I sometimes call "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.

It is worth emphasizing that the approach described here is grounded in a theoretical logic and designed to extend understanding of how street-level practice and, ultimately, social politics are structured within specific organizational 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." (Burawoy, 1991: 281).

Understandably, evaluation research has more proximate interests. Yet, I believe that applying theory to evaluation research enables us to ask better questions and to clarify what we *think* we see when we conduct evaluations. As applied theory, street-level research can help to guard against the reification of policy categories and constructs that may inhibit our ability to appreciate what actually goes on under the rubric of policy implementation. It offers a lens through which to acquire a fuller picture of how policy is produced and acquires its "practical" meaning in everyday life.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> This working paper, a product of the Project on the Public Economy of Work at the University of Chicago, describes elements of the project's methodology. The Project is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, the National Science Foundation (grant # 9730821), and the Open Society Institute of the Soros Foundation. An earlier version of this paper was prepared for a working group on *Process and Implementation Evaluation* sponsored by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin - Madison and the Research Forum on Children, Families, and the New Federalism at Columbia University.

<sup>2</sup> It is not possible within the confines of this essay to do justice to this rich and diverse literature, which addresses, among other things, issues of administrative symbolism, organizational behavior, caseworker-client relations, legal indeterminacy, and policy bargaining. Examples include: Berman, 1980; Brodtkin and Lipsky, 1983; Edelman, 1964; Goodsell, 1981; Hagen, 1987; Handler, 1986; Handler and Hollingsworth, 1971; Hasenfeld and Brock, 1991; Ingram, 1977; Majone and Wildavsky, 1978; McCleary, 1978; Miller, 1983; Prottas, 1979; Rein and Rabinovitz, 1978; Simon, 1983; Weatherly and Lipsky, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> I note that Riverside was highly touted as a "model" program without endorsing that view. Earnings were modest, driven by an increase in hours worked more than wage improvements, and generally insufficient to bring families out of poverty.

<sup>4</sup> The Project on the Public Economy of Work at the University of Chicago, which I co-direct with my colleague Susan Lambert, investigates how welfare reform is redefining the relationship between welfare and lower-wage work. It is comprised of a linked set of organizational studies designed to analyze responses to welfare's work requirements in the context of urban poverty across three institutional domains: neighborhood welfare offices, community agencies, and private workplaces. See: <http://www.ssa.uchicago.edu/research/pubeconwork.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ethnographers often use participant-observation, with participation providing a means of achieving a highly contextualized understanding of individuals through shared experience. Street-level implementation research tends to operate at a different level of analysis, focusing on the context itself, that is, the organization, where observation and interviews (and sometimes survey research) are favored over participant-observation. There is, of course, a natural overlap between these perspectives, which suggests that participant-observation techniques might enrich street-level research. For an insightful discussion of ethnographic methods in organizational anthropology, see Bate (1997).