Danish University Colleges

When the Law is not Enough
A New Research Agenda for Studying Frontline Work
Harrits, Gitte Sommer

Publication date:
2015

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain

Download policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 23. okt., 2019
When the law is not enough:
A new research agenda for studying frontline work.

Gitte Sommer Harrits,
Ph. D, Associate Professor,
Department of Political Science,
Aarhus University, Denmark
gitte@ps.au.dk

*** Very rough draft. Please do not quote ***
Abstract

Over 30 years ago, Michael Lipsky in his theory on street-level bureaucracy suggested that 'the law', i.e. legislation and political regulation, is not sufficient for understanding what goes on at the front line or street level of governmental agencies or for understanding what types of benefits, sanctions and services confront citizens in their daily lives. In stead, he suggested, professional discretion is inevitable in connecting general and abstract political and legal frameworks to concrete action vis-à-vis citizens.

Since then, research in street-level bureaucracy has expanded, overall supporting Lipsky’s original claims, and demonstrating different mechanism at play in street-level bureaucratic organization. This research typically employs a perspective of ‘law abidence’, meaning that street-level behavior and procedures are typically seen as obstacles for the ‘direct’ or ‘pure’ implementation of the law. Following this analytical perspective is also an implicit normative perspective suggesting that the law is the only source of legitimacy for state action.

In contrast to this, other scholars (e.g. Michael Musheno and Steven Maynard-Moody) has suggested that street-level organizations should also be studied in a different perspective, namely as facilitating encounters between citizens and the state. In such a perspective, the law is not necessarily the point of departure for understanding such encounters or for understanding the concrete actions of street-level bureaucrats and state employees. In stead, we must recognize how some state employees are guided by many other things besides the law, including e.g. stereotypical conceptions, or a normative wish for making lives better for the citizens they serve.

This paper follows this tradition, presenting and discussing insights from sociological research on state and citizen encounters. Two main perspectives for understanding such encounters are suggested: 1) a power perspective focusing on the social interaction and context of interaction between state employees and citizens 2) a knowledge perspective, focusing on how professional knowledge, practices and norms function as a context for encounters.

Thus it is suggested, that to understand what goes on at the front line of state agencies, we must move beyond the legal and political context and focus on the social context of encounters, including power dynamics, knowledge production and normative self-regulation of professionals.

Following this analytical discussion, the paper closes with a normative discussion of secondary or supplementary sources of legitimacy for state action, namely the possible legitimacy of a ‘discourse ethic’ (cf. Habermas) and the inclusion of citizens in decision making, and the possible legitimacy of expert knowledge.

Key words: Street-level bureaucracy, discretion, citizen agents, professionalism, legitimacy
Introduction

The question of what becomes of a law policies has structured classic approaches and studies within public policy and administration. Since Lipsky's seminal work (1980/2010), it has thus been recognized that that ‘the law’, i.e. legislation and political regulation, is not sufficient for understanding what goes on at the front line or street level of governmental agencies or for understanding what types of benefits, sanctions and services confront citizens in their daily lives. Following this claim, encounters between street-level bureaucrats and citizens has been center of attention for an impressive theoretical and empirical research literature, elaborating and supplementing original insights (e.g. Brodkin 1986, 2003, 2007, 2008; Handler 1986; Hupe & Hill 2007; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003, 2012; Ellis 2011; Winter & Nielsen 2008; Nielsen 2006; Evans & Harris 2004; Evans 2010).

However, as suggested by several scholars, to fully understand what becomes of laws and policies when they reach citizens at the street-level or the frontline of the state, more work needs to be done. First, studies need to move beyond the single-case level and towards systematic comparisons across different settings and contexts (Hupe 2013, Meyers & Nielsen 2012, Jewell & Glaser 2006). A unified theory on the conditions for and mechanisms of frontline work has thus yet to be formulated, and evidence vary across cases and contexts to a considerable extent. Second, as suggested by some scholars, such a unified theory needs to move beyond taking laws and policies as point of departure (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2012, Ellis 2011, Dubois 2014). In other words, we still need to push forward Lipsky’s original idea that the law is not enough if we want to understand state and citizen encounters at the street level.

Following these claims, this paper seeks a contribution to one future agenda for research on street-level bureaucracy and frontline work, suggesting the importance of social and cultural contexts of street-level organizations. The main argument presented is thus that we need to study characteristics of frontline work beyond law abidance, and move beyond the political and organizational
context towards taking into account also professional as well as social and cultural knowledge and norms.

The paper is structured as a theoretical discussion, drawing on different research literatures, including work on street-level bureaucracy and frontline work, studies of professions and professionalism as well as general sociological theory. It begins with a brief review of other recent attempts to take stock of the street-level bureaucracy research, and to suggest future, comparative agendas. Then, attention is turned to a discussion of the ‘dependent variable’: what is it that needs explaining in frontline work? Following this, the paper proceeds to make a case for the relevance and impact of social and cultural contexts of frontline work, before it ends with a concluding discussion, pointing towards a possible new research agenda.

Providing overviews and pointing ahead

Following the 30th Anniversary extended edition of *Street-level Bureaucracy* (Lipsky 1980/2010), several scholars have contributed with overviews of the literature. In an extended review, Brodkin (2012) summarizes four core propositions, presenting them as "building blocks of the street-level analytical project". These are: the understanding of policy as indeterminate, the understanding of discretionary actions as policy, the interest in systematic and structural factors influencing discretionary behavior, and the importance of street-level workers based on discretion and the position in between government and the individual (Brodkin 2012: 941-942). Also, she emphasizes how the crucial idea of studies on street-level work is to find out the ways in which discretion arise as a patterned practice, what this means for policy delivery and citizens, and how patterns are mainly related to the organizational conditions of street-level work. As she says elsewhere:

> By opening a window on what goes on inside organizations, it [research on street-level organizations] provides a perspective from which to consider the relationship of street-level practices to social and political forces ostensibly at work outside these organizations. (Brodkin 2011a: 200i).
Much similar to this, Maynard-Moody and Portillo highlights frontline status, client contact and people processing, inherency of discretion, irreducibility of autonomy and the policymaking of street-level workers as key elements, and Meyers and Nielsen summarizes even further elements such as joint production processes and the difficulty of monitoring work (Meyers and Nielsen 2012).

Regarding future research, Brodkin suggest the importance of two existing strands of research. The first is policy-focused studies showing the impact of street-level organizations and practices on policy implementation, and she emphasizes the similar structural impact of e.g. coping strategies, lack of resources, and rationalizing practices. The second is management studies, focusing on the way in which transformations of public bureaucracies, and the introduction of different organizational solutions (e.g. volunteering in the public sector and outsourcing of tasks to private or non-profit organizations), change the conditions of frontline work.

Although Maynard-Moody and Portillo as well as Meyers and Nielsen seem to agree on the importance of these two areas of research, they also point towards new grounds in need of coverage. Maynard-Moody and Portillo warns against conceptual stretching of “street-level bureaucracy” and suggest addressing more clearly the constitutive function of client contact and discretion. At the same time, they suggest moving beyond the discussion of discretion vs. rule following and towards a more “robust” concept of agency (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2012: 271). This, among other things, requires, I would argue, addressing more systematically contextual situating of the street-level and the patterning of judgment involved here.

The attention to context is supported by Meyers and Nielsen, who suggest that the systematic study of different contexts of policy implementation may prove to be a fruitful way forward, although they also suggest (against e.g. Brodkin) that individual variables such as capacity and motivation may be of interest. Also, Meyers and Nielsen suggest to address normative issues such as equity and democratic accountability, and they finally argue for more comparative research
in light of the existing, conflicting evidence, especially between single case studies and multivariate models (Meyers & Nielsen 2012: 313).

In sum, recent reviews and suggestions for future research point in somewhat different directions. However, there is some consensus on the need for more systematic comparative research, as well as for addressing further the issues of contexts (see also Hupe 2013), and the way in which different contexts may foster systematic practices of discretion. One way of introducing more contexts is to conduct cross-national studies of street-level work in different political and organizations contexts (Jewell 2007). Another way, however, is to systematically compare street-level work across different professions and policy areas (e.g. Harrits & Møller 2014). Do carry on with this last task, however, a more comprehensive model for systematically exploring differences and similarities is needed.

As Lipsky emphasized in the preface to Street-level Bureaucracy prepared for the 30th Anniversary edition, the main claim of the theory on street-level bureaucracy was that conditions were structurally similar across a variety of different tasks and professions. This paper in no way dispute this focus on structural similarities as the key to understanding street-level work. However, it is suggest to strengthen the idea put forward in existing reviews of the literature, as well as in the original work by Lipsky, that there is a “reciprocity between the larger society and the structure of bureaucratic institutions” and that these institutions are “embedded in a larger system” (Lipsky 2010: 180).

Specifically, more research is needed on the horizontal nesting of frontline work in the context of professional groups and professionalism, and in the social context surrounding frontline workers and citizens’ daily interactions (see also Hupe and Hill 2007:284). These two contexts are crucial as alternative sources (rules and resources) for frontline agency, and they are crucial for providing a more adequate understanding of the practicalities and problems of everyday life at the street level.
The problem of the dependent variable

Surely, studying the horizontal nesting of street-level work, has to do with including further explanatory mechanisms such as professional knowledge and cultural values (see below). Or, to put it differently, it has to do with including more ‘independent’ variables. However, before discussing an expanded explanatory model, we need to discuss the focus of our studies, i.e. what it is that needs to be explained in street-level bureaucracy theory. This question is not as simple as it may seem, and Lipsky's original contribution is somewhat unclear on this point.

Simply put, Lipsky’s core argument seems to be that the structural position of street-level bureaucrats, including their discretionary power and organizational autonomy, shapes conditions of work which again shapes the ways in which street level work is organized and performed. This organization, then, shapes the de facto policy implementation, or what Lipsky underlines as policy making (Lipsky 2010). Hence, street-level bureaucracy theory in it's original form could be seen to contain a very limited set of independent and dependent variables, namely the structural position of street-level bureaucrats (and their discretionary powers) impacting policy making. This simple model, however, is combined, with a myriad of mediating variables or mechanisms related to the working conditions of street-level bureaucrats and their organization of work, including the construction of routines and coping mechanisms.

Surely, presenting street-level bureaucracy theory in categories of independent and dependent variables is a gross simplification, since the heart of Lipsky’s contribution is his understanding of the complex mechanism and workings of the street-level bureaucracy (Brodkin 2012). Lipsky’s main explanatory project is thus indeed to understand what street-level bureaucrats actually do. However, it is relevant to be reminded of the fact that these actions are always thought of in the context of the structural position of street-level bureaucrats and their “effect”, i.e. policy-making or what Brodkin (2012) terms policy-as-produced.
Naturally, the core of the original explanatory project has also dominated the street-level bureaucracy literature, i.e. trying to understand what street-level bureaucrats do when producing policies. Curiously, but not necessarily crucial, however, it seems as if the concept of discretion has moved from being understood as a condition for street-level work, or even an independent variable, to what needs to be explained (e.g. Brodkin 2012, Hupe 2013, Meyers and Nielsen 2012, Evans 2010). This means that discretion has moved from connoting the structural position (and thus resources) of street-level bureaucrats to connoting their actions or patterns of action.

As already mentioned, this explanatory core has resulted in great variety of empirical case studies. However, seen in light of the ambition of formulating a unified and comparative theory, these different case studies are in some ways both too diverse and too narrow, to form a point of departure. They are too diverse in the sense, that each case study conceptualizes what needs to be explained anew, taking a point of departure in the concrete context of the study. For example, Brodkin (1997) studies “caseworker-client negotiations over the terms of program participation” in the context of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program in Chicago, Keiser (1999, 2010) studies determination of eligibility in social security disability programs, while Sandström (2011) studies fish stocking practices, i.e. intentional release of hatchery-reared fish into the wild.

However, the case-studies are also all quite narrowly focused on the same underlying theme (or variable, if you wish), namely the degree of law- or policy-abidance. The ‘end game’ of street-level bureaucracy studies thus often seems to be whether or not street-level bureaucrats implement laws and policies as they are ‘supposed to do’. This is both expected and surprising. It is expected, since it follows the simple causal model implicit in Lipsky’s original contribution. It is also surprising, however, since it contradicts Lipsky’s original and explicit intention of studying the street-level bureaucracy from the bottom up, or “inside out” as Brodkin calls it (Brodkin 2012: 943).
Following this tension between the explicit aim of street-level bureaucracy theory and it’s implicit causal model, several authors have argued to move beyond law abidance as the sole ‘dependent variable’ when studying frontline work. One of the main arguments put forward for this is that much work done at the front level is not given by abstract laws and policies, which needs to be ‘filled out’ by concrete discretion. Rather, street-level work is constituted by such general regulations that the concrete tasks (such as e.g. the providence of care, education, health and prevention) cannot meaningfully be characterized as law-abiding or not. In stead, then, scholars suggest to study the use of both professional knowledge and moral judgements in frontline work.

For example, Ellis (2011), studying adult social care, suggest formal vs. informal and managerialism vs. professionalism as significant dimensions for classifying types of frontline work, with street-level bureaucracy representing only the informal-managerial type. With this typology, Ellis suggest the importance of professional knowledge and values on par with organization and management. Similarly, Evans (2014) underlines professionalism as crucial in frontline work, however he focuses almost exclusively on the moral judgements made by street-level bureaucrats. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 2012) takes an even more radical approach, suggesting to study frontline agency in general, i.e. all the different ways in which frontline workers “practice pragmatic improvisations”. However, at the heart of their contribution is the enactment of practical, cultural and moral knowledge and norms, which they label “cultural abidance”. Following this use of language, we could thus supplement the study of law abidance with the study of both cultural and knowledge abidance, i.e. with the question of how street-level workers seem to follow, enact and enforce not only laws and regulations but also professional knowledge as well as social and cultural norms.

Further, acknowledging the constant flow of tasks involved in frontline work, some scholars suggest to study discretionary practices or styles in stead of concrete discretions or acts (Wagenaar 2004, Feldmann & Pentman 2003). For example, inspired by Opdenakker & Van Damme (2006), Winther and Nielsen (2013) studies teaching practices as being either learner centred, content
centred or order centred, and Mead and Bower (2000) studies the degree of
patient-centeredness in general practitioners consultancy practices.

Finally, drawing on general social theory, Dubois (2014) suggests Bourdieu’s
(2012) concept of ‘state acts’ as a general framework for understanding frontline
work, focusing on the ways in which street-level workers in the name of the state
shapes perceptions and material distributions by defining situations, classifying
people and distributing resources and sanctions. Dubois thus keep focus on the
dimensions of power involved in street level work, without narrowing the scope
of study to law abidance, at the same time as he focuses on the ways in which
these state acts become relevant for citizens in form of distribution of identities,
resources and sanctions (see also Soss et al. 2011).

In sum, in order to move towards a more unified theory for frontline work and
include contexts beyond the law, we need to overcome tensions in Lipsky’s
original contribution between a rather simple causal model and a declared aim
and focus on what street-level bureaucrats do. Specifically this means moving
beyond law abidance as the single implicit dependent variable, focusing also on
several other dimensions such as knowledge and cultural abidance,
discretionary practices and styles, or the state-sanctioned distribution of
identities, resources and sanctions.

**Expanding the explanatory model**

In order to fully understand the horizontal nesting of frontline work, we need to
do more, though, than expand the focus of study, i.e. more than including new
dependent variables. We also need to expand the explanatory mechanisms (or
independent variables) in the model.

In Lipsky’s original contribution as well as in much of the subsequent studies,
focus has been on what street-level bureaucrats do in the context of their
organization. This is obviously important, as it is closely and directly linked to
both the political context and the everyday work life. However, as already
mentioned, two other contexts besides the political may provide insights for
understanding the mechanisms of the street-level bureaucracy. These are, the context of professionalism and knowledge and, the context of socio-cultural communities. To be sure, these contexts are mentioned in the original contribution (Lipsky 2010: e.g. 14), however the implications of these contexts are not developed, and the mechanisms of street-level work considered are thus primarily organizational.

**Professionalism as context**

The context of professionalism and professional knowledge does not take up very much space in the original discussions of street-level bureaucracy, nor have they been very prominent in subsequent research (for exceptions see e.g. Ellis 2011, Evans 2010, 2014). Also, even where professionalism is included, it is mainly in the form of professional values or ‘ideologies’. Lipsky (2010) discusses how professional training of street-level workers entails a call for altruism, i.e. that professionals “make client’s needs primary” (72), and he later discusses how such professional norms may “provide a measure of resistance to bureaucratization” (189). However, he then proceeds to discuss the problems with taking professionalism as a model for street-level work due to e.g. resistance against criticism, individualization of work and the importance of status seeking and selective treatment of clients. In general, then it seems as if he questions the ‘truth’ of the ideology of altruism in favor of a more cynical view of professionals as primarily self-interested, or perhaps more precisely as focused on ‘making ends meet’ in a context of chronic lack of resources.

There are two problems with this conclusion. First, that professionalism has no impact on street-level work due to the workings of other mechanism is an empirical conclusion, which seems to be made here without no solid empirical warrant. To put it bluntly, the impact of professionalism needs to be studied and not assumed away. Second, the conceptualization of professionalism as an ideology of altruism is a strong simplification with regard to the sociological understanding and literature on professions and professionalism, since this literature emphasize knowledge as a key characteristic of professionals on par
with values and power (e.g. Evetts 2003; Freidson 2001; Abbott 1988; Brante 2010, 2011, Saks 2010, 2012).

Freidson thus suggests seeing professionalism as an alternative to both markets and bureaucratic organizations, and he underlines the way in which professions control their own work (as well as access to the profession), based on

[T]he official belief that the knowledge and skill of a particular specialization requires a foundation in abstract concepts and formal knowledge and necessitates the existence of discretion (Freidson 2001: 34-35).

Brante supports this position, drawing professions even closer into a constitutive relationship with science and what he (referring to Foucault) calls fields of truth:

Science informs emerging occupations conducting treatment. These are called professional occupations. Professionals intervene in the object in order to transform it. Through practices of implementation, professionals mediate between science and its object. (Brante 2010: 849).

And in a somewhat less idealistic argument, Abbott (1988) draws out the implication of this understanding of professions and knowledge for professional work distinguishing three key elements of professional work: diagnosis, treatment and inference. Thus, professionals must identify human problems (diagnosis) and decide what to do about them (treatment), while linking to a reservoir of professional (scientific) knowledge that can legitimate decisions (inference).

Following this understanding of professional work, some scholars have suggested a reconceptualization discretion, emphasizing how discretion is not only that which cannot be regulated, but also a particular way of reasoning about problems and solution (see also Wagenaar 2004 and Grimen and Molander 2008). Professions and professionalism may thus serve as an alternate context, a kind of epistemic community (Haas 1992), wherefrom street-level workers draw resources of knowledge, and to whom professional frontline workers feels accountable when making decisions and interacting with clients.
The source of professional knowledge is not, however, necessarily purely scientific or only flowing from research and educational institutions, since “practical” or tacit knowledge stemming from the world of professional work also may be held and transferred collectively in the professional communities (Polanyi 1967; Grimen 2008). Also, as suggested by scholars within the functional tradition, the professional community (or corps, as Durkheim termed it), may also serve as an alternate context for moral views or professionals norms (e.g. Durkheim 1957, Parsons 1954). Further, as is shown in recent studies, professional knowledge and norms may even weave into both organizational and managerial logics and transformations (Evetts 2011, Evans 2010: 51ff, Nordegraaf 2011).

In sum, professions and professionalism may serve as an alternate horizontal context that street-level workers are also embedded in and accountable towards (see also Hupe and Hill 2007), and the professional logic may thus give rise to a professional role being performed also in street-level organizations (e.g. Tummers et. al 2009). To fully understand the mechanism of professionalism in frontline work, then, we need to take seriously the epistemological, cognitive and normative frameworks, as well as the collegial model for organizing work, and the professional identities and role conceptions held by frontline workers. These are the possible rules and resources (cf. Maynard-Moody and Musheno) that frontline workers draw on in their improvisations of daily practices, and the impact of professionalism thus exceeds the ways in which professionals act (or do not act) in the interest of their clients. Indeed, as also suggested by Evans (2014), the sole focus on professional’s interests and the schema of altruistic vs. self-interested actions potentially misses the point of how professional knowledge and norms guide practices at the street-level.

To be sure, professionalism understood in this way should not to be seen in a vacuum devoid of power struggles. Thus, several contributions within the context of professions and professionalism underline how professions use and develop positions of professional power and social closure (Johnson 1977, Larsson 1977, Parkin 1979), and who this sometimes also impacts jurisdictional
struggles at the frontline (Abbott 1988). Such studies show how professions are born out of power struggles, including political, social and symbolic strategies for excluding potential competitors and political strategies for securing state guaranteed monopolies.

These analyses are important per se, especially as antidote to professional ideologies on service motivation and the employment of “pure” knowledge. However, they also emphasize the fact that authority (understood in the ‘weberian manner’ as legitimate power) may have sources besides formal bureaucracy and political democracy, including e.g. knowledge and science, or a close relationship to clients. Also, they suggest considering the different levels of power and authority between professions, as well as differences in legitimacy depending upon the source of power drawn upon (e.g. Harrits & Larsen, forthcoming). Thus, even though power is important for understanding the constitution of professions and aspects of professional work, it does not mean that ‘naked’ power struggles and the pursuit of self-interests vis-à-vis citizens is an appropriate framework for studying professional work. Rather, differences in social closure and professional power (status), legitimacy and authority may interact with knowledge, epistemological frameworks and professional norms and impact frontline work.

In sum, to understand the impact of professionalism on frontline work we need to understand the context of professional knowledge, professional norms and professional authority that function as both rules (or restrictions) and resources that frontline draw on in their daily practices. For example, highly professionalized occupations, drawing upon highly specialized and legitimate forms of knowledge may perceive of and perform tasks of discretion in a rather different manner, than non-professionalized occupations. Also, strong professional norms regarding e.g. how to treat or interact with clients, and a strong collegiate body with the power to sanction professional conduct, for example via a state-sanctioned system of authorization, may impact the ways citizens are approached at the frontline, above and beyond any local procedures and routines created. However, to understand the impact of professionalism on
frontline work, such mechanisms needs to be studied systematically across different professional contexts.

**Socio-cultural communities as context**

The second context that may be relevant for frontline work and discretion is the broader social and cultural context, in which bureaucracies as well as street-level organizations are embedded. As pointed out by Lipsky and others (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, Dubois 2010), street-level work is characterized by a high amount of client interaction. One obvious implication of this, which is well covered in the literature, is the way in which client constructions (or stereotypes) may impact discretion and the categorization of clients (e.g. Lipsky 2010: 59ff, Egelund 1996; Soss et. al 2011; Møller and Stone 2012; Winther & Nielsen 2012). Thus, the use of stereotypes may be seen as a form of simplification, i.e. as one form of coping mechanism and thus a source of patterned discretion practices (Lipsky 2010). Also, this opens for the possible impact of national (or even broader) cultural contexts to make a difference, since social constructions of clients vary across these broader contexts, possibly even following differences between welfare regimes and politico-administrative regimes (Lipsky 2010: 181ff).

However, other and more proximate social and cultural contexts may also be relevant for street-level work. Thus, similar to professional communities serving as alternate contexts with rules and resources that street-level workers draw upon, social and cultural communities of the professional may have the same function. Sociological literature on identity suggest that people in general form identities as well as perceptions, beliefs and values, or what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “principles of vision and division” and “schemes of perception and appreciation”, based on the social positions, circumstances and the socio-cultural communities in which they engage (e.g. Bourdieu 1984, 1989, 1990; Jenkins 2008; Harrits & Møller 2011). Bourdieu refers to this mechanism of forming contextual identities, perceptions and values as *habitus*, which he defines as a system of dispositions (e.g. motivational, cognitive, aesthetic and
normative dispositions), produced by the specific social conditions of the individual (Bourdieu 1990: 53, 77, 1984: 170-173).

Building partly on Bourdieu’s theory, Michelle Lamont (1992, 2000, 2012) supplements the individualistic mechanism of habitus with an understanding of how collective identities, perceptions and values are enacted and reinforced in social interactions. She thus insists on the ways in which practices and understandings are not only result of processes at the individual level, but also a collective phenomenon:

Bourdieu neglects to analyze how people’s preferences are shaped by broader structural features as well as by the cultural resources that are made available to them by the society they live in [...]. We need not deny the importance of the habitus. Following cognitive psychologists and neo-institutionalists, however, we need to recognize that people do not always perceive the world only through their own experiences and that they often borrow cultural models that are decouples from their own lives (Lamont 1992: 187-188).

Returning to the frontline of work, this means that discretionary judgments may draw on both logics of individual habitus as well as the broader social and cultural models, in which street-level workers are embedded. Either way, this implies that frontline workers draw on social and cultural contexts for making sense of their work, using cognitive and moral frameworks from their own social history (the mechanism habitus) or from the social and cultural relations in which they are presently embedded (the mechanism of cultural models).

In support of this idea, Abbott suggests that diagnosis – one of the three elements of professional work – consists of ‘colligation’, i.e. painting a picture of the client, and of ‘classification’, i.e. referring this picture to a suitable professional category that can then be handled (treated). Thus, when encountering clients and deciding what do to, the first task of colligation involves sorting information that is relevant from information that is irrelevant. This distinction, however, is not very clear, and street-level workers may therefore “begins to assign subjective properties to the objective problems with which professions work” (Abbott 1988: 44). Or, formulated in consistence with our argument here, frontline workers may draw on other contexts to help them
make decisions, including their own common sense understanding of the social worlds, or a common sense understanding shared with colleagues and clients.

The importance of the socio-cultural context and habitus of street-level workers has already been demonstrated in some work. First, the literature on representative bureaucracy suggest a link between “passive” and “active” representation, meaning that the representation of minorities among bureaucratic employees leads to responsiveness towards such minorities’ interests (e.g. Meier 1984, Meier and Stewart 1992; Keiser et al. 2002, Wilkins & Keiser 2006). Although the focus is these studies is different from street-level bureaucracy studies, results from the representative bureaucracy literature demonstrates how social identities and characteristics become relevant in public administrative work, also at the frontline.

More specifically focused on the frontline, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) demonstrate how frontline work “is as much a process of forming and enforcing identities [...] as of delivering services and implementing policies and that “more than bureaucratic politics, identity politics shape the citizen-clients’ outcomes” (153). Further, Dubois (2010, 2014) demonstrate how social relations of class and inequality shapes both institutional practices and interaction orders in the French social office and among French controllers entering people’s homes in order to make judgments about cohabitation, and how social characteristics and roles such as class, gender and ethnicity becomes important when frontline workers encounter citizens. Also, and much similar to this, Watkin-Hayes (2009, 2011) explores the dynamics of race for frontline encounters, whereas Harrits & Møller (2014) explore how the social and cultural distance between street-level workers and citizens with respect to class, lifestyles and habitus may be of particular importance in policy areas where the discretion done by street-level workers touch upon issues of every-day-practices such as in preventive health care, child protection and education.

Again, one should be aware of how social and cultural contexts may interact with both professional and organizational contexts. This is for example demonstrated
by Epp et al. (2014), showing how perceptions and socio-cultural understanding of race in America become institutionalized practices in police frontline encounters and traffic regulations (see also Meier & Capers 2012 for a similar argument of interaction in the representative bureaucracy literature).

In sum, even though some research does exist, most is done on single-case studies or comparing only a few settings, and more systematic and comparative work is needed in order to be able to address the impact of social and cultural contexts. In particular, systematically exploring frontline work in different social and cultural settings and with varying degrees of social distance between frontline agents and citizens may bring us closer to understanding these intricate mechanisms.

**Concluding discussion**

Research on street-level bureaucracy has always been aimed at exploring what goes on at the frontline of the state, where frontline workers encounter citizens, and where the practicalities of everyday life and work makes the abstract and general world of policies and laws seem far away. However, this intended aim at moving beyond the law has been followed by an implicit causal model, sustaining abidance to laws and policies as the ‘end game’ of street-level bureaucracy theory. Also, much work on street level bureaucracy has been done, but a unified model and systematic, comparative studies are yet to be formulated.

This paper has suggested a new agenda for studies on frontline work, moving beyond a focus on law abidance and towards systematic studies of the horizontal embeddedness of frontline work. This involves, first, a reconceptualization of the dependent variable to include cultural and knowledge abidance, discretionary practices and styles and the state-sanctioned distributions of resources. Second, it involves including into the explanatory model the professional and the socio-cultural context of frontline workers, meaning that frontline workers may draw on professional and socio-cultural structures as significant restrictions, rules and resources (including both knowledge, cognitive frameworks and norms) for practicing their work (see figure 1 for a sketch of the suggested model).
As indicated in the model, the suggestions made here are supplementary to the original theory on street-level bureaucracy. Political and organizational contexts of street level work is still important to include in studies, as is law abidance. Following more empirical work, then, more theoretical work needs to be done, theorizing and hypothesizing about the relationship between contexts and mechanisms.
References


