SIXTEEN

# Professionals and discretion in street-level bureaucracy

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## Introduction

Lipsky's (2010, cover blurb) *Street-level bureaucracy* is a '… a cautionary tale of how decisions made by overburdened workers in underfunded government agencies translate into ad-hoc policy changes impacting on people's lives and life opportunities'. It has received plaudits for its enduring contribution to the study of public policy. In this chapter, I want to acknowledge the contribution of *Street-level bureaucracy* to understanding the limits of managerial control on front-line practice. My main focus, however, is on a critical examination of *Street-level bureaucracy*, arguing that it constrains the investigation of discretion and limits the exploration of the location, construction and deployment of discretion within welfare services. *Street-level bureaucracy* does not take sufficient account of the role of different occupational status, particularly professional status, in the construction of discretion or in how discretion may be used in practice. In emphasising both the similarity of all front-line workers and their fundamental difference from their supervisors and managers, Lipksy ignores the ways in which, for professional staff particularly, this distinction is blurred and highly permeable. *Street-level bureaucracy* also brackets off the discretion of managers – the new organisational professionals *par excellence* – and characterises their use of discretion as simply motivated to implement the policy that they have been given as best they can. In short, my argument is that *Street-level bureaucracy* pays insufficient attention to the role of professional status in understanding the discretion granted and used by some front-line staff and by managers within public welfare organisations and the way in which this can influence the extent and use of discretion at different points in implementation. While the chapter does not report on a particular empirical research project, it draws upon my earlier work on discretion in social work practice to explore

the adequacy of Lipsky's treatment of issues about professionalism and its management.

In the first section of this chapterm I will outline what I see as the strength of the street-level bureaucracy approach in terms of its critique of the idea of managerial control of front-line discretion, and I will consider the additional resources for discretion available to professional front-line staff. I will then consider the way in which *Street-level bureaucracy* characterises the uses of discretion as 'client-processing' and engages with ideas of professionalism in characterising uses of discretion on the front line. In the final section, I will look at managers as the new elite professionals within welfare organisations and the issues this raises for *Street-level bureaucracy* about the analysis of managerial discretion.

## Indelible discretion

Street-level bureaucrats work directly with citizens. They provide public services and 'have considerable discretion in determining the nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by their agencies' (Lipsky, 2010, p 13). The extensive discretion of front-line staff, Lipsky argues, arises, in part, from the stand-off between managers and front-line workers. Managers are powerful; they can control and direct front-line staff, but they also face practical limitations in the nature and exercise of this power. Managers are 'constrained by law, labor agreements, political opposition and worker solidarity from dictating decisions' (Lipsky, 1991, pp 216–17). They also need workers to perform because 'Workers can punish supervisors who do not behave properly toward them, either by refusing to perform work of certain kinds, by doing only minimal work, or by doing work rigidly so as to discredit supervisors' (Lipsky, 2010, pp 24–5).

The intensely political nature of public welfare services also contributes to discretion: services are replete with promises and political rhetoric; and policies tend to be wide-ranging and vague, and sometimes impractical. Policies also exist in an environment of other policies, with which they may fit or conflict. Resources also tend to undershoot what politicians and policies promise. In fact, social service organisations rely on the use of discretion by staff to ensure that services do not grind to a halt or collapse in confusion and contradiction.

However, the extent of discretion involves more than just the balance of power between the worker and manager and the mismatch between policy rhetoric and resources. It is also embedded in the nature of the work of public welfare services. The human dimension

of service cannot easily be proceduralised and controlled because the 'elaboration of rules, guidelines, or instructions cannot circumscribe the alternative' (Lipsky, 2010, p 15). Front-line discretion is necessary to respond to the unexpected and to ensure that services are responsive to individual need.

## Management control

One of the challenges of applying Lipsky's work to contemporary services is, critics argue, that welfare services are now so closely managed, and front-line workers so subject to control, direction and surveillance from managers, that discretion has all but disappeared (Howe, 1991; Cheetham, 1993). These critics are right to point to a shift in power away from practitioner discretion towards practice as increasingly defined and supervised by managers. The terms of the stand-off between managers and front-line practitioners have changed. Managers have become more powerful and are more able to restrict the freedom previously enjoyed by front-line staff. Employment rights, for instance, have been eroded (Mangan, 2009) and managerialism – the idea that managers should have freedom to manage in line with principles drawn from business practice – has been promoted by governments (Harris, 2008).

From any perspective, the rise of managerial power has constrained the freedom of front-line staff. However, constrained freedom does not mean the elimination of freedom, and the constraints themselves can create new choices and freedoms – discretion is as much about spaces created in the wake of the unintended consequences of others' policy choices as it is about simply being left to one's own devices. Policy initiatives often raise questions about what policies mean, how they should be applied in particular settings, how they fit with other policies and procedures, and so on. Harrison et al (1992), for instance, talks about the puzzlement often experienced by those who are faced with policies to implement, and the degree and extent of constraint is not necessarily uniform: the extent and impact of management control varies between services and between and within occupational groups (Evans, 2010).

My interest in discretion has focused on questions about the continuation of professional (social worker) discretion in contemporary local government social services, particularly in the context of a widespread assumption that front-line discretion has been curtailed. Key questions here include: the extent of discretion granted (or withdrawn); how organisationally sanctioned discretion intersects with

professional claims to discretion; and the ways in which discretion is used in practice. An influential view is that discretion has now all but disappeared and front-line workers are compliant with systems of management control. A recent study of the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) systems in children's services, for instance, characterises these systems as the perfection of the managerial control of practice, which have so limited professional decision-making, in all but marginal areas, that 'procedures and rules (inscribed in ICTs) … increasingly constrain what can be done, and indeed determine behaviour in the sense that power is ceded to the rules' (Wastell et al, 2010, p 318). However, even if managers are relatively more powerful, strategies to reduce front-line discretion continue to be frustrated by the human and political dimensions of the work of street-level bureaucracies. In another national study of the introduction of major ICT systems in social care services, the new systems were found to be ineffective and burdensome, and required extensive discretion on the part of professional staff to make sense of categories and to make the system work at all (eg Shaw et al, 2009).

Furthermore, even if managers are more active in seeking to control front-line discretion, it is not clear that they can or want to eliminate discretion. Systems of control can be expensive and severely hampered by resource constraints (Evans, 2010). Politicians and executives are often reluctant to take responsibility for difficult decisions, preferring to support ideas such as clinical responsibility and professional discretion as ways of defending senior decision-makers from blame if things go wrong (Hood et al, 2001).

Historically, professional staff have been employed within welfare services to play a key role in resolving the tensions between citizens, policies and resources (Marshall and Rees, 1985). The expansion of traditional professions and the development of new professions, alongside the expansion of the post-war welfare state, were noted by Lipsky as key factors in the development of street-level bureaucracies.

## Professional street-level bureaucrats

Given the significant role of professionals in the post-war welfare services, Lipksy's treatment of professionalism in *Street-level bureaucracy* is intriguing. He refers to street-level workers as professionals but his use of the term ranges from the broad sense of service/white-collar workers to a narrower conception of a recognised occupational group with status and authority (Evans, 2010) (ie professional status based on its knowledge claims, organisation and norms of practice and some

ability to guide and direct its own work [Freidson, 1994; Noon and Blyton, 2002]).

Lipsky occasionally draws on this second, narrow sense of 'professional', talking about a subset of street-level bureaucrats who are 'expected to exercise discretionary judgement in their field … [and who] are regularly deferred to in their specialised areas of work and are relatively free from supervision by superiors' (Lipsky, 2010, p 14). However, generally, he tends to use 'professional' in the broader sense to make the point that there is now little use in distinguishing (narrow conception) professional street-level bureaucrats from their non-professional street-level bureaucrats because 'even public employees who do not have claims to professional status exercise considerable discretion … even though their discretion is formally circumscribed by rules and relatively closely supervised' (Lipsky, 2010, p 14).

Lipsky acknowledges that there may be differences between street-level bureaucrats arising from professional status, but he does not pursue this point. Rather, he emphasises the common characteristics of street-level bureaucrats despite the diverse nature of the public services workforce to which this term refers – receptionists, benefits clerks, judges, doctors, police officers, social workers, teachers and so on (Lipsky, 2010). This would perhaps make sense if one were to assume the de-professionalisation of staff in street-level bureaucracies. However, while professional workers, across a range of different settings, have seen changes that have constrained their work, they have also seen changes that have increased their power and status (Leicht and Fennell, 2001). In England, for instance, the professional status of social workers has been embedded in law for over a decade (Social Care Act 2000). Social workers are now registered, and only social workers registered by the professional body can operate as social workers. Furthermore, the number of social workers employed within social services in England has also increased by 24% in the decade 2000–10 (NHS, 2010).

In relation to street-level discretion, Lipsky's concern for the 'central tendencies' (Lipsky, 2010, p xix) risks missing particular factors in particular settings that may give greater or fewer resources to exercise discretion – particularly the ability to appeal to an idea of professionalism and associated ideas of professional discretion.

My own research (Evans, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014), for instance, has looked at the continuing role of 'professionalism' as a factor influencing front-line discretion. The research study looked at social workers' experience of discretion within adult services in an English local authority – a classic case of a 'street-level bureaucracy' that provides an opportunity to critically explore and examine the theory. The study

employed qualitative methods of data gathering: primarily interviews but also observational and documentary research. As a case study, the research study was designed to explore and critique theory and to identify areas for further exploration and discussion (Walton, 1992). I found that the professional status of social workers was an important factor in the levels of discretion expected and afforded in their practice. Policies limiting decision-making on the face of it, actually assumed a major role for professional judgement. For instance, the eligibility criteria that govern service users' entitlement to social care services are couched in terms of 'needs' and 'risks' – which may also be 'high', 'significant', 'major' and so on. These terms are not defined, but assume that professional staff will bring into play their own expertise to fill the gaps. Furthermore, professionalism is a significant factor in understanding the relationship between front-line professionals and their managers. Friedson (1994) also notes that front-line professionals tend to be first-line managed by a fellow professional. In my research, practitioners and front-line managers shared a professional background (social work) and shared a similar worldview that included respecting the role of professional judgement as a basis for discretion in front-line work.

## Street-level discretion and client-processing

The idea that professional status can augment the already wide-ranging resources for discretion available to front-line workers should not, on the face of it, be a problem for the street-level bureaucracy approach. However, I now want to consider the way in which professionalism as an idea introduces problems into the analysis of front-line discretion in *Street-level bureaucracy*. The assumption is that front-line discretion is the problem. Front-line staff tend to frustrate policy and use discretion to make their work easier or more bearable at the expense of the organisation's interest and service users' interests. This is perhaps a surprising claim, certainly in the UK, given the continued high level of trust and satisfaction with public sector professionals noted in national surveys (Ipsos-MORI, 2009).

Lipsky uses the term 'client-processing' to refer to the routines and practices that street-level bureaucrats individually and collectively adopt in the use of their discretion to manage the stress of their situation. Front-line staff: create waiting lists or allow people to queue-jump; prefer some service users over others; understand rules too narrowly or too broadly; see service users as more or less culpable for the problems they face, focusing either too much on individual fault or on social

disadvantage and structural inequalities; and focus on certain aspects of their job at the expense of other aspects. These very different practices are, for Lipsky, fundamentally the same in that they are all about managing stress and pressure and 'contribute to control over the work environment. This is consistent with perceiving routines as coping behaviours in which the confronting problem is the management of work stresses'(Lipsky, 2010, pp 85–6).

For Lipsky the problem of front-line discretion is part of the stressful working environment of street-level bureaucracies. Street-level bureaucrats (except for professionals – see later) are not bad people; they are changed by experience. Initially, people are attracted to work in public welfare services because they want to help others. However, the pressures and contradictions of working in street-level bureaucracies frustrate idealists, who then leave. Those who remain accept that they have to compromise their ideals to survive. They develop strategies and practices – 'client-processing' – to reduce the stress and strain of their work in such a way that allows them to reduce the discord between their ideals (the myth of altruism) and the nature of their day-to-day practice. Is such a catch-all explanation for such a wide range of different behaviours in different settings plausible? Do the uses of discretion by front-line workers come down to stress?

Official statistics indicate that 'workplace stress' is higher among occupations in public services, such as health and social work, education, and public administration, than in the work population as a whole; however, it still only affects a small proportion of these occupational groups (around 2–3%) (Health and Safety Executive, 2013). These figures may indicate the tip of an iceberg – only those who find the stress too much to bear reporting their experience – but, even accepting this, it seems unlikely that 'stress' is the primary and predominant phenomenon in street-level bureaucracies that Lipsky assumes in his explanation of such front-line routines as 'client-processing' as a set of stress-management strategies.

It is not clear what 'stress' means in the account of 'client-processing' in *Street-level bureaucracy*. The sense one gets is that stress is used as synonymous with pressured and demanding work. However, this common-sense idea of stress, while widespread, is vague. Ferrie (2004, p 6) argues that this common-sense idea of workplace stress is not helpful and suggests that it is better understood as 'an imbalance between the psychological demands of work on the one hand and the degree of control over work on the other.… It is the combination of high demand and low control.' Work stress entails more than demanding and pressured work; it also relates to other factors, such as

the opportunity to use skills and expertise, a sense of control over the task, occupational status, and so on (Ferrie, 2004). Stress is unlikely to be a uniform experience in street-level bureaucracies – professional street-level bureaucrats, for instance, with a relatively greater ability to control their work, sense of status and so on, are less likely to experience the sort of stress that Lipsky assumes gives rise to client-processing than other street-level bureaucrats.

Interestingly, though, in the case of professionals, Lipsky's account of motivation and routines short-circuits 'stress' and simply asserts the venal character of professionals:

> studies of professional practice suggest that doctors, lawyers, and other professions tend to seek out higher-status clients at the expense of low-status clients, to neglect necessary services in favor of exotic or financially rewarding specialties, to allow the market for specialists to operate so as to create extreme inequalities in the distribution of available practitioners, to provide only meagerly for the professional needs of low-income people, and to respond to poor people in controlling and manipulative ways when they do serve them. (Lipsky, 2010, p 202)

Lipsky's notion of 'client-processing' categorises a wide range of discretionary behaviours as reflections of a single phenomenon: they reflect a common drive to deal with the difficult circumstances of front-line practice, to reduce stress. However, while stress may explain some discretionary behaviour, it is difficult to see how it can provide a sufficient explanation. If stress fails to hold these disparate approaches to discretion among front-line staff together, then what is the purpose of the term? It seems to me that rather than describing something out there, it is a term that reflects the concerns and values of the person using it. Client-processing defines a problem for Lipsky. The problem is not so much that front-line staff develop routines and so on, but that these routines and so on do not – from his viewpoint – advance agency objectives or responsiveness to service users (Lipksy, 2010, p 86). However, on what basis is this judgement of front-line practice made? Scratch the surface of Lipsky's account of client-processing and it is an assumption that front-line workers will choose to make their work life easier, more pleasant and less stressful in preference to being concerned with others' interests. In the case of professional staff, he believes that they will seek to control and manipulate in the pursuit of individual and collective interests. However, are such simple, damning

and global accounts of motivation plausible? Stress management or venality cloaked in altruism are unlikely to be the only or even the most plausible explanations for the different ways in which discretion is used by different actors, in different settings and for different purposes. The approaches to discretion may reflect commitments, interest and concerns (Evans, 2010), professional understanding and analysis, or professional ideas of appropriate responses and interventions (Evans and Hardy, 2010). The problem with the idea of client-processing is that it sets aside these questions with a sweeping statement about what makes all street-level bureaucrats tick. However, any explanation of behaviour also needs to consider motive 'because it is not really possible to observe and describe behaviour at all (apart from the very simplest actions) without grasping the motives that it expresses' (Midgley, 2001, p 93).

What seems to lie behind Lipsky's evaluation of front-line discretion is a view that policy is handed down through the organisation in a pristine condition until it gets to the front line, where 'street ministers' (Lipsky, 2010, p 12) mess it up. However, how can policy be handed down in a pristine state when one of the key arguments in *Street-level bureaucracy* is that policy is imprecise, contradictory and vague? Lipsky seems to get over this problem by equating policy with what hierarchical superiors say it is. In this sense, while Lipsky's account of the operation of discretion looks 'bottom-up' in recognising the limitations of 'top-down' managerial control and direction, his approach to the evaluation of front-line discretion is 'top-down' in that the measure of legitimate discretion is to be found in compliance with policy in terms of the instructions of one's organisational superior – one's manager.

This brings us onto the fundamental problem with the approach to front-line discretion and the notion of client-processing: it is a covert ethical assessment of front-line practice from a top-down perspective. Putting aside the psychological-looking analysis of work stress, what actually remains is an ethical evaluation that lumps together the diverse ways in which front-line discretion is used under the rubric of client-processing. Furthermore, this evaluation is based on the point of view that discretion and its use should be evaluated in terms of obedience to managers.

## Managing – a fractured chain of command

The contrast that Lipsky draws in *Street-level bureaucracy* between the motivation of managers and the motivation of front-line workers is stark. While front-line staff pursue their own needs and interests, managers share a commitment to the implementation of organisational objectives

(Lipsky, 1980, p 216). They focus on the 'aggregate achievement of the work unit and orientations directed toward minimizing autonomy' (Lipsky, 2010 [1980], p 25). Their prime concern is with implementing the policy that they are directed to put into effect, and with doing this as effectively as possible (Lipsky, 2010, p 18). They sometimes also have to compromise in the face of front-line recalcitrance, and strike practical bargains, but still with the goal of achieving the policy in the circumstances.

Managers in *Street-level bureaucracy* are the hierarchical superiors of street-level bureaucrats, including 'someone in an immediate supervisory position vis-à-vis street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010, p 242). They are supervisors, their supervisor's supervisor and so on in the organisational chain of command. Interestingly, Lipsky suggests – in a footnote – that there may be broken links in the chain of management command: 'The focus on the divergence of objectives between the organisation and lowest-level workers could with some modifications be applied to the relation between lowest-level supervisor and the roles to which this position is subordinate' (Lipsky, 2010, p 242). However, he does not pursue or develop this observation. I want to look at this issue more closely.

### *Local managers*

The distinction between front-line managers and workers is likely to be blurred where services involve professional staff. Many front-line managers also occupy hybrid roles that cross the manager–professional divide (Causer and Exworthy, 1999). Professional front-line staff tend to be first-line managed by supervisors from their own profession (Friedson, 1994). In the personal social services in the UK, for instance, information on the professional background of front-line managers is thin on the ground, but research examining recruitment suggests that Friedson's observation continues to be the case. Henderson and Seden (2003, p 87) examined 'job descriptions' and 'person specifications' for front-line managers in social services and found that there was 'little evidence of employers prioritising management expertise rather than professionally defined skills, abilities and experience'.

In my research (Evans, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014), I found that the blurring of local management and practitioner roles in professional social work teams was widespread. All the local managers were professional social workers who had moved into management. Overwhelmingly, these managers strongly characterised themselves as professionals first, who managed fellow professionals. They also identified with front-

line workers' concerns about the (in their view, distorted) priorities of the organisation, focusing on finances rather than care. Furthermore, front-line managers managed not only front-line staff, but also their own front-line caseload – they were both managers and street-level bureaucrats. These practitioners and their social work managers also tended to identify with each other and with a professional social work culture, in contrast to senior managers, who were seen as a having different concerns, priorities and interests.

That front-line managers and front-line workers share commitments and distinguish themselves from senior mangers reflects a recurrent finding in organisational research in social services (Harris, 1998). This fracture in the management hierarchy poses the question: where are the 'managers' described in *Street-level bureaucracy*? Lower-level managers managing staff in professional services do not match the picture of mangers as a quite different group from the street-level bureaucrats. In fact, these managers look more like the professionals they manage than the senior managers to whom they report.

### *Senior management*

We have to look further up the management hierarchy to find Lipsky's 'managers'. These are the senior managers, whose primary concerns are formulating organisational goals and implementing policy, and who identify with other managers and are entrusted with implementing policy. They look like the managers that Lipsky describes. Their raison d'être is to make policy work – striving to narrow the gap between street-level performance and 'desired policy results' (Lipsky, 2010, p 223).

Managers, as an occupational group, have advanced a professional project over the last few decades. Managers have created a body of expertise (knowledge claims) and a narrative of service (norms) that has been deployed to assert the idea of managers' right to manage (discretion) (Leicht and Fennel, 2001). Since the 1980s, the idea of professional managers has been embraced and promoted in the public sector by neoliberal-oriented governments (Pollitt, 1993).

Looked at from this perspective, the distinction between 'managers' and 'professionals' is a false contrast. Far from being the scourge of professional privilege, managers are its beneficiaries; management is an occupation group that has successfully promoted its professional project and, as part of the process, has sought to displace other (established) professional groups from their pre-eminence in organisations (Leicht and Fennel, 2001).

Seeing managers in this way raises questions about the rather anodyne way in which management is presented in *Street-level bureaucracy*, particularly the paucity of close examination of the discretion that is granted to managers and the ways in which managers use this discretion.

Lipsky tends to present discretion as a problem of front-line freedom with which managers have to cope in their work of implementing organisational goals and making policy work. Managers try (unsuccessfully) to control discretion. However, discretion permeates public welfare; it operates, according to Davis's (1969, p 4) classic definition, wherever a public official is free to make a decision or exercise choice. On this definition, any employee within a public body at any level of the organisation can exercise discretion. The conditions that contribute to wide-ranging front-line discretion – mismatched policy aspirations and resources, vague and conflicting policy, and so on – presumably also apply to managers and require them to make choices and exercise discretion. Managers' discretion is also embedded in their professional status as managers – 'the right to manage'.

Furthermore, managers' discretion is significant. Their decisions translate and change policy in its journey through the organisation and, in the process, create the environment of discretion faced by front-line staff. While street-level bureaucrats play a role in changing and implementing policy on the ground, the response of street-level bureaucrats to their situation – such as rationing contact time – may be a management strategy, as opposed to a worker response (Anon, 1981). Interestingly, in the new edition of *Street-level bureaucracy*, Lipsky (2010) acknowledges that the context within which street-level bureaucrats act is, to some extent, already structured by organisational responses and options.

The extent and impact of managerial discretion is important in understanding who the key actors are in making sense of policy and making policy work – and, in the process, changing it. However, why is the discretion of managers not more in the picture in *Street-level bureaucracy*? One reason for the blinkered nature of the analysis may be that management decision-making is not seen as discretion because, according to Lipsky, managers are committed to policy implementation; policy is safe in their hands and it is only at risk when it finally arrives at the front line. Managers can be trusted with policy while front-line staff cannot. However, is this view plausible? Given Lipsky's view that professionals are primarily concerned with advancing their own interests, why does Lipsky assume that management professionals are different?

One way to make sense of the apparent contradiction is to see senior managers' self-interest and the interests of the organisation as coincident. Senior managers are the authors of organisational goals. The apex of the organisation is where management self-interest harmonises with organisational interests. However, this confuses senior managers' interests with those of the organisation that employs them, and confuses organisational goals with policy.

It is not self-evident that the interests of senior managers dovetail with the interests of the organisation employing them. Over the past decade, for instance, senior managers have been accused of executing serial 'pay heists' against the organisations that employ them. They have prioritised higher and higher pay for themselves at the expense of shareholders' interests by taking advantage of 'the separation of ownership from control, and the potential for mischief it creates' (Colvin, 2001). Of course, this observation relates to the private sector but, given the promotion of a more business-like public sector, particularly by neo-liberal-minded governments, public sector managers are as likely to reflect the unsavoury characteristics of management – that greed is good, for instance – as they are characteristics of virtuous management.

Policy in the public sector is seldom made and implemented within the same organisation. Even in the traditional Westminster model of top-down policy implementation through levels of public sector organisations from national to local, different organisations are often involved, for example, national government to local authorities. In the contemporary setting of policy governance, policy implementation involves disparate organisations, such as agencies and trusts, as well as national and local government, and is also outsourced to private and third sector organisations (Rhodes, 2007). We cannot assume that organisational interests and goals coincide with the concerns and commitments of policymakers (Carson et al, 2014). A recent example in the health service in the UK illustrates this point. Over the past few years, there has been a series of enquiries into the service provided by Mid Staffordshire Hospital within the National Health Service in which senior executives were found to have prioritised the aspirations of the hospital board and senior managers to become a more autonomous and independent hospital trust within the health service by focusing on financial control and cutting costs, while, at the same time, the standards of the health care they were entrusted to deliver were plummeting. The final enquiry was critical of the practice of a range of the front-line professionals working in the hospital, but there was particular criticism of senior managers for distorting national policy goals in their

(self-serving) pursuit of trust status for their hospital regardless of the human costs for patients, families and front-line staff (Francis, 2013).

Greener (2004) warns against imposing the false binary of managers as either simply heroes or villains. The point here is not to characterise managers (as Lipsky characterises other professionals) as villainous, but to move beyond the equally problematic assumption of heroic management embedded in the analysis of discretion in *Street-level bureaucracy*. Managers have extensive discretion, and to understand front-line discretion, we need at least to understand the impact of managerial discretion on front-line options and choices and to identify the extent to which the services received by citizens are influenced not just by 'street-level ministers', but also by 'organisational ministers'. We also need to grasp what motivates the choices of senior management in particular contexts – the range and mix of motives underpinning senior managers' approach to discretion.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sought to outline what initially drew me to *Street-level bureaucracy* in terms of the analysis of the central and continuing role of discretionary decision-making within public services. However, the focus of my argument has been on the fact that Lipksy's analysis of the extent, location and ways of understanding discretion in street-level bureaucracies pays insufficient attention to the role of professionalism in understanding the construction and deployment of discretion, and that the discretion of managers is under-examined.

I have argued that the idea of professionalism is helpful in understanding the extent of some street-level bureaucrats' discretion. In looking at the uses of discretion at the street level, Lipsky emphasises survival and self-protection in a difficult work environment. (The idea of professional altruism is given short shrift as a smokescreen for self-interest.) He argues that discretion is used at the street level for 'client-processing' – to manage work stress and to reconcile the myth of altruism with the desire to make work easier or more pleasurable. Looking at discretionary choices in terms of individual and collective strategies to manage work stress may contribute something to our understanding of the uses of discretion but it is far from a sufficient explanation of the motives underpinning the use of discretion.

In contrast to front-line workers, managers in *Street-level bureaucracy* are not the subject of close scrutiny. This is despite the fact that the conditions that give rise to extensive discretion at the street level also apply to their work. Managers have extensive discretion, and because

of their position, they influence and change the policy they transmit to the street level. Their choices also influence the context of discretion within which front-line workers operate.

The basis for the assumption in *Street-level bureaucracy* that managers' motives are primarily concerned with putting policy into effect is unclear – particularly when we recognise managers as a professional occupation and consider Lipsky's characterisation of professionals as self-serving.

However, my argument is not that we should see managers as purely venal and front-line staff as altruistic. Rather, we need to move beyond sweeping and crude characterisations of motivation and discretion, and examine actors' own evaluations and accounts of the use of discretion in order to understand what is happening in different situations. Part of this process is the need to move away from the disproportionate focus on front-line discretion and to consider the extensive discretion of professional managers in order to understand how managers' discretion creates the context and constraints or expands the choices of front-line workers in implementing policy.