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STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY

Dilemmas of the Individual

in Public Services

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CHAPTER 10

The Client-Processing

Mentality

The drill sergeant who insists that soldiers stand tall, keep their eyes straight, and march in precision achieves results without knowing the state of mind, predispositions, or previous military experience of the recruits. He is untroubled by the needs of individuals and is at ease with mass processing. Street-level bureaucrats are not so favored. Their work involves the built-in contradiction that, while expected to exercise discretion in response to individuals and individual cases, in practice they must process people in terms of routines, stereotypes, and other mechanisms that facilitate work tasks.

Workers defend these patterns psychologically. They regard their adaptations to the job not only as mechanisms to cope with resource limitations, but also as functional requirements of doing the job in the first place. Thus what to critics seem to be compromise solutions to resource constraints may, from the workers' perspectives, be desirable and necessary components of the work environment. To attack the routine is to appear to attack the structure. Clients who challenge bureaucratic routines are taught this lesson when administrators act to control them or respond defensively to questions about agency procedures.

However, this does not entirely explain how workers cope or exhaust the types of psychological adaptations apparently required by these jobs. For one thing, it does not explain how street-level bureaucrats rationalize the discrepancy between service ideals and service provision. At least two additional perspectives on the psychology of street-level work must be considered in accounting for street-level bureaucrats' persistence and relative job satisfaction.

First, street-level bureaucrats modify their objectives to match better their ability to perform. Second, they mentally discount their clientele so as to reduce the tension resulting from their inability to deal with citizens according to ideal service models. In short, street-level bureaucrats develop conceptions of their jobs, and of clients, that reduce the strain between capabilities and goals, thereby making their jobs psychologically easier to manage.[1]

This is particularly significant because street-level bureaucrats' views of their work, and of clients, are matters of great public concern. Street-level bureaucrats are often accused of being biased against particular racial or ethnic groups or they are thought to be particularly cynical or unreliable in fulfilling obligations toward particular social groups. The proposal that workers' attitudes in large part are formed in response to their work setting contradicts some popular views. Popular wisdom often identifies the source of workers' attitudes toward clients and their jobs in prejudices acquired in upbringing and social background. Such perspectives lead to recommendations to hire better educated personnel or provide further education and training in public and human relations.

All too often such perspectives fail to take account of the influence of street-level bureaucrats' work on their attitudes. It is apparent that street-level bureaucrats change their attitudes from the time they are recruited to the time when they begin to experience work problems. Differences in the class backgrounds of recruits tend to disappear in training and trainee socialization.[2] Furthermore, there is evidence that educational background, which is closely related to class, is not an important predictor of the attitudes of workers who experience extreme job stresses. In this connection, sociologist Eliot Freidson has reviewed studies relating doctors' educational background to performance and concludes: "There is some very persuasive evidence that 'socialization' does not explain some important elements of professional performance half so well as does the organization of the immediate work environment.[3]

This is not to say that biases toward clients do not intrude in street-level work. However, focusing on the social backgrounds or experiences of workers will not yield a persuasive theory of bias in street-level bureaucracy. Such a theory should account for the development and persistence of attitudes as well as their direction.

Taking a different view, the origins of bias in street-level bureaucracies may be sought in the structure of work that requires coping responses to job stress. Attitudinal developments that redefine the nature of the job, or the nature of the clientele to be served, function in this way. Considering the

structure of work helps explain the persistence of biases and the difficulties inherent in interrupting them.

However, the content of coping responses may well reflect the prevailing biases of the society. The need for biases may be rooted in the work structure, but the expression of this need may take different forms. Stereotyping thus may be thought of as a *form* of simplification. While simplifications are mental shortcuts (of many different kinds) that summarize and come to stand for more complex phenomena, stereotypes are simplifications in whose validity people strongly believe, and yet they are prejudicial and inaccurate as summary characteristics for groups of people with nominally similar attributes.

This approach to analyzing the client-processing mentality detaches the existence of attitudes toward clients and jobs from the content of those attitudes. It suggests that attitudinal dispositions will be rigid or flexible in large measure according to the degree they help workers cope with job stresses. On the other hand, it suggests that workers' attitudes and resulting behavior may be challenged and helped to change if: incentives and sanctions within the structure of the job encourage change; the structure of the job is altered to reduce workers' needs for psychological coping mechanisms; it can be shown that workers can cope successfully with job stresses without depending upon undesirable simplifications; efforts are made to make simplifications conform to actual job requirements rather than to unrelated biases. These general guidelines are grounded in recognition that the persistence of inappropriate attitudes is related to the work experience, and they can best be helped to change by focusing attention on the requirements of work.

The following sections treat in greater detail the tendency of street-level bureaucrats to cope with job stresses by modifying their conceptions of work and their conceptions of the clientele to be served. At the same time they show the relationship between attitudinal coping responses and the patterns of practice that the attitudes support.

Modifications of Conceptions of Work

TENSIONS BETWEEN CAPABILITIES AND OBJECTIVES

Withdrawal from work is one way that people respond to job stress. They may withdraw in fact, or they may withdraw psychologically. At the extreme, the tension between capabilities and objectives may be resolved by

quitting. Or, in anticipation of this tension, people may decline to apply for public employment in the first place. Idealistic young teachers quit because they cannot tolerate the pettiness of their supervisors or their inability to teach as they would like or were trained to teach. Zealous young attorneys leave jobs as public lawyers in despair over making an improvement in the lives of their poor clients. In some ways these idealists are potentially the most dedicated public employees. In other respects they are least suited to do the work. In any event public agencies are left with a work force least bothered by the discrepancies between what they are supposed to do and what they actually do.

They and others who withdraw from the work force mute the extent to which withdrawal behaviors are evident in street-level bureaucracies. Thus, adaptive attitudes developed may be more moderate than would be the case if those least able to cope had remained on the job.

Those who do not actually withdraw from the work force may withdraw psychologically without actually quitting, rejecting personal responsibility for agency performance. The outward manifestation of these withdrawal orientations are familiar to managers and people attentive to labor-management relations: absenteeism, high turnover, goldbricking, slowdowns, and general withdrawal from involvement. These reactions are all outward signs of attitudinal responses to the sometimes overwhelming and insuperable difficulties of gaining gratification in task processes and achievement. At base are psychological developments that function to help workers maintain a distance from their failure or inability to realize the symbiotic goals of personal gratification and task realization.[4]

The problems of actual or psychological withdrawal from work are complicated in street-level bureaucracies by several considerations. There are numerous incentives outside the job context itself that operate to reduce the extent to which workers leave public service. Civil service systems protect against arbitrary management decisions, but they also increase the costs of firing workers or taking actions against them. In addition, workers accrue rights by virtue of their tenure in public employment, providing powerful incentives to remain in jobs despite low or declining job satisfaction. For example, the right to retire after twenty years' service, or pension rights that increase with tenure, encourage street-level bureaucrats to remain in jobs despite the inherent pressures.[5]

Indeed, it is possible to argue that these and other conditions of public employment, when combined with the difficulty of measuring job performance, are powerful enough to reduce workers' contributions to agency objectives to an absolute minimum once a degree of seniority has been

achieved. The cynical view is that public workers have very little incentive to perform. However, while some street-level bureaucrats may retire on the job, the vast majority continue to be reasonably dedicated to occupational objectives as they come to define them.[6]

In addition to the usual material and psychological incentives operating on the job, street-level bureaucrats often enter public service with some interest in client-oriented work, embrace professional orientations that call for altruistic behavior toward clients, and continually interact with clients, thus regularly confronting client characteristics and concerns. Moreover, street-level bureaucrats do not abandon agency objectives entirely because the discretionary nature of their jobs and the organizational milieu in which they work encourage them to develop private conceptions of the agency's objectives. They strive to realize these modified objectives and measure their day-to-day achievements in terms of them. They rationalize ambiguities and contradictions in objectives by developing their own conceptions of the public service (which they may share with other workers). Taking limitations in the work as a fixed reality rather than a problem with which to grapple, street-level bureaucrats forge a way to obtain job satisfaction and consistency between aspirations and perceived capability.

Accepting limitations as fixed rather than as problematic is significant for two reasons. First, it discourages innovation and encourages mediocrity. It is one thing to say that resources are limited, another to say that the practices arising from trying to cope with limited resources are optimal. Yet the tendency to equate what exists with what is best is strong when patterns of practice must be defended psychologically to avoid confrontations with work failures.

Second, as I have argued, organizational patterns of practice in street-level bureaucracies *are* the policies of the organization. Thus, workers' private redefinition of agency ends result directly in accepting the means as ends. Means may become ends in other organizations, but lower-level workers rarely have as much influence on the drift in goals as in street-level bureaucracies.

PRIVATE GOAL DEFINITIONS

As we have seen, individual workers develop procedures to allocate resources efficiently. Some of these practices are approved or indulged by their organizations, others are unsanctioned. Parallel developments occur in conceptions of the work to be done. Just as organizations confronted with difficulties in achieving objectives may retreat on objectives in order to obtain a

better fit between their capabilities and goals,[7] so too workers can and do modify their conceptions of the job in order to close the psychological gap between capabilities and objectives. Thus judges may be oriented toward punishment and deterrence or corrections and rehabilitation. Teachers may be oriented toward classroom control or toward cognitive and personality development. Police officers drift toward concerns with order maintenance or law enforcement.[8] Possessing a simpler concept of the job than the one theoretically prevailing in reality, street-level bureaucrats are able to fashion an apparently more consistent approach to their work.

Street-level bureaucrats also impose personal conceptions of their jobs when they make superior efforts for some clients, conceding that they cannot extend themselves for all. At times this perspective results in favoritism toward certain social groups, but it may also apply without group bias. A case in point is the public defender who must select only a few cases to push to trial, settling the others as best he or she can.[9] Teachers similarly rationalize their inability to pay close attention to all children by drawing special satisfaction from the progress of children who do receive particular notice.

In these cases efficiency is still the norm and effective triage is again the ideal. But the benefits gained from modifying goals to make them consistent with serving a few, when not all can be served well, are not public benefits. On the contrary they are enjoyed mostly by the workers (and presumably by the clients who receive special attention). Moreover, they are not open to popular judgment or normally available for policy analysis. The individual street-level bureaucrat is not, in a sense, free to abandon private conceptions of the job without taking on still more of the tensions that go with it. Because these personal conceptions are adaptive responses they tend to be held rigidly and are not open for discussion.

The patterns of practice developed by individual workers often only make sense in the private conception of the job held by the worker, while supervisors and the public still expect allegiance to a more complex set of goals. For example, a police officer who fails to make an arrest upon observing an unlawful incident may strike an observer as negligent. But if the officer privately understands his or her job to be one of maintaining order and community harmony, with law enforcement in the neighborhood a secondary matter, this behavior may be acceptable according to the officer's private definition.

In the same way, a teacher who spends a great deal of time with a few students will not consider fair any criticism of this practice if he or she defines the job as, at best, the provision of sufficient attention to a select

group. It is difficult to investigate conceptions of the job and trace their relationship to performance. Yet this may be necessary if one would try to reorient street-level bureaucrats in their work.

Private conceptions of the job have their counterparts in official policy. In some cases agencies themselves solve workers' problems by imposing a particular orientation on the work. At other times, the adaptive defensive attitudes of street-level bureaucrats toward their jobs are incorporated in the service orientation of their agencies although still officially unsanctioned. Thus the staff of some schools develop collective perspectives on their work and some police departments develop a shared view of patrol practices, contrary to the preferences of supervisors. Recruitment of like-minded people to the service contributes to collective adaptation to bureaucratic stresses by excluding staff members who would challenge work-force goal consensus.[10]

SPECIALIZATION

Specialization of function in bureaucracy is usually treated as fostering efficiency, permitting workers to develop skills and expertise and concentrate attention on their work. For some analysts specialization is synonymous with modern bureaucracy.[11] Specialization is frequently and increasingly characteristic of street-level bureaucracies. Welfare departments separate social services from eligibility determinations. Legal services agencies separate individual client servicing from law reform units. Schools breed educational specialties.

Like other contributors to efficiency, specialization solves problems for workers as well as for their organizations. In particular, specialization permits street-level bureaucrats to reduce the strain that would otherwise complicate their work situation. A lawyer in a law reform unit need not balance the demands of incessant case-load pressures, while his or her colleague who has high case-load assignments is relieved from considering the larger issues that clients' cases present. The social worker concerned with eligibility is relieved of concerns for clients' social integration, while the income maintenance worker need not worry whether clients receive undeserved support.

It is undoubtedly appropriate for some workers to be trained in areas that others are not trained in. Not every teacher, for example, need know French or Hebrew or Chinese for schools to provide training in languages other than English. But some specialization relieves other workers from developing skills they should have. As I have suggested, community relations specialists relieve others of responsibility for concern with treatment of minorities. Special community advocates may function to relieve others of responsibility for being advocates themselves. Even the case of language specialization is

not so obvious as it might first appear. For should not all teachers in some city schools know Spanish to be able to converse with a large proportion of their students? Why should the Spanish teachers and the teachers of Hispanic background have responsibility for communicating with Spanish-speaking students? Specialization in this case relieves the other teachers of an important complication in their work lives.

Specialization permits street-level bureaucrats to avoid seeing their work as a whole. Once specialized they are expected, and expect themselves, to pursue an agenda that calls for the deployment of a restricted set of (perhaps highly developed) skills toward the achievement of a result defined by those skills. Specialists tend to perceive the client and his or her problems in terms of the methodologies and previously established processing categories that their training dictates.[12] Rare is the specialist who retains a comprehensive conception of the client and the alternatives available for processing. In some fields, such as special education, critics have advocated the training of *general specialists* capable of working with children with any learning disability or physical or psychological behavior. (This confirms the obvious: teachers should be well trained for the job, and the base of practice and theory from which they should operate has expanded significantly.)

Public institutions generally have conflicting or ambiguous goals for good reason. They embrace ambiguity, contradictions, and complexity because the society is unable and unwilling to abandon certain fundamental aspirations and expectations in providing public services. Specialists undoubtedly bring important skills and orientations to organizations that cannot develop them in their staff as a whole. Yet specialization and task specificity should be analyzed to discover those circumstances in which the costs of relieving street-level bureaucrats from contradictions and ambiguities may be higher than the benefits.

IDEOLOGY AND MILIEU

Another dimension of goal consolidation is provided by the occupational or professional ideology that governs street-level bureaucracies. Ideology provides a framework in terms of which disparate bits of information are stored, comprehended, and retrieved.[13] In street-level bureaucracies ideology also can serve as a way of disciplining goal orientations when many goals compete. When a school becomes an open classroom school or reverts to a traditional model the directors are saying something about their goals as well as their methods. The same is true in the case of correctional facilities that assert the primacy of custody over treatment.[14] By stressing some objectives over others, administrators partially solve the problem of

what kind of institution they will run. Thus hiring becomes more rational because objectives are clearer, and employees have a clearer sense of what they are expected to achieve.

In recent years considerable attention has been devoted to the trend towards "medicalization" of social problems. Advanced by physicians and supported by a public anxious to think that there are "solutions" to behavioral "problems," the medical model has intruded into the worlds of education and corrections, and other environments in which human development is at issue. This trend has been correctly understood as undermining the political and social status of individuals, who, labeled "diseased" or "sick," are expected by the society to accept others' definitions of their circumstances and means for recovery. The significance for social control is substantial. What in other times might be understood as rebellious behavior may now be processed as mere sickness, implying no indictment and certainly no culpability on the part of social institutions that may have contributed to the genesis of the behavior.

Why has the medical orientation become so prominent? The influence of physicians and the high regard in which most people hold them surely provides part of the answer. But this does not fully explain the attraction of the medical orientation to say, educators, who in some respects have competing professional perspectives.

A substantial addition to understanding the attraction of the medical milieu in education, corrections, and other fields may be gained by recognizing the ways in which the introduction of a therapeutic milieu contributes to simplifying the goal orientations of public service workers. It provides a defense against personal responsibility of the worker by resting responsibility for clients in their physical or psychological development. It provides a theory of client behavior to help explain the complex world of the street-level bureaucrat. And it provides a clear statement of clients' problems in terms of which responses can be formulated. The hegemony of the medical model may be explained not only by the influence of physicians but also by the way it helps street-level bureaucrats solve problems of goal complexity.

This is not to say that goal clarification and reconstruction of work objectives have no value. Schools that assert that reading is primary may be able to achieve results that elude schools with more diffuse goals. There are undoubtedly physiological dimensions to deviant behavior in some instances, although the pharmacological cure is sometimes worse than the disease. The question is whether or not public institutions make their objectives and orientations manifest and the costs of their choices clear, and whether or not it is appropriate to abandon some goals or concentrate more on others.

DEFENSES AGAINST DISCRETION

Street-level bureaucrats sometimes cope with their jobs by privately modifying the scope of their authority. Imposing restrictions on the scope of their powers frees street-level bureaucrats from perceived responsibility for outcomes and reduces the strain between resources and objectives.

Denying discretion is a common way to limit responsibility. Workers seek to deny that they have influence, are free to make decisions, or offer service alternatives. Strict adherence to rules, and refusals to make exceptions when exceptions might be made, provide workers with defenses against the possibility that they might be able to act more as clients would wish. "That's the way things are," "It's the law," and similar rationalizations not only protect workers from client pressures, but also protect them from confronting their own shortcomings as participants in public service work.[15] At times these assertions are best understood as strategies to deflect clients' claims. But at other times they are best understood as rigidly held attitudes that partially have their origins in, and are bolstered by, distress over the gap between expectations and perceived capability.

Agencies often impose rigidities on their workers. For example, in the late 1960s, when the welfare rights movement began to pressure welfare workers to make discretionary grants to large numbers of recipients, welfare departments throughout the country eliminated discretionary special-grant awards for furniture and other items. Thus the departments removed from workers a discretionary option. This circumscribed their power but also eliminated the tension between the workers' desires to help clients and their need to control disbursements.

Another way in which agencies help solve employees' role tensions is by extensively promulgating rules specifying official procedures. From the point of view of reducing role tensions it is less important that rules are not necessarily followed than that they are available as authoritative materials with which street-level bureaucrats can renovate job conceptions to better fit work realities. Thus rules not only order work but also function to order workers' role conceptions.[16]

Earlier chapters have focused attention on street-level bureaucrats' development of work routines to process clients and otherwise treat their responsibilities. These routines often represent more than mere instruments of efficiency. Street-level bureaucrats also develop attachments to modes of practice. They appear to feel that their jobs require the routines. In some street-level bureaucracies, routines of practice become so dominant that workers seek to negotiate the routines rather than to obtain the objective for which routines were presumably developed.

Legal services lawyers, for example, have been observed to discourage clients from raising questions and penalizing those who refuse to follow the preferred procedures. Similarly, welfare workers have been observed to disfavor clients who do not permit them to conduct interviews according to standard formats.[17] These and other examples of rigid adherence to procedure suggest the significance for workers of pursuing means instead of ends.

DEFENSES AGAINST BUREAUCRACY

Earlier chapters have also stressed the tenacity of street-level bureaucrats in resisting efforts to limit their discretion. They may assert discretionary dimensions of their job *to a greater degree than called for in theory* in order to salvage a semblance of proper client treatment as they define it. Typically, they develop conceptions of their job that focus on good treatment of some rather than inadequate treatment of all.

Most of the time escapes from bureaucracy tend to favor some kinds of clients over others. (This tendency is discussed later in the treatment of modifications of conceptions of clients.) Sometimes the escape from bureaucracy appears simply as a refusal to accept the decision-making formulas of the work. The social workers who started making home visits rather than doing intake, because they felt that additional clients could not be well served by the agency, illustrate this inclination.[18]

Another dimension of the escape from bureaucracy is suggested by street-level bureaucrats who in client processing redefine their jobs by taking into account the informal but likely consequences of their actions. Judges and prosecutors, for example, often make charging and sentencing decisions based on their expectations of the consequences of subjecting defendants to the results of sentencing, although formally they are not supposed to consider the quality of correctional institutions in their deliberations. These tendencies have earned some judicial personnel considerable criticism for the resulting leniency of their approaches.[19] Similar reconceptualizations of the job were evident among the public housing personnel who, contrary to official agency policy, took into account the consequences of placing some favored applicants in undesirable housing projects, as previously discussed.

Is escape from bureaucracy desirable? Does it represent a tendency toward responsiveness whose absence is too often deplored? Certainly to the beneficiaries of these orientations it represents responsiveness. However, the dilemmas of street-level bureaucracy remain unresolved. Workers who undermine intake practices by favoring some clients deny minimal services to those who fail to get entered on the agency rolls. Public housing appli-

cants who do not receive treatment are disadvantaged because fewer places are available in the better projects. Judges and prosecutors who develop private conceptions of proper considerations in charging and sentencing contribute to defendants' welfare as best they can, but they also skew the population of the correctional institutions in ways responsive to their private conceptions of appropriate sentencing. And to judge by the proliferation of mandatory sentencing legislation, they force the development of inflexible policy to restore the formal order. However one might sympathize with court personnel who take discretionary actions in clients' interests, one cannot conclude that they substantially resolve the dilemmas of confining the scope of discretion and negating the consequences of rule-bound bureaucracy.

Modifications of Conceptions of Clients

Street-level bureaucrats are expected to treat all people in common circumstances alike. Paradoxically, many factors operate to make favoritism and unequal treatment characteristic of modern bureaucracies. These factors include the inherent subjectivity of required judgments, the difficulty of assessing street-level bureaucrats' work, the inadequacy of feedback as an influence on behavior, and ideological considerations that justify client differentiation. These concerns have been treated in the previous three chapters focusing on patterns of practice developed to make jobs easier to manage.

However, a discussion of the importance of practices resulting in client differentiation would be incomplete without reference to the *psychological* importance of client differentiations as a coping strategy. Client differentiation is a significant aspect of street-level bureaucrats' rationalization of the contradictions in their work. It is not simply that street-level workers prefer some clients over others. These preferences also make it possible to perform flexibly and responsively with a limited segment of the clientele. Thus workers do for some what they are unable to do for all. The street-level bureaucrat salvages *for a portion of the clientele* a conception of his or her performance relatively consistent with ideal conceptions of the job. Thus as the work is experienced there is no dissonance between the job as it should be done and the job as it is done *for a portion of the clientele*. The worker knows in a private sense that he or she is capable of doing the job well and can bet-

ter defend against the assaults to the ego which the structure of street-level work normally delivers. The teacher's pet is not only an obedient child but also one who confirms to the teacher the teacher's own capability.

There is another important reason to consider street-level bureaucrats' conceptual modifications of the clientele. Just as differentiation of clients supports rationing and other practices of organizing work, it also supports private modifications of conceptions of work. Conceptions of the job imply conceptions of the clientele. One cannot practice without an implicit model of the people on whom one is practicing. An open classroom demands a conception of children as requiring relatively greater freedom and flexibility than are available in a traditional classroom. A psychiatrically oriented drug center is founded on a different model of human motivation than a center organized around peer interaction and self-help.

Street-level bureaucrats who are unable to provide all clients with their best efforts develop conceptual mechanisms to divide up the client population and rationalize the division. The differentiation of clients discussed in previous chapters thus not only provides a rationale for allocating scarce resources, but it also serves to help street-level bureaucrats justify their jobs to themselves. The frequency with which street-level bureaucrats are observed to divide up the client world conceptually suggests the importance of this dimension of work in sustaining street-level practice.

The psychological importance of private reconceptions of the clientele can be traced in the primary divisions of the client world. For example, unsanctioned distinctions between worthy and unworthy clients narrow the range of clients for whom street-level bureaucrats must provide their best efforts. Street-level bureaucrats often respond more favorably to clients who are helpful or cooperative in their own treatment, or who appear to be particularly responsive to help. Orienting services toward cooperative clients, or clients who respond to treatment, allows street-level bureaucrats to believe that they are optimizing their use of resources. At the same time these perceptions help condone service denials (or even routine treatment) by permitting the private judgment that some clients absorb more than their fair share of resources.

Perhaps the most familiar syndrome of private reconceptions of clients concerns locating responsibility for client difficulties. Assumptions about who or what is responsible for clients' situations are significant conceptual instruments by which street-level bureaucrats distance themselves from clients. For example, the tendency of helping professionals to blame the victim, attributing the cause of clients' situations to the individuals themselves

without considering the role of social and environmental contexts, locates responsibility in a place that absolves the helper from blame.[20]

There are many examples of blaming the victim. Chronically unemployed men are described as shiftless and unwilling to work when their situations might be attributed to the structure of employment and previous job availability. Students' learning difficulties are explained by focusing on their lack of motivation rather than on the skills of the teachers and the atmosphere of the school. Blaming clients for failing to keep appointments protects street-level bureaucrats from the possibility that prior interviews have discouraged or alienated them. Instances of teachers beating children who clearly display signs of mental disturbance provide particularly brutal illustrations of the apparent need of at least some street-level bureaucrats to attribute self-direction to noncompliant clients.[21] If the client is to blame, street-level bureaucrats are shielded from having to confront their own failures or the failures of the agencies for which they work.

An opposite but functionally equivalent mode of perceiving clients also serves to absolve street-level bureaucrats from responsibility for service failures. This is the tendency to take an entirely environmental point of view and perceive clients exclusively as the products of inadequate background conditioning. Thus if children are perceived as primitive, racially inferior, or culturally deprived, teachers can hardly fault themselves if their charges fail to progress.[22] Similarly, job training counselors who explain failures by clients' low motivation stemming from the discouragement experienced by ghetto youth can avoid dealing with their own failures to make the program meaningful.

Undeniably, there are cultural and social factors that affect client performance, just as there is a sense in which people are responsible for their actions. However, it is important to note that these explanations function as cognitive shields, reducing what responsibility and accountability may exist in the role expectations of street-level bureaucrats. Moreover, because these explanations of responsibility are illegitimate in terms of formal agency policy, they remain beneath the surface, unstated. Thus when they implicitly form the basis for decisions about clients they contribute to misunderstanding and to the resulting hostility of clients toward the agencies acting upon them.

Given the imbalance in power between clients and their agencies, not all clients will respond with hostility to decisions based on these implicit assumptions. Perhaps more commonly, clients accept the implicit assumptions of responsibility; then these conceptual structures contribute to client com-

pliance with agency policy. Clients may accept responsibility for their circumstances without reference to the environmental conditions that they experience. Or they may regard their situation as hopeless because their environment is so antagonistic to improvement. Each attitudinal set works against personal movement and growth.[23]

This is not to say that one can easily strike out for one explanation of responsibility over another. Structural explanations of clients' circumstances are important in order to direct attention to changing the political, economic, and social structures that circumscribe and dictate the possibilities of action. For if environmental factors do not prescribe life changes they certainly structure the range of opportunities.

Similarly, in important respects clients to some degree must be responsible for themselves. Without this assumption there can be no client growth within the current structure of arrangements and no client contribution to changing those arrangements, individually or collectively. Erving Goffman's insight into the relationship of client responsibility to absolving explanations, developed in his study of prisons, mental hospitals, and other "total" institutions, has generally wider applicability.

Although there is a psychiatric view of mental disorder and an environmental view of crime and counterrevolutionary activity, both freeing the offender from moral responsibility for his offense, total institutions can little afford this particular kind of determinism. Inmates must be caused to *self-direct* themselves in a manageable way, and, for this to be promoted, both desired and undesired conduct must be defined as springing from the personal will and character of the individual inmate himself, and defined as something he himself can do something about.[24]

These views of social responsibility do not originate with street-level bureaucrats, of course. But they are adopted and rigidly held by workers faced with the contradiction that they ought to be able to make a difference in clients' lives, but commonly cannot. These views explain failure away, and permit workers to develop more comfortable relations with the contradictions in their work.

Not all street-level bureaucrats develop these attitudinal patterns. Conspicuously, some public services develop different patterns of attribution of client responsibilities from others, and variations can also be found within individual public services.[25] The task of those interested in promoting the quality of street-level bureaucracy is to help sustain the ambiguity in allocating responsibility. It is undoubtedly an important measure of street-level bureaucratic services that some workers find a way to keep in balance their views of client responsibility and environmental causality and their own potential for intervention.

Street-level bureaucrats hold private views that affect the distribution and quality of services, and they hold these views intensely. Their biases, when they exist, are difficult to interrupt. Why should this be so when street-level bureaucrats, more than most people, have regular opportunities to disconfirm stereotypes?

A partial possible explanation has already been suggested. First, segmentation of the client population complements work practices that are themselves compromises, and it also complements the resulting reconceptions of work objectives. In other words, patterns of practice, conceptions of the job, and conceptions of the clients must fit together if street-level bureaucrats are to resolve work contradictions successfully. Private conceptions of the clientele will be developed in proportion to the need to come to a private resolution of the contradictions in the work.

Second, conceptual modifications of the clientele tend to accept and build upon general social attitudes, and thus are reinforced in everyday life. Favoring clients who are underdogs or discriminating against clients considered socially unworthy may partly be explained by the sympathies and antipathies of the general society. Sociologist Howard Becker reports that children may be morally unacceptable to teachers in terms of values centered around health and cleanliness, sex and aggression, ambition and work, and age-group relations. These considerations are particularly likely to be salient when class discrepancies between teachers and pupils are significant.[26] These responses to childrens' characteristics are not likely to be unique to teachers. But when teachers do respond to children in these terms, their responses have implications for public policy.

Other conceptions of clients appear to enhance feelings about job accomplishments even when they seem to run counter to prevailing social norms. Consider the case of social service workers who would rather be assigned to child abuse than to child neglect cases. Although child abuse is a particularly unattractive crime the anomaly appears to be explained by the greater likelihood that child abuse cases will respond to intervention, while the typically passive child neglector is less likely to respond to social workers' assistance.[27] It would appear that clientele segmentation is usually consistent with prevailing social norms, but it is not wholly explained by them.

Third, various aspects of the ways in which street-level bureaucrats receive information about their work contribute to conceptual modifications of the clientele. Illustrative validation, self-fulfilling prophecies, rationalizations that excuse failure, and selective retention of information tend to confirm rather than disconfirm workers' attitudes about clients.

Finally, street-level bureaucrats work in a milieu in which their co-

workers have similar needs to segment the client population. Thus attitudes prejudicial or beneficial to certain clients are likely to reverberate among, rather than be contradicted by, other workers.

Street-level bureaucrats have a need to modify their conceptions of clients quite apart from but usually consistent with the prejudices of the general society. And they work in a structure that tends to confirm the validity of their biases. The general argument of this section, based on observations that street-level bureaucrats consistently introduce unsanctioned biases into client processing, suggests that it would be difficult to eliminate client differentiation without changing the structure of work for which these biases are functional.

This is not to say that any particular bias is necessary to cope with the work. No doubt classes of clients may be treated in markedly different ways if administrators pay enough attention to specific behavior of workers. But without changes in the work structure one ought to expect that biases will soon develop in other areas, or that the old biases will soon emerge in new forms in the absence of considerable vigilance.

PART IV

THE FUTURE OF

STREET-LEVEL

BUREAUCRACY