



Transcript for “Bureaucrats at the Front Lines of Government Service: Born or Made?”

Featuring Zachary Oberfield

Hosted by David Chancellor

In this podcast, Zachary Oberfield of the Haverford College Department of Political Science discusses his research on how “street-level bureaucrats” develop in their first years on the job, and what that means for how they act and how the public experiences government.

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[Chancellor] Hello, you’re listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I’m Dave Chancellor.

For this, our March 2015 podcast, I talked to Zachary Oberfield, an assistant professor of political science at Haverford College and, we’re happy to add, a former IRP graduate research fellow who got his PhD at UW-Madison. Oberfield came back to visit IRP at the end of January this year and gave a talk on his new book, *Becoming Bureaucrats: Socialization at the Front Lines of Government Service*, which examines how public servants develop, and what that means for how they act and how the public experiences government. When I sat down with Professor Oberfield during his visit, I first asked him to explain the premise behind this book.

[Oberfield] So the basic idea is that at the front lines of government, where people interact with the state, there is a really important role played by the bureaucrats, the people who fill those state agencies, from police officers to teachers to welfare caseworkers, all down the line. The term is “street-level bureaucrats”. And they’re important because they have discretion and that they can do things, like if you could pulled over by police they get to, to some extent within their purview, decide whether you get a ticket or not. Teachers have a wide amount of autonomy in the class, yet, sort of from the democratic theory perspective, they’re supposed to be accountable to the public, but there’s no real way to maintain that accountability and there’s a famous book called *Street-Level Bureaucracy* and, basically, it’s a book that makes this general point that these are really important people and that they’re always going to have some discretion and have this power. They’re also important because they’re the face of the state. Most of us don’t have, often,

these interactions with congresspeople, elected officials, even if Americans vote or not. So they play an important sort of symbolic role in the state and so, anyways, my book is asking how they become who they become.

[Chancellor] Oberfield says that a key point here -- and one that Michael Lipsky makes in *Street Level Bureaucracy* -- is that these public servants play an important role in all of our lives, but that role is even more profound in the lives of the poor.

[Oberfield] In part that's because, if you don't have means, you don't have the power to challenge a decision that's made. Whereas a person with a higher income might be able to say "I don't agree with that" or "I'm going to challenge that in court." And if there are fewer means, there's a greater likelihood of not being able to fight the decision. The second reason I think they're important for low income people is because it also offers an access point to government in a way that permits them to advocate on their own behalf. Whereas if you think about the definition of politics as who gets what, where, when, and how, they play a really important political role in determining whether you get that welfare check, whether you get that child care subsidy. In the big picture of the budget, that's a really small expenditure. In the life of a person, that could have a massive effect on a whole family, the well-being of a family. I think that there's a particularly important influence that they play on the lives of low income people.

[Chancellor] The two main groups that Oberfield looks at in his book are welfare caseworkers and police officers. He says that in some ways, police officers and caseworkers are good case studies because they have a fair amount of discretion and they're typical of street-level bureaucrats in other ways.

[Oberfield] They're able to make decisions on the job even though they're also following a lot of regulations. In fact, one of the arguments about discretion is that the more regulations you get, the more discretion you get because it gets harder and harder to follow each rule that comes down the line. It ends up having this counterintuitive effect. And, they're prominent, just like the way that Lipsky says that they are, visible entities of the state. And I guess there's one other way of thinking about this, there's a sociologist, Bourdieu who has a theory that there's the right hand and left hand of the state, the one hand is sort of provides aid and assistance and comfort and the other hand is sort of punitive and requires rigorous watching, what you might associate with police. I think these two cases sort of offer both hands of the state and in some sense kind of gives us a full picture in terms of comparing them, that would be interesting, I thought, to see how they developed. Very different professions -- to what extent do they develop similarly and how do they not?

[Chancellor] As we think about the processes that take place when people enter bureaucratic organizations, Professor Oberfield says that there are two main narratives about how bureaucrats develop their professional identities and behaviors.

[Oberfield] The first one I refer to as ‘the dispositional perspective’ is the idea that who people are before they enter an organization is likely to affect how they act in the organization. The example that I often think about in this regard is whenever there’s a case of atrocities, military atrocities, you think about Abu Ghraib prison scandal, one of the first responses from the Bush Administration at the time that happened was that these are just a few bad apples, these are just a couple of bad actors who obviously came into the military with some sort of negative perspective on how to use their authority. And that’s the reason they did what they did, their disposition. The second narrative is what I refer to as institutional perspective is that people’s roles in how behavior is socially constructed and we’re affected by the places that we enter. I think that perspective has a lot more purchase in academia, where there’s sort of a tendency to think that existing organizational norms, things like that, processes, structures, influence the way people think about their work and how they act.

[Chancellor] Both of these narratives seem plausible, so Oberfield set about doing some empirical work to sort these stories out. He began his research by surveying and interviewing police officers and welfare caseworkers in a large East Coast city. The survey asked questions about their motivations, their attitudes about their work and the people they serve, and about their professional identities.

[Oberfield] And the idea was to get them as close to the beginning of their time in their organizations as possible - so Day 1 if possible. I administered surveys to get that ‘fresh eyes, time 1’ perspective and then to chart them using surveys as administered to the entire population of entrants at a few different times to chart them to see how they changed from that baseline response. So surveys were a big part. The second part was -- survey data, you can quantify it, that’s great, but it also doesn’t really explain what people were thinking so I selected a sample within the population of entering groups to have interviews with throughout the course of their development at three times, to say, “ok, you indicate that you think the rules are important to follow, what does that mean? Can you give me a situation and how does that make sense, and then track that.

[Chancellor] The third way that Oberfield used to study these bureaucrats was actually to become one himself. He trained to become a welfare caseworker and did the job for a year so he got to experience the role and get a better sense of how these workers develop.

Oberfield then used the information he gathered through the survey data, the interviews, and his own experience as caseworker to analyze three main questions and see whether the answers to

them changed over time. First, he asked what were the motivations of these bureaucrats and how did they see themselves as agents of the state? Second, what were their attitudes, especially about social ills like criminality, poverty, and racism? And third, how did they see themselves from an identity standpoint as an agent of the state?

[Oberfield] And so I tracked those three things and I guess the easiest way to capture the findings is that, as you would expect, there was some change in each of those three areas. There were some differences between the groups, but at the broad level, both groups changed a little bit, usually in a pretty uniform direction from the time of entry until the end of the two-year period. At the same time, it's complicated because the change was not particularly impressive. Like I said earlier, I think the traditional sort of approach is that when you enter an organization, it's a time of amazing surprise and you have to kind of wrap your head around how do you make sense of this environment that I'm in and who am I going to be in this environment? And there wasn't radical change and some of my most compelling findings were that people largely remained connected to the entering views that they had when they came in to the organization about who they should be. A rule follower on day 1 was likely to be more of a rule follower at the end of two years even though they may have shifted in terms of how they see themselves vis a vis the rules. The sort of term I use is differential continuity -- everyone shifted a little bit, but if you think of a normal curve, people tended to shift in a particular direction as a group, but everyone also stayed very much anchored to where they were when they started. I think the traditional sort of notion is that, especially the police, sort of remake... the literature suggests that it's this time of 'we take modeling clay and make police officers out of them'. And going back to the mid-20th century, organizational theorists who sort of have these - almost apocalyptic notions of what it means to be an organization man and how it changes people, oftentimes in negative ways. And I didn't find any evidence of this radical change that you often hear about in the literature so that was very interesting to me.

[Chancellor] After hearing that there wasn't really dramatic change in the perceptions and identities of these public servants two years after they started their jobs, you might wonder how much consistency there is in the attitudes that people enter these bureaucracies with. So perhaps the story is that particular types of people become police officers or caseworkers.

[Oberfield] So that's part of this sort of larger point that the people who are drawn to that particular kind of work -- they're not oblivious about what the organization is all about. People don't just get randomly assigned to an organization. They choose it. In that sense, the notion of an entry or a time 1 point is almost a myth and that's one of the things I came away from it with, is that there are these deeper social connections between people and organizations that go outside the walls of the organization itself, i.e., through familial contexts, through friendships, through personal experiences. For the police, it was oftentimes familial -- my uncle, ever since I was little said I had a police-like demeanor. They said that I was suspicious of people and that would serve

me well as a police officer. For welfare caseworkers, it was largely the experience with welfare was one of claiming. Many of the women that I worked with, some had gone directly from claiming welfare to working in the welfare office. And so, like I said, there wasn't this amazing surprise and there was a real, 'I understand what this job is about, I understand what it means to be in this role, and the amount of flexibility I have.' It wasn't perfect information and I think to me that's the sort of nuanced way of understanding how this process works now -- for me at least as I see it now, there is some.... most of the perspective is already embedded in the person in some way before they enter.

[Chancellor] As we're thinking about bureaucracies, one question that's really been highlighted in the last several months with the events in Ferguson, and New York, and across the country, is how much it matters if the people in a bureaucracy -- specifically a police department -- look like the people in the communities they serve? So, does making the police more representative make a difference in how they go about their jobs or in how people in the community perceive them?

[Oberfield] I think there's a fair amount that suggests that there would be differences. Now, part of this is outside the purview of my book, but there's evidence from representative bureaucracy literature that looks at the relationship between how much a group of bureaucrats looks like the people they serve. It suggests they have a variety of material and symbolic effects on the people who interact with them, making them more confident in a decision, for instance, a minority driver being pulled over by a minority police officer -- there's a much different perception in terms of the fairness of that interaction than being pulled over by a white police officer. On the other side of that, if organizations are these sort of totalizing institutions that mold people, what's the purpose of hiring a diverse array of people if they're just going to be molded into the sort of generic macho baton wielding cop? And I think my research and variety of other studies suggest people do retain some connection to their identities, what you might think of as their external identities. And some of the findings from my research, how they think about the use of force. Minority officers and white officers had different views about how effective force would be in doing the job of the police, and those beliefs persisted, those differences persisted, similar to what I was just saying about how general beliefs persisted, those persisted. To me, that's quite compelling for making police departments more representative. Now, what that means in practice is, obviously, the devil's in the details... I published this piece in the Washington Post and you never want to read the comments too closely, but one of the comments was "oh, so we're just supposed to fire all the white cops and hire minorities?" That's obviously not what I'm suggesting, but I'm suggesting that the recruitment moving forward needs to be done in a way that really makes diversity in hiring an important priority.

[Chancellor] When we consider both the representativeness and the attitudes of public servants, Oberfield says it's important to understand the kind of role that these street level bureaucrats play in sending messages to the public, and especially to low-income people.

[Oberfield] And I think the literature suggests that they play a pretty important role. And I think if that's true, then I think it is incumbent upon policy makers and academics to recognize that this isn't sort of a vending machine approach to government. You don't just put in money and make a selection and it comes out. You really want to know the nuts and bolts of who the people are that you're bringing in to an organization and how they're going to continue or change the culture inside an organization and how that might affect the people who are going to have interactions with the organization. Oftentimes, organizations say "we need new blood", and what that means, I think, is people who didn't used to work here that now work here. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they'll have different perspectives. In fact, part of what comes out of my research is the sort of understanding that if you don't make a radical change in where you get the people who work in the organization, you're likely to get people who share the thinking of the people who are already inside and, to that extent, I think that's something that policymakers and people who are already thinking about bureaucratic change writ large, is something they would want to consider.

[Chancellor] Thanks to Zachary Oberfield for talking about his research and his new book with us. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.