

The Moral Economy of Street-Level Policy Work

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The analysis of street-level discretion tends to be conducted in terms of political economy – seeing people who design, deliver and consume public services as self-interested and self-serving individuals. This has resulted in a paradigm of policy analysis that struggles to engage with the merits and mess of humanity (as well as its limitations) and the ethical dilemmas that arise in service delivery. Diverse needs and conflicting claims create tensions for front-line staff in balancing ideas of consistency and responsiveness to individual circumstances. This paper examines tensions in street-level policy implementation drawing on empirical research with professional staff in adult social care to consider their responses to the tensions and dilemmas they encounter in practice. The paper will consider the role of professional commitments and values in policy implementation and service delivery and suggests that the idea of ‘moral economies of practice’ can offer critical insights into street-level policy implementation and service delivery.

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1. Introduction

Discretion is an inevitable aspect of policy implementation (Lipsky, 2010) and is also a continuing dimension of professional practice within social services (Evans, 2010). Discretion in public services raises several issues, and in my work I have been interested in two particular questions: the extent and basis of discretion in welfare services where professionals are key front line staff; and the ways in which those who have discretion use it.

Major public service reforms over the last few decades have been underpinned by managerialism. For Newman and Clarke (1997), the idea of the active controlling manager is central to managerialism and is one of its distinguishing features (from administration amongst other things). However, they are also careful to avoid the conclusion that managerialism has resulted in the elimination of front line discretion. Empirical evidence that has accumulated over the last two decades supports this observation and points to the continuation of extensive professional discretion in areas such as social work (Evans, 2010). For Newman and Clark, the significant influence of managerialism is ideological: the way in which it has sought to influence and direct front line discretion through: »... framing the exercise of professional judgment by the requirement that it takes account of the realities and responsibilities of budgetary management« (Newman, Clarke, 1997: 76).

The degrees and extent to which discretion is influenced by budgetary concerns touches on a wider and more long-standing concern about professional discretion – how it is used and what motives underpin its use. In this paper, I want to focus on this issue – particularly the ethical dimension of the use of discretion in professional practice.

Professionals are workers whose claim to discretion is based not only on the possession of particular expertise but also on a belief that they can be trusted to act in line with: »... a professional morality with standards of conduct that are generally acknowledged by those in the profession who are serious about their moral responsibilities«. (Beauchamp, Childress, 2001: 5). The idea that professionals are motivated by altruistic concerns has historically been seen as a defining characteristic of pro-

fessionalism (Flexner, 1915). Recently this view has developed in the contrast between managerialism and professionalism as different logics of work. In managerialism, work is seen as the means by which a production plan can be realised by workers who are motivated by self-interest (and incentives and punishments). Professionalism, on the other hand, is characterised by an ideology that motivates an occupational group to focus on concerns of service and others' well-being over economic priorities (Friedson, 2001).

This view of professionals as altruistic can appear naïve and outdated. Le Grand (2003) identifies two phases in post-war public policy reflecting different conceptions of professional motivation. In the first, professionals were seen as people who could be trusted to work in the public interest and: 'were thought to be primarily motivated by their professional ethic and hence, to be concerned only with the interests of the people they were serving.' (Le Grand, 1997: 155).

However, in the wake of the fiscal crisis of the 1970s and the neo-liberal turn in politics and policy in the UK and US, Le Grand identifies a shift to a quite different view: »Fuelled in part by people's experience both of dealing with, and of working within, the welfare bureaucracies, scepticism grew ... that professionals were only concerned with the welfare of their clients. Instead, there was an increasing acceptance of the argument of the public choice school of economists and political scientists that the behavior of public officials and professionals could be better understood, if the assumption was made that they were largely self-interested.« (Le Grand, 1997: 158).

From a neoliberal perspective, public servants are venal and public institutions corrupting. To address these problems they prescribe: »a political order that will channel the self-serving behaviour of participants toward the common good in a manner that comes as close as possible to that described by Adam Smith with respect to the economic order«. (Buchanan, quoted in Stedman-Jones, 2012: 130).

Contemporary analysis of street-level policy and practice tends to reflect the terms of trade set by rational choice theorists and political economy – front-line staff are presumed to be primarily self-interested; and managers are lionised and characterised as struggling against front-line resistance to deliver services and get the job done. This perspective can be seen, for instance, in Lipsky's classic and recently expanded account of *Street-Level Bureaucracy* (2010).

For Lipsky, the problem of front-line discretion is closely related to the ways in which he sees workers responding to their stressful work environment. He argues that they adopt habits and routines – such as following rules too closely or not following rules closely enough – to cope with the stress and to make their work easier. However, when we look closely at this, the concern is not so much that front-line workers develop routines but that, from his perspective, these routines reflect self-interested behaviour rather than a commitment to advancing agency objectives or responsiveness to clients (Lipsky, 2010: 86).

Lipsky's observations seem to be made more in regret than celebration and he tempers his observation, noting: »that some workers find a way to keep in balance their views of client responsibility and environmental causality and their own potential for intervention«. (Lipsky 2010: 154). However, for Lipsky, professionals generally are self-interested and venal. They: »... 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 meagrely 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: 202).

The solution is to incentivise (his view of) good front-line policy practice: »... attitudinal dispositions will be rigid or flexible in large measure according to the degree they help workers cope with job stresses ... 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 simplification conform to actual job requirements rather than to unrelated biases.« (Lipsky, 2010: 142).

Such sweeping and limiting accounts of front-line behaviour, though, are contentious. Public Service Motivation theorists, for instance, challenge the view that people are simply self-concerned and self interested, pointing to the significance of service ethics and other-regarding motives in worker behaviour in public services (Perry et al., 2010). Le Grand (1997) has criticised the general tendency in policy analysis and amongst policy makers to characterise public service professionals and other workers as self-serving »knaves«. He has called for a more balanced

picture of what motivates people in public services and has argued that the professional workforce is made up of »knights« as well »knaves«, and that public policy, in assuming the selfish behaviour of workers, can lead us to forget this. Dean (2003) has extended this observation to point out that motives and behaviour of professionals in public services tend to be less categorical and more mixed and fluid, drawing on different motives and perspectives in particular situations. Drawing on a survey by Ellis and Rogers (2004), which included a number of social workers, Dean points out that the professionals in this study, while committed to the social justice as an aspect of public service provision, were, at the same time, dubious about the idea of citizenship rights to services; and that these responses need to be understood situationally (Dean, 2003), as, for instance, »defensive practice« (Harris, 1987) in the context emphasising risk management.

The deployment of discretion may reflect self- and/or other-regarding concerns; it may also reflect different understanding and analysis of a problem, and/or different ideas of appropriate responses and interventions (Evans, Hardy, 2010). These observations suggest that understanding street-level practice requires engagement with questions about practitioners' concerns and commitments, and issues such as the perception of need, the characterisation of the problem at hand, and the views about the balance(s) to be struck between social and individual responsibility.

In order to engage with these questions, we need to move away from broad-brush assumptions that professionals (and other workers in public services) are either altruistic or self-interested and look at motives as a combination of commitments and interests operating in a particular context. This suggests the need for closer examination of these factors in front-line situations. However, a challenge here is to dislodge the influence on analysis of a dominant unworldly idea of 'moral' that casts our judgement of the motivation of front-line workers in global terms as either essentially good or essentially bad. From the 'moral' perspective, being moral involves doing the right thing regardless – to deviate from the right course of action in the presence of practical and mundane concerns seems to invalidate the idea that there may be altruistic motives; and if motives are not wholly pure and altruistic they are venal and self-serving. For instance, Le Grand, quoted above, points out that one of the reasons for the demise of the traditional view of professionals (as virtuous) was the scepticism that they were: »... concerned *only* (*emphasis T. E.*) with the interests of the people they were serving«. (Le Grand, 1997: 155) But must

the presence of self-interested concerns invalidate concerns for others' interests too? Does being moral mean only (and to the exclusion of your own interests and projects) being concerned with the needs of others?

2. Concept of *Moral Economy*

David Hume has argued that ethics entails a mixture of calculation of benefit, personal commitments and sentiments extending our concerns for others and for wider society. People, he observed, are motivated in part by instrumental concerns and utility; but these concerns alone are not enough to understand why people act: »Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a sentiment should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies. This sentiment can be no other than a feeling for the happiness of mankind, and a resentment of their misery; since these are the different ends which virtue and vice have a tendency to promote. Here therefore reason instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and humanity makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial.« (Hume, 1917/1777: 68).

Ethical understanding and practice is also very much woven into our day-to-day world. They develop implicitly in practices which both embody and promote moral behaviour in the same way that: »Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, though they have never given promise to each other.« (Hume, undated: 207). For Hume morality is not simply about applying abstract injunctions. Ethical understanding is a more practical process of understanding the concerns, commitments and conventions that operate and guide choices within a situation.

Hume's practical and social approach to ethics is echoed in contemporary moral philosophy. Bernard Williams, for instance, has argued that we should not see ethics as a system of external universal laws (Williams, 1993). He has criticised the widespread approach to morality (moralising) – unbending injunctions based on some assumed absolute authority – a form of secular theology that only recognises obligations as ethically significant. It obscures the tensions and difficult feelings involved in making decisions about the right course of action and ignores the mixture of motives that guide ethical action (Williams, 1993). For Williams, ethical

analysis has to be grounded in understanding people's commitments, their experiences and how they balance tensions in broad and often conflicting principles in concrete situations. Moreover, in seeking to understand unethical and ethical behaviour, Williams argues, we should not simply dismiss personal commitments as unethical (Smart, Williams, 1973).

This approach sees ethics as a field of critical enquiry investigating the relationship between needs, obligations, commitments and actions (Norman, 1998: 225). Furthermore, it also suggests that in looking at these questions the approach should be grounded in understanding actors' responses to situations and their aspirations. In relation to questions about policy analysis understanding ethics in this way, points to the need to ask why different actors respond to policies differently and what underlies these responses – particularly their fundamental commitments and concerns about right or wrong, good or bad etc. Examining front-line practice and policy discretion through this lens also suggests the need to look beyond formal accounts of ethics (such as professional codes) to moral practices on the ground; we need to understand the »moral economies« of street-level policy practice, the ground-level 'values' and ethical dialogue between practice and the political and social context.

The idea of a »moral economy« is closely associated with the work of the social historian E. P. Thompson and his analysis of food riots. He was critical of mechanistic accounts of behaviour – that people rioted simply because they were in hunger. Rather, he argued, rioting was mediated by expectations and a sense of moral outrage focusing on shared ideas of traditional rights about fundamental needs (Thompson, 1991). The impact of Thompson's ideas has been wide spread including the exploration of contemporary relations between citizen and state, client and patron and worker and employer (Thompson, 1991; Randall, Charlesworth, 2000). Scott has been particularly influential in developing the idea of moral economies in terms of values embedded in traditional practices which provide a resource within an institution or community to restrain the powerful and empower the »subordinate« (Randall, Charlesworth, 2000) and the ways in which dominant rhetoric can embody moral principles that become a resource for resistance to challenge departure from expectations embedded in established practices, particularly in times of change: »There is frequently ... a temporal gap between the brusque advances of capitalist production relations and the ideological work designed to euphemise and naturalise them. It is especially in this temporal gap, when economic practice is at variance with received values, that subordinate groups frequently have the rhetorical resources and sense of justice that

foster indignation and resistance.« (Scott, 2000: 206). Importantly, in developing Thompson's idea a constant theme in the approach has been that one cannot simply impose an understanding of behaviour and motivation on a situation. Rather one has to work to understand people's commitments and concerns through immersing oneself in their experiences to understand their expectations within their situation and their context of traditions and practices (Thompson, 1991).

3. Methodology of Research

In the preceding section, I have looked at the idea of morality and professional concerns and commitments, arguing that policy analysis has tended to see practitioners' motivation in terms of either economic self-interest or universalistic morality. I have argued that an alternative approach to understanding morality analysis allows us to engage with motivation as a mixture of concerns including principled commitments that are situated within day-to-day practices. Understanding morality in this way alerts us to the dangers of sweeping accounts of motivation. It also helps us to recognise the need to consider why policy actors respond (or not) to policy in particular ways, and to engage with the commitments and principles that lie behind these responses.

An important dimension of understanding policy implementation is uncovering responses to policy in practice; but also seeking to understand the range of factors that inform the responses. My particular interest here is to avoid the imposition of assumptions about motives in street-level behaviour. I am instead interested in understanding the way in which front-line practices provide insights into professional commitments and concerns – their moral economy – which can also help us to understand and assess front line implementation. Making these (often tacit) commitments and standards clearer can also make explicit a practical critique of policy. It also makes these principles available for scrutiny and challenge by others, such as policy-makers, managers and service-users, outside the professional group.

In the following section, I want to illustrate this approach to the front-line ethical analysis of policy practice by looking again at an element of a study I undertook which looked at professional discretion within public welfare service (Evans, 2010; Evans, 2011). The study looked at the experiences of professional social workers (front-line practitioners and their immediate line managers) working within a local government older persons care

team. The role of social worker in this setting is closely associated with care management. Their new primary role was assessing need, negotiating with service users about preferences for care and then arguing for funding from the local authority and, with this money, buying and managing a package of care to support the service user (Department of Health, 1991). This was at a time when there were significant changes in the style of management within the service (more assertive and intrusive management control of front-line work) and increasingly restricted resources for service delivery (fewer resources meant fewer people could be helped).

A focus of the research was eligibility criteria – rules setting out entitlement to services – used by senior managers to control and direct professional decision-making and professionals, and the responses of professional staff to these criteria. I was particularly interested in the effect of these criteria on day-to-day freedom on the front line to exercise professional judgment. The study found that increasingly detailed policy direction, assertive management techniques and cuts in resources for services had constrained professional freedom. However, despite (and sometimes because of) increasingly detailed rules, professionals continued to exercise discretion in this work – and this discretion was not simply a reflection of managers' inability to formulate systems of control, but also reflected expectations within the organisation that professional staff should have a degree of freedom to exercise their judgment.

For this paper, I have re-examined some of the data from this research – focusing on social workers in an older persons team – through the lens of ethical analysis outlined above. This has involved looking at professional response to the environment of practice in terms of conceptions of the purpose and aim of their professional work, and teasing out aspects of their moral economies of practice. This involves going back to the study and interrogating the data from a different perspective from the one originally used; but in doing this I don't want to claim that this is a new and better understanding of what was going on; rather, it is another perspective, adding to what was previously »discovered.« (Dey, 2004: 91).

4. Social Workers and Their Environment: An Ethical Evaluation

The context of the study was a local authority in which the work environment was increasingly characterised by closer management scrutiny

and intervention in professional practice and resources to do the job were increasingly constrained.

The social workers felt that the local authority was placing them in a difficult position in their acting unethically towards the people it was supposed to be helping – in this case older people. They characterised the authority as denigrating older people as citizens, not providing them with the basic help to which they are entitled, and of approaching older people services as a means of solving an overspend in other (unconnected) services within social services (because older people's services were easier and quicker to cut). One local manager encapsulated this view: »We had to reduce our qualified staff numbers, so that only half of our field staff were qualified staff, and the other half were, I won't say were untrained, but were an unqualified community care outfit ... it's a financial move. It's cheaper. ... and that's not been a view that's been taken with any other service ... my feeling is, it's a lot to do with the way elderly people are viewed in society, as being in a way people who only need practical services.«

The social workers were also concerned about the way in which the council and its senior officers viewed social services as in terms of meeting performance specifications rather than as a human service. They criticised senior managers' focus on external league tables and performance measures rather than on the quality of the service: »I think they see social workers as there to, yes, assess the needs, because that's what we're obliged to do; but then as much as possible to limit, to ration what we can do to meet that need as cheaply as possible, as quickly as possible and as long as we get the paperwork done then they're happy ...«

Looking at their own role as social workers delivering a service, they felt they were not able to work according to basic ideas of good practice in their profession. This came out in comments about not being able to help clients before they deteriorated into a desperate state. One practitioner summarised the ethical tension in the situation: »Going back to when I applied for my (social work) training ... I suppose I saw (social work) in terms of empowering people and facilitating and advocating for people ... And I still see those roles as being relevant. But working, for instance, in the kind of field I'm working now, with ... older people and increased eligibility criteria ... you're limited in some things you can do, so you become a bit more of a sort of agent of social control, in a way.«

The interview data do not just describe the problems; they also point to the basis of these concerns. There is a belief that the rights of older people in this community are being severely compromised and that the treatment

of older people lacks humanity because of the focus on meeting financial targets in preference to meeting the needs of older people. A local manager explained that the team was: »... being asked to make savings, because other adult services haven't managed to make savings. In part it's because the elderly services are easier to cut, because there's a high throughput and high volume – this will bring down costs quicker!«

Reflected within these concerns we can see an aspect of their professional moral project in terms of a commitment to empower citizens, to make systems work in their clients' best interest, to care rather than ration: »... the choices you make are still very limited by services. Thus, I suppose we kind of always have the issues of user empowerment and choice and listening to the client up to a point. But at the same time it's kind of restricted by what realistically we can offer.«

A criticism might be that this is not just an interpretation but involves accepting these practitioners' own accounts at face value: is not this just disguised special pleading by a professional group that wants to pursue its own interest and is bemoaning the fact that it has got to get on with the job? This may or may not be the case – but neither interpretation is self-evidently true or false. The veracity of the account lies in the degree to which it reflects the data. However, even if we were to be sceptical and assume that what these professionals are saying is tainted by self-interest, it still gives us some sense of the nature of these professionals' other-regarding concerns; and these provide standards by which to check the extent to which professionals in that situation are (and are not) doing what they should be doing. They also offer insights into the effects and reception of a policy by one group that can be checked against others' (for instance older people themselves) evaluation of local services. Seeking to identify the ethical concerns of front-line staff is not to privilege their concerns over the concerns of other groups. There are often different groups involved in the process of translating policy into service and they may subscribe to quite different moral concerns – the original study's focus was local professionals, so I do not have data to go beyond the perspectives and concerns of front-line professional staff.

5. Social Workers' Response to the Environment

The preceding section outlined the professional social workers' ethical evaluation of the environment within which they had to practise. In what

follows I want to consider how these ethical concerns informed professionals' responses to this environment.

There was one flash-point between professionals and senior managers that resulted in overt conflict. This was a situation where the authority publicly set its eligibility criteria at a relatively generous level of help but subsequently asked practitioners to apply covert, more restrictive criteria to restrict help and save money: »... we had a verbal directive. We had no written statement to support that ... there wasn't anything that (the Council) owned, because it wasn't on a piece of paper.« The social workers refused to apply the more restrictive criteria and demanded that, if the criteria were to be restricted, the authority should formally acknowledge the change (and take the political criticism that would result). The authority did eventually do this and was the subject of extended criticism in the local press.

However, apart from this one incident, the ethical context of work had changed gradually, almost imperceptibly. In the words of one professional, who had worked for the authority for over a decade: »I think it's kind of been quite a steady, slow (change), not clearly defined when it happened ...«

The responses to the situation mirrored the gradual and accumulative change. Responses were not heroic; they were piecemeal practical adaptations – rather like Hume's oarsmen tacitly changing their stroke – to mitigate what the practitioners saw as the most damaging consequences of changing the ethical environment of service.

For instance, social workers used administrative categories, which gave service users access to different budgets, 'creatively' to ensure needs were met. The authority had set up a system where people who met eligibility criteria still had to wait several weeks until they actually received the service they needed (rationing by waiting list). To get around this the practitioners and local managers redefined these clients as »an urgent case« to get funding for a service immediately from another budget designed to provide a temporary service in emergency situations. The case remained 'urgent' until the client had gone through the queue and long-term funding became available. In the words of one social worker: »It's just a way of working the system, which I respect. I think it's very sensible.«

Another strategy was critical disengagement from cultural assumptions underpinning policy, particularly assumptions about responsibilities and familial care. One practitioner explained that: »Once you start taking his wife out of the equation, we're probably faced with someone who would never

go out, who probably wouldn't go out to get any shopping ... wouldn't maintain the household or the bills or anything like that. So looking at it in terms of him as an individual, once you start taking key people or key support networks out of it, then the eligibility criteria look different«.

Alongside shared concerns and responses, there were also tensions and different views on ethical responses to policy. There was, for instance, a shared concern about achieving a good outcome for service users, i.e. getting their needs met, but there were differences about whether these informal strategies were also fair. One group was very uncomfortable about acting covertly and being so flexible with the rules; they felt it was unfair not to treat everyone consistently. However, for the other group, the ends justified the means – to ensure that people's basic needs were met, you had to push, bend, and break the rules.

Another point of conflict within the team focused on the responsibility of professional social workers to question and challenge the conditions within which they worked. Some of the more experienced social workers in the group – interestingly, those in team leadership positions – were critical of what they saw as the passivity of many of their professional colleagues: »There doesn't seem to be any sort of groundswell. Professionally ... it seems to me that part of our role is to be advising the authority as social workers about things and saying: you're employing us as professionals, not as dogs' bodies.«

The conflict between experienced and newer professionals may reflect different cohorts' perspectives on the role of professionals in questioning and challenging the ethical terms of trade of their place of work. The conflict reflects a broader process in terms of changing expectations of the professional role within welfare over the past twenty years.

Historically, welfare professionals were seen as legitimate policy actors within organisations but their role in this area has been increasingly circumscribed (Laffin, Entwistle, 2000). Related to this it could also be that the more newly qualified practitioners were not happy challenging organizational authority because they recognised that they were being employed to carry out the authority's instructions, to implement its policies. However, within this dispute is a moral tension between claims to autonomy and authority – how to balance moral responsibility. There are several issues here. The first is that obedience follows from the inherent authority of public policy – but why? A version of this argument is that policy is often based on law and that front-line workers should obey the law (not just because they would be punished if they did not but also because it

is the right thing to do). However, we cannot assume that policy simply reads-across to the law; the argument is contingent on policy conforming to law. There was an example in this study, for instance, where local policy was contrary to the law. Most policy though, is not directly based on law but is made up of organizational directives, instructions, and procedures – and resource allocations, staff profiles, customs, and practices. Policy is, then, inherently unstable, confused and confusing, and open to multiple interpretations (Evans, Harris, 2004). In this case, an appeal to policy is less an appeal to authority than an argument about the interpretation of policy – which suggests that professionals who are defined, in part, by their ethical commitments and concerns should articulate their concerns and challenges. Of course, it is possible to cut through the Gordian knot of policy interpretation and say that obedience is contractual: professionals are employed as agents to carry out the instructions of their principals – senior managers and councillors. However, that someone is employed to carry out a task should not mean that they carry that task out unquestioningly – at the extremes there are limits to obedience (Arendt, 2006) but there are also many grey areas in which disobedience is not just condonable but necessary (Kadish, Kadish 2010). In terms of broader public policy, in the UK for instance, the idea that professionals should simply follow instructions and not air ethical concerns or challenge organisational priorities has recently been heavily criticised in a major public report (Francis, 2013).

The final observation I want to make in relation to re-examining the research study data is the risk of submerging ethical arguments that do not easily fit into the dominant picture that emerges of the ethical concerns and goals amongst front-line professionals. An example of this was a challenge within the team to the idea that practitioners should see people in terms of needs. One of the social workers in the team, while generally critical of increasing limitations on services, also saw them as an opportunity to challenge the: »... welfare tendency in older people's services to look after people.« Tighter resources, this person argued, can make people think more clearly about the ethics of promoting and defending user independence and autonomy: »And being quite firm with other professionals and saying, no – this person, yes, there is a risk, but it's one that they want to take.«

6. Conclusion

The discretion exercised by frontline workers can have a significant effect on the implementation of public policy and service provision. My

concern in this paper has been to consider approaches to understanding how discretion is used at street-level from the point of view of those who exercise it. Professional discretion in public services has tended to be either idealised as the exercise of altruistic judgment by the wise (e.g. Keynes), or demonised as the interference of self-styled (and self-serving) experts (e.g. von Mises) (Steadman-Jones, 2012). The second perspective has now come to dominate policy analysis (Le Grand, 1997). In these circumstances, to ask professionals how and why they use discretion can seem retrograde and naïve – going back to unquestioning trust and taking what is said at face value.

However, characterising discretion and motives as necessarily self-servicing is too sweeping. Such an ethical evaluation of public service professionals lacks credibility and moral imagination. Discretion is a degree of freedom to exercise judgement; it is neither necessarily good nor bad in itself. The important questions are: to what degree it is justified in a particular setting, and for what purposes and in whose interests it has been used.

»Justified«, »good« or »bad« can be weasel words, simply conveying our approval or disapproval in emotive terms. However, they can also reflect profound and significant commitments and concerns. The challenge in any analysis of policy and practice is to understand how these ideas are being used and how they relate to what is done by understanding the situation, the tensions, and the dilemmas that actors face, and by understanding how they then seek to balance concerns, commitments, and interests in their responses. People often act in far from ideal ways but that does not mean their actions do not also reflect ethical concerns.

In the first sections of this paper, I argued that an ethical analysis of the moral economy of practice helps us to understand the uses of discretion in a more nuanced way, and to see discretionary practices as practical evaluations of and responses to the policy context, and as a source of situated principles to examine professional discretion in action. In the second part of the paper, I drew on these ideas to illustrate how a research study can illuminate front-line workers' ethical evaluation of their work environment, the role they have within that setting and their deployment of discretion in response to the issues that concern them. This illustration has been limited by the data – if the original study had been designed as an ethical evaluation it could also have focused on the way practice on the front line conformed to the standards and commitments professed by the practitioners in their critiques of the environment of service.

Discretion affects the translation of policy through practice into a service for citizens; and here the perspectives of policymakers and citizens on the use of discretion are clearly important. However, in looking at discretion from the perspective of front-line professional staff I have sought to recognise that their views are also important and can reflect serious ethical analysis. Convenience and self-interest can play a part in how front-line staff choose to use discretion, but to understand the extent and impact of these motives we also need to understand (and not exclude) the possibility that discretion can also be influenced by ethical commitments and valid critique of policy. Ethical analysis of the moral economy of discretion, where discretion is not assumed to be necessarily good or bad, offers critical insights into policy, challenges in implementation, and service at the front-line.

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THE MORAL ECONOMY OF STREET-LEVEL POLICY WORK

Summary

The discretion exercised by frontline workers can have a significant effect on the implementation of public policy and service provision. The deployment of discretion tends to be characterised as self-serving. However, while people often act in far from ideal ways, this does not mean that their actions do not also reflect ethical concerns. In the first section of this paper, I argue that an ethical analysis of the moral economy of practice helps us to see discretionary practices as practical evaluations of and responses to the policy context, and as a source of situated principles to examine professional discretion in action. In the second part of the paper, I draw on these ideas to illustrate how a research study can illuminate front-line workers' ethical evaluation of their work environment, the role they have within that setting, and their deployment of discretion in response to the issues that concern them. Discretion affects the translation of policy through practice into a service for citizens. Here the perspectives of policymakers and citizens on the use of discretion are clearly important. However, in looking at discretion from the perspective of front-line professional staff, I have sought to recognise that their views are also important and can reflect serious ethical analysis. Convenience and self-interest can play a part in how front-line staff choose to use discretion, but to understand the extent and impact of these motives we also need to understand (and not exclude) the possibility that discretion can also be influenced by ethical commitments and valid critique of policy. Ethical analysis of the moral economy of discretion, where discretion is not assumed to be necessarily good or bad, offers critical insights into policy, challenges in implementation, and service at the front line.

Key words: discretion, moral economy, policy implementation, professionals, street-level bureaucracy

ETIČKA DIMENZIJA PROVEDBE JAVNIH POLITIKA NA RAZINI NAJBЛИŽOJ GRAĐANIMA

Sažetak

Prostor slobodnog odlučivanja kojeg imaju službenici koji su u neposrednom dodiru s građanima može imati nezanemarivi učinak na provedbu javnih politika i pružanje javnih usluga. Korištenje te mogućnosti često se doživljava kao izraz sebičnih interesa samih službenika. No, premda ljudi često rade na način koji je daleko od idealnog, to ne znači da njihovi postupci ne odražavaju i etičke dileme. U prvom dijelu rada argumentira se da analiza etičke dimenzije slobodnog odlučivanja do kojeg dolazi u praksi pomaže da se slobodno odlučivanje sagleda kao praktična procjena i odgovor na kontekst provedbe javnih politika te kao izvor ustaljenih načela za analizu slobodnog odlučivanja službenika u stvarnim okolnostima. U drugom dijelu rada te se ideje koriste da bi se pokazalo kako istraživački rad može službenicima koji su u neposrednom dodiru s građanima dati osnovu za etičku procjenu radne okoline, njihove uloge u toj okolini i njihovog odlučivanja o načinu rada rukovođenog relevantnim okolnostima. Takvo odlučivanje zapravo određuje način na koji će se njihovo razumijevanje javnih politika u praksi pretočiti u konkretne usluge za građane. U tom su kontekstu važni načini razumijevanja službeničkog slobodnog radnog odlučivanja od strane aktera koji oblikuju javne politike te od strane građana. No, namjera rada bila je pokazati da su važna i stajališta samih tih službenika, koja mogu odražavati njihove ozbiljne etičke analize. Pogodovanje svojim sebičnim interesima može djelomično opredijeliti način na koji će službenici koji su u neposrednom dodiru s građanima koristiti prostor slobodnog odlučivanja, ali da bi se razumjelo dosege i učinke tih motiva potrebno je razumjeti, a ne isključiti mogućnost da njihovi konkretni načini rada budu uvjetovani njihovim etičkim vrijednostima i opravdanom kritikom javnih politika koje provode. Etička analiza prostora slobodnog odlučivanja u kojoj takvo odlučivanje nije unaprijed proglašeno dobrim ili lošim omogućuje iznimno važne uvide u javne politike, izazove njihove provedbe i neposrednog pružanja usluga građanima.

Ključne riječi: slobodno odlučivanje, sustav vrijednosti, provedba javnih politika, profesionalci, provedbeni dio javne uprave