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Professional agency in street-level work

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*** Very first draft. Please do not quote. All comments and suggestions are very welcome! ***
Abstract

The street-level bureaucracy literature teaches us that frontline workers draw on both policy logics and social, cultural, and personal logics in their work (Lipsky, 2010; Rice, 2013). This has also been conceptualized as state and citizen agency (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 1999, 2003, 2012), and it is both well documented and well theorized.

However, the influence of professional logics, knowledge and norms is less developed in the street-level bureaucracy literature (Harrits, 2019b). Many street-level bureaucrats are in fact professionals carrying out professional work. Conceptualizing and examining the role of professional logics as well as the interplay between the professional logic and policy logics and social and cultural logics is therefore important. In this paper, we ask: How can we understand and conceptualize professionalism in street-level work? And how can we understand and conceptualize the interconnection and negotiation of state, citizen and professional agency in street-level work?

We answer these questions in two steps: First, we re-analyze existing data, to explore how pre-school teachers and schoolteachers use, move between, negotiate and reconcile different forms of agency when performing and discussing professional work. We build on two different studies. The first study contains 42 semi-structured interviews with Danish pre-school teachers and schoolteachers on the topic of prevention of social and health risks. The interviews use narrative questions on existing practices, and vignettes mimicking ‘real-life’ situations where professionals have to assess individual children. The second study contains observations, interview and focus group data from 25 weeks of field studies in two different Danish schools, on the topic of health risk prevention in schools. The fact that we use both studies gives us the opportunity to compare the establishment and negotiation of different forms of agency across different professions (pre-school teachers and teachers), across different data types (interviews, focus groups and observational data) and across different contexts (teaching a group of students, assessing single students and discussing policy with an interviewer and/or colleagues).

Second, building on the results of the explorative analysis, we discuss how to theoretically understand and conceptualize professional agency and the negotiation of different forms of agency. Here, we rely on the notion of state and citizen agency as suggested by Musheno and Maynard-Moody (1999, 2003, 2012), and develop the concept of professional agency to supplement these concepts. The conception of ‘agency’ here points toward an understanding, where both the institutional context and the individual professional practices needs to be taken into consideration. Agency is always embedded, and institutions are always inhabited (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014). Further, we build on the literature on hybrid professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2007, 2015) to conceptualize how different forms of agency are negotiated, and how the institutional context may influence or condition this negotiation.

In a final discussion, we draw together our empirical and theoretical findings, and discuss how the concept of professional agency can contribute to the broader literatures on street-level work, the management of street-level work, and policy implementation.
**Introduction**

The street-level bureaucracy literature teaches us that frontline workers draw on different logics in their work (Lipsky, 2010; Rice, 2013). This has been conceptualized in different ways, for example by distinguishing between discretion-as-granted and discretion-as-used (Hupe, 2013), as well as different forms of (state, citizen, or moral) agency (Dubois, 2010; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 1999, 2003, 2012; Zacka, 2017).

The literature on professional work adds to this an understanding on how professional and knowledge-based logics also shape frontline work such as nursing, teaching, social work and policing (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Harrits, 2019b). However, the literature on street-level bureaucracy and frontline work is remarkably silent on how to understand professionalism and knowledge-based logics in frontline work. In this paper, we therefore seek a contribution to the literature and future empirical studies of frontline work by providing a conceptual framework for studying professional agency, both as a separate logic and as a logic that is possibly intertwined and mixed with other logics. An enhanced understanding of the nuances of frontline work in research, we think, may help policy makers, managers and educators build better institutions, which can benefit both frontline workers and citizen clients.

We develop the conceptual framework taking a point of departure in explorative analyses of data from two existing studies on frontline work in Danish schools (Cecchini, 2018; Harrits, 2016; Harrits & Møller, 2014, 2016), since Danish education is a good example of a domain with increasing complexity of tasks and many different and competing logics. Both projects focused on the task of social and health prevention, where teachers combine professional knowledge with demands on prevention stated in the law, as well as with teacher’s own knowledge on and relationship to concrete children. The first project used vignettes to mimic real-life decision making, whereas the second project used ethnographic observation to capture situated teacher practices. We approach the data using grounded theory techniques. By combining two different projects and data types focusing on similar tasks, and using an explorative grounded theory-inspired analysis, we thus create a solid empirical base for theory building. Thus, the main intention of the paper is to develop a conceptual framework with broader applicability, which we do by linking our empirical results with the literature in a broader theoretical discussion.
Our analyses and theoretical discussions take a point of departure in existing discussion of agency and frontline practice (Hupe, 2013; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Zacka, 2017) and are framed by two overall questions. 1) How can we define professional agency as a separate logic of frontline practice?; and 2) How are different forms of agency combined and mixed in frontline practice? Below, we begin by briefly discussing the existing literature on discretion and agency. However, we quickly move on to the explorative analysis, leaving the discussion of our theoretical contribution to the final parts of the paper. Also, before moving on to the analysis, we present the data and methods used for gathering and analyzing the data.

Compliance, coping and agency in frontline work
Discussion of street-level bureaucracy and frontline work are united by their interest in what goes on at the “sharp end” of government, where policies are transformed from ideas and intentions to actual interventions in people’s lives. Thus, most scholars within this field are interested in the frontline worker’s actions and why they choose to do what they do.

For Lipsky the concept of discretion was used to demark the nature of street-level bureaucracies and frontline work: “By definition, street-level bureaucrats work at jobs characterized by relatively high degrees of discretion and regular interaction with citizens” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 27). This feature of street-level bureaucracies, i.e. that frontline workers have a great amount of freedom in their everyday decision making, together with constant lack of resources (time, information etc.), was used to explain why frontline work “could not be performed according to the highest standards of decision making” (Lipsky, 2010, p. xi). Lipsky’s use of the concept ‘discretion’ is thus quite structural and close to what Hupe calls “discretion-as-granted” (Hupe, 2013). However, most work on street-level bureaucracy following Lipky’s original work has been focused on explaining “discretion-as-used”, trying to pinpoint exactly what can be seen as guiding for frontline workers actions. As Hupe states, this means focusing on “the way freedom is used” and to “actual behaviour of actors” (Hupe, 2013, p. 435).

Without covering the whole range of studies, a crude and preliminary distinction of studies on discretion-as-used can be made between studies focusing on compliance, coping and agency. The first group of studies, focusing on compliance, takes a point of departure in policy and discretion-

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1 We thank an anonymous Danish public servant for giving us this precise metaphor for street-level and frontline work.
as-granted, and tries to explain when and why frontline workers deviate from policy intentions, for example by treating clients differently, by sabotaging policy intentions or by shirking to achieve more leisure or greater job satisfaction (e.g. Brehm & Gates, 1999; May & Winter, 2007; Nielsen, 2006). The second group of studies continue Lipsky’s focus on coping, as a way of understanding frontline behavior by focusing on institutional cross-pressure and individual (and collective) responses (e.g. Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015; van Loon, Heerema, Weggemans, & Noordegraaf, 2018). Although obviously different, the first two groups of studies nevertheless share a point of departure in the formal setting of frontline work, i.e. that of government agencies and policy regulation. Thus, although their main focus and explanation is different (human interest in maximizing satisfaction and influence vs. natural reactions to stressful work environments), both these groups share an interest in understanding, why frontline workers sometimes do not do what they are “supposed” or intended (by policies) to do.

The main perspective and interest of the third group of studies is somewhat different. As explained by Zacka (2017), the “compliance model” of street-level bureaucracy overemphasizes the technical nature of frontline work and thus underestimates it’s ambiguous, uncertain and fuzzy elements. Instead, Zacka suggests, we need to understand and study the moral agency of frontline work, i.e. the ways in which frontline workers constantly interpret, navigate and make normative judgements and decisions within the everyday practice of their work. A similar focus on meaning making and judgements is present in Maynard-Moody and Musheno’s (2003) seminal contribution to the street-level bureaucracy literature, as well as in more recent work drawing heavily on this work (e.g. Dubois, 2010; Harrits & Møller, 2014b; Raaphorst, 2017). Two major messages make this group of studies different compared to studies on compliance and coping, although these two messages are often intertwined.

The first message has to do with how we frame, understand and study frontline work. Maynard-Moody and Musheno deliberately chooses the concept of ‘agency’, as an attempt to underline how actions at the frontline are the result of both institutional constraints and resources as well as the inherently human capacity for making interpretations, forming judgements and taking action (Giddens, 1984; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012; Sewell, 1992). The fact that frontline actions are different from intentions in policy rules and prescriptions is thus in this perspective not seen as deviant or problematic, but as a result of the fact that policy is always a matter of human affairs.
However, using the conception of agency, Maynard-Moody and Musheno also underlines that frontline actions are always embedded within social relations and institutions, i.e. that agency is constantly both constrained and enabled by structure, understood as rules, roles and resources (Giddens, 1984). Analytically, the concept of agency thus forces us to see both institutional contexts, and the ways in which agents draw on, use, interpret and combine different rules, roles and resources. With reference to a different scholarly tradition, one can say that the concept of agency forces us to focus on, on the one hand, institutional logics understood as

[...] the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999, see also 2012).

However, additionally we need to focus on what could be called forms of agency or agency logics, understood as the ways in which actors constantly and situationally interpret, make judgements and act within a range of institutional constraints.

The second message follows from the first, or rather, it is an insight following from applying the perspective of agency to frontline work, namely that the nature of this work contains different types of agency. As pointed out in Cops, Teachers and Social Workers (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003), frontline workers only sometimes act according to a logic of policy compliance and state authority (i.e. state agency). At other times, the logic dominating frontline meaning making and actions can better be described as citizen agency, i.e. a logic focused on social and cultural norms of everyday lives and interactions.

These two messages are sometimes confused, though, resulting in the implicit assumption that frontline agency always involves drawing on situational and everyday cultural and moral logics. Instead, we wish to underline the distinctness of the two messages. We agree with, and take a point of departure in, message number one, and the value of focusing studies of frontline work by zooming in on both institutional and agency logics. Yet, we claim that following message number one, we need to enlarge message number two, i.e. move beyond cultural and moral logics, and focus on logics of knowledge and professional experience, i.e. what we will frame as professional agency. Following a broader understanding of different forms of agency, we then further need to develop
our understanding of how these different forms of agency are combined and negotiated in frontline practices. As explained above, we proceed with the development of this argument by first turning to an explorative analysis of existing data, before returning to a discussion of our theoretical contribution.

Data and methods

This paper is based on an explorative analysis of existing data generated for other projects. Our original analyses of the data showed how frontline workers sometimes interpret and manage situations and problems by drawing on professional expertise, knowledge and experience and thereby pointed to the existence of a professional agency logic. We thus decided to revisit our data in order to examine and further understand professional agency as a single logic as well as explore how this logic is combined with other forms of agency at the frontline. The approach we have adopted in this paper can thus be characterized as an abductive approach. Whereas deductive and inductive research follow a linear logic, abductive research follows a circular or spiral pattern moving back and forth between theory and empirical observations (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, pp. 26–34). Abduction starts with an observation (the consequences) and then constructs a possible explanation or reason (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, pp. 35–49; Peirce 1997). How we have done this in the analysis of the data will be described later in this section, but first we will present the two studies.

The data used for this paper derives from two different studies. The first study was an interview study of the use of class stereotypes by Danish frontline workers in decisions regarding early social prevention, i.e. decisions on whether or not to further observe and intervene in the lives of children and families in possible social risk (Harrits, 2019; Harrits & Møller, 2012). The study included three professional groups who in Denmark carry the main responsibility of early social prevention and the detection of possible social risk: health nurses, pre-school teachers and primary school teachers. It used semi-structured interviews in combination with a vignette experiment as the main source of data. In total, the study collected, from 2011 to 2012, 16 interviews with health nurses, 20 interviews with pre-school teachers and 22 interviews with primary school teachers, i.e. 58 interviews, including 116 responses to vignettes. For the purpose of analysis in this paper, we only analyze the section of the interview where respondents react to and discuss the two vignettes. Also, to increase comparability
with the second study, the 16 interviews with health nurses are excluded from analysis in this paper, and we thus include 42 interviews, i.e. 84 reactions to vignettes.

Semi-structured interviews are well suited to explore how respondents interpret and make sense of situations and everyday practices and how they think of and reason about e.g. decisions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Soss, 2006). Letting frontline professionals talk about their experiences and how they perceive their everyday tasks and decisions thus gives possible insight into different agency logics. However, semi-structured interviews focus (and should focus) on the individually situated everyday lives of each respondent, and it can sometimes be difficult to compare the very different contexts and problems that these respondents encounter and choose to reflect in in interviews. Also, interviews are focused on the ways in which people themselves perceive, interpret and choose to narrate their own practices. Therefore, interviews are possibly limited by an ‘attitudinal fallacy’, where researchers infer from such interpretations and narrations to actual behavior and practice (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

To make up for both these limitations, the interviews included a vignette experiment, presenting each respondent with similar vignettes. Vignettes are small, often fictional, stories, which can situate interview questions and discussions in a concrete context, thus making it possible to compare answers more easily across respondents (Hughes & Huby, 2004; Jenkins, Bloor, Fischer, Berney, & Neale, 2010). Also, although one should also be careful not to infer directly from answers to vignettes to real-life behavior, the discussion of a vignette closely mimics real-life situations where professionals have to interpret different types of information and quite quickly reach a conclusions (Eskelinen & Caswell, 2006). By analyzing how frontline professionals interpret, discuss and reach a conclusion when presented with two different vignettes, gives us an opportunity to come quite close to possible negotiations of different forms of agency (and institutional) logics in professional work.

The vignettes were created to realistically present a child and a family in a possible (but not certain) social risk situation. Before constructing the vignettes, pilot observations studies were made, and the vignettes were further vetted by experts with insights on teaching and professionalism in pre-schools and primary schools. Great care was thus taken to make sure that vignettes were perceived as authentic, which strengthens both construct and ecological validity (REF Harrits 2020, Harrits & Møller forthcoming). The experimental setup was designed to test the use of class stereotypes
(Harrits, 2019). However, for the purpose of this article, we do not utilize this experimental setup. Data was collected in eight different school districts in four different municipalities, making sure that frontline the professionals represent organizations (i.e. schools) located in quite different circumstances (rural vs. urban areas, socially homogenous vs. socially heterogeneous areas). This strengthens the possibility for analytical inference (Maxwell, 2012), even though this is not the main goal of this paper. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by student assistants.

The second study is an ethnographic study on the topic of health risk prevention in schools conducted in four seventh grade school classes at two Danish Public Schools. The data was generated through a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews with teachers and focus group interviews with teachers. The data that forms the basis of analysis in this paper consists of more than 500 hours of participant observation, two focus groups with respectively three and four teachers in each and seven semi-structured interviews with teachers.

The observational data consists of observations of interactions between teachers and students that somehow concern health promotion and prevention for example interactions between teachers and students in health education and physical education class as well as interactions between teachers in the staff room, in teaching situations and during meetings discussing health promotion and prevention. The data thereby allows for examining the negotiation and establishment of hybrid roles across different situations in encounters with different types of actors (students and colleagues). The observational data was generated through participant observation and written down as field notes following (Spradley, 2016:73-84, Emerson et al., 2011:1-20). This entailed taking small notes in a notebook – a condensed description – during fieldwork and later re-writing the notes and filling in the gaps with details thereby turning it into an expanded account (Spradley 2016, 70-73)

The interview material consists of semi-structured single-person interviews and two focus groups with the seven primary teachers in the four school classes, which was the sampling criterion. Although, it was not an intentional sampling criterion, the interviewees constitute quite diverse group of teachers with regard to gender, age, years in the job, the subjects they taught etc., which enhances the internal generalizability of the study (Maxwell, 2012). The main purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to get a comprehensive understanding of how teachers perceive and classify pupils’ health as well as getting a sense of the professional identity of the individual teachers, their
perceptions of health and their role as health-promoting agents. As such, the questions focused on making teachers reflect on their role as teachers in general and in relation to students’ health (see the full-length interview guide in the appendix).

The aim of the focus groups was to get access to how health, health promotion and health education as well as the health of pupils were collectively constructed and negotiated in the encounter between teachers. The point of departure of the focus group was an exercise where the teachers had to design a health education course for the school classes. The teachers had to come up with topics, learning goals and activities and agree on them collectively and discuss and reflect on the potential challenges and benefits of such a course, which pupils the course would appeal to and which pupils it would not appeal to etc. Overall, the study followed general suggestions in the literature on doing interviews and focus groups, e.g. adjusting questions to everyday-language tone, asking open and concrete questions, making teachers talk about what they did by telling stories from everyday life and making use of exercises (Weiss 1995, Barbour 2007, Kvale and Brinkmann 2015, Halkier 2016). All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

As explained, we have not collected new data for this study, but re-analyze existing data from two existing studies. Nevertheless, analyzing the data we are inspired by the grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). In the re-examination of the data, we have thus adopted an explorative approach remaining open to different theoretical possibilities uncovered from the data (Ibid; p. 47). First, we conducted an initial coding where we aimed to stick closely to the data. We asked analytical questions of the data focusing on how frontline workers decide and reason about what they do, exploring these processes across different contexts (interacting with a group of students, interacting with colleagues, assessing single students and discussing policy with an interviewer and/or colleagues). In order to stay close to the data, not apply, and adopt already existing theoretical interpretations we strived to compare data with data, use codes that reflect action and by moving through the data swiftly (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). Afterwards, we build a coding scheme based on the open coding and the analytical reflections and theoretical insights this process had generated and taking this coding scheme as a point of departure, we conducted a focused coding of the empirical material. In the final part of the analysis, we made a final coding scheme combing the results from our open coding with existing theoretical insights and coded all the data according to this scheme.
### Table 1: Final coding frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Subcode</th>
<th>No. of cases coded St. 1</th>
<th>No. of References St. 1</th>
<th>No. of cases coded St. 2</th>
<th>No. of References St. 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agency logic</strong></td>
<td><em>State agency:</em> interpretations, judgements and actions drawing on or referring to rules, resources (e.g. knowledge, authority) and roles from policies or the organizational context of the state.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Citizen agency:</em> interpretations, judgements and actions drawing on or referring to rules, resources (e.g. knowledge, norms) and roles from the context of everyday life and cultural or common repertoires.</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Professional agency:</em> interpretations, judgements and actions drawing on or referring to rules, resources (e.g. knowledge, authority) and roles from science, professional education or professional experience.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Combinations</strong></td>
<td><em>Situational shifts:</em> Shifting between single logics over time or according to the situation or problem at hand</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Explicit reasoning:</em> Explicit weighing different forms of agency against each other</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Integration:</em> The almost seamless integration of different agency logics, where they blend together in mutual support in e.g. interpretations of a situation or arguments for an intervention</td>
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</table>
Exploring agency in frontline work

As mentioned above, the analyses of our original work pointed towards the existence of an agency logic drawing primarily on professional expertise, knowledge and experience. This means that we saw frontline workers interpreting and solving situations and problems using professional language and resources. However, we also saw the presence of state and (most widespread) citizen agency as defined and described in the literature (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 1999, 2003). In our explorative (re)analysis, we searched openly for different types of agency logics, i.e. for different forms of situational interpretation, judgement and action. Drawing together our explorative analysis, we found primarily citizen and professional agency, with only a few instances of state agency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Citizen and state agency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well, it … [laughs with a hint of moral disapproval in her voice]. Sometimes I do this [demonstrates an action, probably pointing a finger to her head]. And I have actually seen this show myself, and it is really beyond the limit … to me. And eh, I must say, I am a person, that cannot help but interfere, if I hear about something like that. So, I will make a remark about it, and I will probably do that at the next parent-teacher conference. […] And then they can use my opinion for what it’s worth, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Study 1, Female teacher on issue presented in vignette with a child watching a comedy show not appropriate for his age, with his father)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well, I’ve never seen an instance where girls didn’t feel like showing off to boys. On the contrary, I think. But sometimes you kind of think that some of the girls who are actually a bit overweight, that they don’t, you might say that they maybe sometimes forget that they are overweight because you could say that the clothes they sometimes wear maybe shows a little bit too much considering how you should dress when you’re overweight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Study 2, Male teacher on the issue of shyness among teenage girls)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What about the issue with the meals? Is it a possibility that the family opts out of the collective arrangement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, that is actually not a possibility. […] No, I don’t think we will just accept that. That requires a statement from a GP. I think …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So, it should be related to allergies or something like that?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, and then it doesn’t go through us, right?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Study 1, Female pedagogue on issue raised in vignette regarding meals in day care center)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 [] indicates remarks from the author. […] indicates that the excerpt has been edited, i.e. that some text has been left out. … indicates a pause made by the interviewee.
As can be seen in table 2, citizen agency is seen when frontline workers interpret and intervene in situations drawing on their own common sense understanding of everyday morality. In the example from study 2, the (male) teacher is addressing the topic of teenage girls feeling self-conscious about their weight. Instead of problematizing their mental health state or the physical risk associated with overweight in the teenage years, he uses his common sense understanding of decent clothing (especially for overweight girls) to problematize how some girls in his classroom handle their overweight.

Similarly, the female teacher in study 2 uses her own sense of the age appropriateness of a comedy shows for making a judgement on the fact that a father chooses to watch a specific show together with his son. Here, the context of the statement is a question of whether or not the behavior and situation of the child (as described in vignette) raises any concerns for the child’s well-being, social risk, and possible need for interventions, and the teacher here begins her interpretation of the vignette with this statement, but then moves on to other types of interpretations and ends up making the judgement that this specific child is not at risk.

These two small excerpts are exemplary for many instances of citizen agency in our data, and they share (together with the other instances in the data) the use of common sense and cultural norms for what is appropriate and not appropriate, focusing on what Maynard-Moody and Musheno refers to as cultural abidance (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). In other words, citizen agency as exemplified in our data, draws primarily on cultural institutions (i.e. rules, roles, and resources) such as norms for what ‘we’ as a society deem appropriate, and common-sense conceptions of what can be considered ‘normal’ behavior. Common for many of the instances of citizen agency is also, that they are related not only to interpretations of situations, but also to making judgements and choosing actions. For example, the teacher in study one not only interprets the situation referring to cultural norms, she also judges the situation as inappropriate and chooses to intervene by letting the citizen-client (in this case the parents) know what she thinks, at the same time as she realizes that her opinion is just that: an opinion.

As mentioned, we do not find many instances of state agency in our data. We can only speculate about why this is, but it could be related to both the nature of the work (pedagogical interaction with children), the identity of frontline workers such as teaches and pre-school teachers, the nature of the
questions we ask, or the nature of Danish public institutions. More importantly for this paper, though, is the ways in which the few instances of state agency primarily involve the reference to state resources in the interpretation of, judgement of, and intervention in a situation. Thus, in our data we don’t find many references to goals or prescriptions as described in policy regulations. Rather, frontline workers may refer to state resources in the form of institutional offers (e.g. a specialized institution for families in need, or a scheme where families in need can apply for funding of children’s leisure activities). Or, as is seen in table 2, frontline workers may refer to the resources inherent in their position as government employees, i.e. as sharing state authority vis-à-vis citizen clients. Thus, as seen in table 2, a frontline worker can, when interpreting a problem (in this case a child not eating the food served, and a family wanting to opt out of the food arrangement in the day care center and bring their own food), suddenly shift to an almost legal logic, referring to a formal procedure (getting a reference from a GP) for allowing special food arrangements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Professional agency</th>
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<tr>
<td>The first thing that just pops into my head is that he has motor skill issues, and that is why he has the experience … we typically see that with some boys having issues with participating in playing with balls, they get excluded. They are not included, if they have motor skill problems. So, I will try to get a screening, or talk to a physiotherapist, and I will discuss that with the parents. That’s my immediate response, because when he begins with this outward reacting pattern in these situations, then it’s because he gets frustrated. As I see it. So I recognize this, that someone, if they are not included in the social relations, begins hitting other and are excluded, not feeling as part of the group, then it’s because they are frustrated. It’s because they need help. And what they need is that … It may be that he has motor skill issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female preschool teacher discussing an issue with a boy hitting other children, and having motor skill issues.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Well, I teach biology, and we have just been through the digestive system, where talking about nutrition is a natural part. And we have talked about that a lot. I am not a fan of the low-carb diets or Stone-Age food or whatever is trending right now. For me it is important to have a varied diet. And that is reflecting in my teaching. Not that I think I should influence the students, but I think it is about enlightening them. And that is because I think that sometimes, within the field of my professionalism, you are presented with some half-truths from these diets.

(Study 2, Male teacher talking about his role in relation to health promotion and prevention)

Compared to the instances of citizen and state agency, professional agency, as we find it in our data, stands out as different. Here, frontline workers draw on professional institutions of both formal
knowledge and experiential knowledge shared in communities of practice, i.e. what Freidson refers to as formal and practical knowledge (Freidson, 2001). For example, a female preschool-teacher in study one (see table 3) interprets the vignette by zooming in on the motor skill problems mentioned in the vignette and uses her knowledge on such problems as well as her previous experience with children to suggest an interpretation of what is going on, as well as an intervention. Similarly, a male teacher in study 2 mentions teaching biology and brings in his knowledge about nutrition and the digestive system when explaining how he translates health promotion and prevention policies into action in his work as a teacher.

Common for the instances of professional agency in our data is a close link between problem, knowledge, interpretation and solution. In some instances, teachers and pre-school teachers thus employs their specialized academic knowledge on e.g. biology or math, how children typically learn how to read, how they develop language and motor skills etc. In other instances, however, teachers and pre-school teachers employ their pedagogical knowledge and experience with regard to children’s’ social relations and personal development, as exemplified also by the female preschool-teacher in table 3. Following Zacka, we may interpret references to pedagogical knowledge and experiences as inherently moral in nature, as such references touch upon e.g. what it means to develop strong friendships or what it means to develop as a human being. Thereby, professional agency in these instances may look somewhat like citizen agency. However, we see a difference between referring to professional institutions such as pedagogical knowledge and professional experiences (which we see as professional agency) and referring to broader social and cultural institutions and common-sense cultural norms (which we see as citizen agency). Below, we will further discuss how these two forms of agency, then, are oftentimes combined and intertwined.

**Combining agency logics: Shift, negotiation and integration**

To sum up, exploring our data our first significant finding is that professional agency stands out as a separate form of agency compared to state agency and citizen agency. However, exploring our data, we also came upon a second important finding, namely that frontline workers often combine more than one form of agency in their interpretations, judgements and actions. More specifically, we identified three distinct ways of combining more than one form of agency: Situational shifts, explicit negotiation, and integration.
The first way of combining agency logics may be better described as a form of navigation than combination. Especially in the interview data in study 1, where frontline workers were deliberately confronted with descriptions of situations and problems containing many different aspects, we saw a tendency for frontline workers to swiftly shift between different forms of agency (especially citizen and professional agency) as they zoomed in on different aspects of the vignettes. One example of this can be seen in table 4, where we see the same excerpt as in table 2, now showing how the female teacher continued her interpretation of the vignette. As can be seen, she, after concluding that she will tell the parents what she thinks, immediately continues her interpretation, now shifting to using her professional experience and knowledge on how some children handles being new in a classroom. After discussing this for some time, she then again shifts to an interpretation of the problems in math, where she draws on her knowledge as a math teacher to make a judgement on whether or not the boy has sufficient math skills. We thus see, in the beginning, a clear example of citizen agency, which then shifts to professional agency, first by referring to pedagogical knowledge, and then referring to specialized didactic expertise on math.

<table>
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<th>Table 4: Situational shifts between different forms of agency</th>
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| Well, it … [laughs with a hint of moral disapproval in her voice]. Sometimes I do this [demonstrates an action, probably pointing a finger to her head]. And I have actually seen this show myself, and it is really beyond the limit … to me. And eh, I must say, I am a person, that cannot help but interfere, if I hear about something like that. So, I will make a remark about it, and I will probably do that at the next parent-teacher conference. […] 2 lines cut] And then they can use my opinion for what it’s worth, right? … And the next thing that stands out to me, but that is also related to the comedy thing, is that he actually becomes the class clown, right. That he actually himself takes on the sort of a clown-role, because he … And it is obvious that all children when they enter a new class, they have their methods for getting recognized and getting noticed, right, and this seems to be his method […, 7 lines cut]. So, this is definitely something I will be really really attentive about. It also says that his start has been okay, so I think it is a bit odd … the parents, when they both have a teaching background, teacher and pre-school teacher … that, I mean a small thing like, you know as a math teacher, that he cannot tell the time, and the numbers above 20. I mean that really makes my red light go off.  

(Study 1, Female teacher on issue presented in vignette with a child watching a comedy show not appropriate for his age, with his father, being loud in class, and having difficulties in math)

To us, this logic of shifting demonstrates how the perspective or ‘mode’ of frontline workers is always different from the perspective of institutions, including both political, professional and cultural institution. Frontline workers are in a constant ‘flow’ of practice, dealing with many different problems, but also having the option of dealing with one problem or one situation at a time. The flow of time can thus somehow dissolve what can otherwise seem as almost impossible
complex problems. This, however, makes the use and prioritizing of time an important issue of frontline work. We will return to this point in the theoretical discussion.

The second way of combining agency logics is explicit negotiation. What characterizes this form of combining logics is that the distinction between professional knowledge and norms and personal beliefs and values are more or less explicitly articulated. This can either take the form of teachers expressing a conflict between logics, but also teachers expressing that logics complement each other. Moreover, teachers do also negotiate balance between logics for example a balance between professional norms and personal values and emotions as in the example below.

<table>
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<th>Table 5: Explicitly negotiating agency logics</th>
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<td>Well I think. I try. I try to be alive in the classroom if that makes sense. I mean. I try to enter the room and show them that I want something. And then if course I think it is important to try to accommodate all students. Both seeking to sense how they are feeling, but also academically. But that is a huge challenge. But I think I am not afraid of disclosing something about myself. Of course, you need to strike a balance and know the limit. Especially now with the older kids. I think it is great to see how they grow.</td>
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(Interview with female teacher, study 2)

In this example, the teacher is drawing on professional knowledge and norms about the importance of trying to accommodate all students both in an academic and social sense. One way she tries to achieve this, is by actually letting the students into her personal life (disclosing things about herself), but at the same time she expresses how it is important to strike a balance between the professional and the personal. What set this form of combining logics apart from shifting is first that logics become more intertwined and secondly that negotiating logics is a more conscious practice than shifting. When teachers negotiate logics, they reflect on different considerations and tools in a more explicit manner.

The third way of combining agency logics that we have identified in our analysis is integration of the different forms of agency. Unlike shifting, integration involves teachers simultaneously drawing on different logics when facing a problem or a situation. Integration is also distinct from negotiation, because the integration of logics is not a conscious practice to the same extent as negotiation. The following example illustrates how integration of logics plays out. The example is a
fieldnote from study 2 and describes an observation made during a sexual education lesson where the teacher Bo is addressing the issue of revenge porn.

Table 6: Integration of different forms of agency

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| “OK, let’s watch a film,” Bo says in a loud and clear voice as he enters the room. “Yes!” The pupils are excited and start to move the couch up in from of the whiteboard and sit down. “I know that it may not be relevant to you right now, but it will be. It’s something that happens as early as 6th grade. See it as a warning,” says Bo and starts the film. It is the documentary about revenge porn. When the film is over, Bo asks the pupils why they think he showed them this film. Julie raises her hand and says, “so that we see the consequences of taking nude pictures of ourselves.” “Exactly,” says Bo. Karla says, “but I don’t think it was her fault.” “No, but when you send a picture to a boyfriend or a flirt and you break up or fall out, they may share the picture and your education and life may be ruined,” Bo responds. Mette asks why only girls have their pictures shared. “Good question. Does anyone have an idea?”, Bo asks the class. Without raising her hand, Karla shouts, “because girls are better people than boys.” The class laughs. “That’s one answer,” says Bo. He goes to the blackboard, picks up a piece of chalk and writes in big letters: “Moral sanctuary.” He turns to the class and starts to explain while he paces back and forth in front of the blackboard: “When boys get together, something unfortunate … or it can be really fun too … something that’s called a moral sanctuary where you do things you are not supposed to be doing. You break rules. That’s why when a window at the school is broken or a moped is stolen, 9 out of 10 times it’s who?” The boys shout in unison, “girls!” and the whole class laughs. Bo continues, “It’s boys! That’s just the way it is. It’s a gender thing. The other thing is that even if a nude picture of a boy was posted, it wouldn’t be the same. It would just be, ‘oh shit, look at his dick, he’s naked, ha ha’”, says Bo, imitating a goofy boy’s voice. “When I was young and hooked up with three girls in one night, I was what?”, Bo asks. “A player”, some of the boys shout. “That’s right! I was a stud. But if Filippa did the same thing, she would be what?”, Bo asks and points to Filippa, who’s in her seat. “A cheap slut!”, Karla shouts. “Yes, and that’s just the way it is, and it’s completely unfair, and you girls can yell and scream as much as you want,” says Bo, imitating a shrill girl’s voice, “but it’s not going to change. At least not in my lifetime,” Bo establishes.

(From fieldnotes from study 2)

In the situation above, Bo is drawing on his professional role as a teacher. For example, he is asking questions to the class and expecting the students to provide (right) answers to his questions and he is standing in front of the class writing down words or concepts, which are unfamiliar to the students on the blackboard. At the same time, he is bringing in his own common sense understanding of appropriate sexual behavior as well as his personal experiences from his youth in order to legitimize his message about gender differences and gender norms. Drawing on the professional agency logic is thus enabling Bo to act as a citizen-agent. The excerpt from study two is exemplary for many instances of integration in both study 1 and 2, where teachers do not only
shift between logics focusing on one problem at a time and thereby reducing complexity, but draw on different logics in the interaction with students, making the different logics mutually support each other. Integration is widespread in both study 1 and 2, but it is especially dominant in the observational data from study 2, perhaps because this kind of data captures teachers ‘in-action’, and not confronting specific problems as in the vignettes.

**Theoretical discussion: A framework for studying frontline agency**

As we have explained, the conception of agency zooms in on both institutional contexts and logics, and the ways in which frontline workers make interpretations, judgement and actions drawing on these institutional contexts. Exploring our data, we saw the fruitfulness of this approach in two ways: first, we identified different separate forms of agency drawing on different specific institutional settings; and second, we saw how frontline workers also hold the capacity to shift between, negotiate and integrate different agency logics.

Our first theoretical contribution is thus the explicit distinction between different agency logics, and in particular separating professional agency from state and citizen agency. Our data contained many instances of frontline workers using their professional knowledge and experience to make interpretations, judgements and interventions. Theoretically, what we identify in the data comes close to what the literature on professions and professional work has discussed as professional discretion (Abbott, 1988). Although much of Abbotts discussion focus on how professionals establish professional jurisdictions, he also makes a profound theoretical contribution by defining professional work as the combination of diagnosis, inference and treatment (Abbott, 1988, p. 40). For all three tasks, Abbott lays out how each profession draw on more or less well-defined repertoires of knowledge, categories, ways of reasoning, exemplars etc. Other scholars studying professional work have discussed how such repertoires can be more or less constituted by formal knowledge and formal institutions of science and formal training within higher education or constituted by the ‘tacit’ knowledge gained through work and communities of professional practice (Freidson, 2001; Polanyi, 1967; Schön, 1981). To us, the distinction between formal and practical knowledge is less important though, as we see both to constitute a broad institutional context of professionalism providing the constraints and resources of professional discretion as Abbott describes.
However, the distinctness of the context of professional institutions is exactly what makes professional agency different from both state agency and citizen agency. Compared to state agency, the authority of professional agency is not drawn from democratic and legal institutions or the organizational hierarchies of bureaucracy, and it therefore does not fit the technical model of compliance as described by Zacka (2017). Similarly, the authority of professional agency is different from the reference to cultural and everyday logics as seen in citizen agency. Professional agency does not follow a logic of moral or cultural appropriateness or abidance, but rather takes it point of departure in a more pragmatic logic of what frontline professionals knows to ‘work’. In other words, one could see professional agency as a way of ‘knowledge abidance’, including both formal and practical forms of knowledge.

In a comprehensive theoretical discussion of agency, Emirbayer and Mische (2015) points out three inherent elements of agency: the iterational element, the projective element, and the practical-evaluative element. We return to the iterational element below, but the two other elements can help explain the distinctness of professional agency. The projective element, Emirbayer and Mische explains, involves “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action” (Emirbayer & Mische, 2015, p. 971). It thus has to do with the inherent ability of human beings to imagine and thus change the course of human life, and it refers to agents’ ability to formulate and review preferences and interests, and to adjust courses of action in relation to such interests. As underlined by Emirbayer and Mische, the primary locus here is the future. This type of agency is in the forefront in discussions of frontline workers political interests affecting their compliance towards policies, or their personal interests in workloads and leisure time affecting e.g. shirking behavior. We see some, but not a lot, of this form of agency in relation to instances of or reflections on state agency, or in separate and direct discussions of new policies or of workloads and working conditions. We also see it, when frontline workers engage in reflections on their role as e.g. professionals and how they, for example, can be challenged by citizen clients. And we see it in some of the explicit negotiations of agency logics, where preferences and possible futures are weighed against each other.

However, our analysis, as well as most scholars analyzing agency logics, zooms in on the practical-evaluative element of agency, which Emirbayer and Mische (2015) defines as “the capacity of actors to make practical and normative judgments among alternative possible trajectories of action,
in response to the emerging demands, dilemmas, and ambiguities of presently evolving situations” (p. 971). This is thus the capacity of human beings to pragmatically evaluate the ‘content’ of a situation and how to resolve it. It does not have much to do with preferences, interests or future goals, but with a situational relationship to our constant engagement with and navigation in the (material or social) world. As explained by Emirbayer and Mische, the primary locus here is the pragmatic contextualization of social experience. We see such engagements in both citizen and professional agency logics, which are then distinguished from each other by the type of evaluative engagement with the world. Simply put, citizen agency is guided by normative judgements of appropriateness of actions vis-à-vis cultural and common-sense norms, whereas professional agency is guided by different forms of knowledge and the evaluation of what type of problem one is confronted with (diagnosis, cf. Abbott) and what type of intervention (treatment, cf. Abbott) is then relevant. Professional agency could also contain references to different forms of professional norms, such as norms for the appropriate relationship between professionals and citizen-clients, but we don’t see much of this in our data.

The final element of agency, the iterational element, is defined by Emirbayer and Mische as “the selective reactivation by actors of past patterns of thought and action, as routinely incorporated in practical activity” (Emirbayer & Mische, 2015, p. 971). The main locus here, is the past, and this element thus highlights what we previously have underlined as embeddedness of agency in existing social structures understood as rules, resources and roles. To us, this element of agency is thus related to our findings of the ways in which frontline workers (re)activate and sometimes combine different agency logics in practice. What we see is that frontline workers sometimes follow single agency logics, and other times choose (more or less consciously) to shift between negotiate or integrate logics. Frontline workers thus navigate situations by drawing on past repertoires and routines, but also by selectively allowing different types of agency to ‘access’ the situation.

This element, and the combination of agency logics, activates a well-known discussion of the relationship between structure and agency (Giddens, 1984), or a more recent discussion of reflexivity vs. habitual action (Archer, 2003; Bourdieu, 1990; Decoteau, 2016). The main issue of these discussions is whether or not human beings always have the inherent capacity for reflexive judgements and thus the capacity to evaluate and change situations. However, although this is an important philosophical discussion, for our analytical purpose it remains somewhat irrelevant. What
we see in the data, is that frontline workers sometimes quite consciously reflect on what do and deliberately negotiate different agency logics and courses of actions. However, at other times they activate, shift between and integrate logics more or less unconsciously. To us, the iterational element thus has more to do with the practical nature of frontline work than the relationship between structure and agency. Practice, Bourdieu teaches us, “unfolds in time, and it has all the correlative properties, such as irreversibility, that synchronization destroys” (Bourdieu, 1990), and agents thus in the flow of practice have a practical and habitual relationship to the world. This means, Bourdieu explains, that logics of practice are defined by their:

[…] uncertainty and 'fuzziness', resulting from the fact that they have as their principle not a set of conscious, constant rules, but practical schemes, opaque to their possessors, varying according to the logic of the situation, the almost invariably partial viewpoint which it imposes, etc. (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 12).

We see this fuzziness in both in the ways frontline workers employ single agency logics, but also, and perhaps especially, when they integrate logics. Here, what otherwise (analytically) are distinct arguments, are mixed sometimes to an extent that it cannot really be decided whether or not frontline workers act, for example, following what they ‘know’ (cf. professional agency) or what they deem to be appropriate (cf. citizen agency).

However, as we have already explained, frontline workers are not always in a practical relationship to the world. Sometimes, they engage in a more distant, analytical and reflexive relationship to the world, reasoning about choices and negotiating between different courses of actions. To us, this is not surprising, and it reflects the different possible relationships to the human and social world that we as agents can take. This is the key message of the distinction between iterational, projective and pragmatic-evaluative elements of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 2015), as well as of e.g. the theory on fast and slow thinking (Kahneman, 2011), and Decoteau’s argument that habitual and reflective actions are not mutually exclusive (Decoteau, 2016). Also, we see no inherent claim on stability in the claim that agents sometimes (or perhaps most of the time) engage in habitual routines. As pointed out by Decoteau (2016), social change can easily be the result of habitual actions, as the complexity of the (social) world creates disjunctures and the employment of “hybrid habitus” and “unintended agency”, i.e. the unconscious or practical adaption to complex situations which ends up in the production of genuinely new forms of social action. In our data, we see this in some instances
of integration of agency logics, where the unconscious combination of quite distinct logics adds a creative element to frontline practices.

To sum up, we thus suggest the framework of agency logics as a fruitful way of studying frontline work. First, this framework underlines the distinct contribution of frontline agents in addition to institutional logics when trying to explain the outputs and outcomes of public institutions. The framework of agency logics thus underlines the ways in which frontline agents can both reflect on future implications (and their own preferences), as well as draw on past repertoires in the flow of routines and practice. Most importantly, however, the agency framework points to the pragmatic-evaluative dimension and thus allows for the study of distinct agency logics, including both state, citizen and professional agency as relevant for frontline practice. And finally, the agency framework allows for the study of how agency logics are activated sometimes as single logics, and sometimes in situational shifts, integrations and (reflexive) negotiations.

There are many possible implications and benefits of this framework for future studies, but here we will mention only three. First, we claim a large potential for future studies of the implications of professional agency for the quality of frontline work, decisions and service delivery. To us, one can intuitively expect the quality of frontline work to depend on the quality of professional knowledge, experience and training (for example, the strength of nurses’ knowledge on efficient forms of care, teachers knowledge on how children learn, or social workers knowledge on how marginalized citizens may react to different programs) as much as on, for example, the design of a specific policy. To be precise, we do not want to underestimate the importance of policy design and state agency, but only ‘raise the flag’ for the possible importance of professional agency. This expectation, and studies of the relationship between professional agency and quality, may then also have implication for how we approach our understanding of frontline leadership. Here, we see a large potential in studies of the relationship between professional agency and the ways in which leaders (at different levels in an organization) engage with the professional repertoires of employees, and perhaps even the context of professional institutions. Second, we also see a potential for further studying the implications of the ways in which different agency logics are combined. For example, one could imagine that different (e.g. organizational) contexts allows for or facilitates specific forms of combination. Also, studies of implications for the change or development of routines, practices and even institutions of different forms of combinations may
teach us more about how frontline work can be deliberately changed, for example in political reforms.

Finally, we see a potential in studies of the democratic legitimacy of different forms of agency as well as their combination. This includes both a more nuanced discussion of different understandings of democracy and the relationship between the state and its citizens. Here, too narrow understandings of parliamentary forms of democracy and the sole legitimacy of state agency (due to its foundation in legitimate political decisions and bureaucratic rules) may underestimate the need for what Zacka (Zacka, 2017) frames as the need for moral agency in the encounters between frontline workers and citizen-clients. We agree that these encounters hold a potential for democratic legitimacy for example by the showing of mutual respect (Sennett, 2003). However, we also see a potential in discussions of the democratic legitimacy of professionalism, including the role of both expertise and professional norms. Additionally, we suggest including in such discussions the possible normative or moral ‘dark sides’ of each of the three forms of agency. These “dark sides” include bureaucratic red tape, distancing, and abuse of state authority (state agency), the use of cultural stereotypes and private common-sense assumptions, which to us seems especially problematic in diverse and multicultural societies (citizen agency), and the paternalistic tendency to disregard the wishes and insights of citizen-clients vis-à-vis expert knowledge (professional agency). And finally, we suggest the discussion and exploration of how the combination of different agency logics affect legitimacy. On the one hand, we observe in our data a possible threat to democratic legitimacy when integrations of professional and citizen agency expand the legitimacy of the professional expert to interpretations and suggestions which are clearly founded in a citizen agency logic. This is the case, when Bo (the male teacher in table 6) clearly draws on his own norms about gender in what is a situation that is not otherwise possible to distinguish from traditional teaching, and where the students most likely reacts to him is his capacity of professional (teacher). However, in some instances, the combination of different agency logics may be a source of strengthened legitimacy, because different agency logics can acts as a counterbalancing of the vices or ‘dark sides’ of other agency logics.

**Conclusion**

TBW


Hupe, P. (2013). Dimensions of Discretion: Specifying the Object of Street-Level Bureaucracy


