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Bringing the Theory of Street-Level Bureaucrats into the 21st Century: A Study of Social Workers in Louisiana

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Bringing the Theory of Street-Level Bureaucrats into the Twenty-First Century: A Study of Social Workers in Louisiana

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Dedication

To Keeleigh Beverly and Keevin Jr.,

Always know that you can achieve all that you desire.

Acknowledgement

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Abstract

This study examines the applicability of Michael Lipsky's (1980) concept of "street-level bureaucracy" to the profession of social work in 2019. Street-level bureaucrats are public service workers "who interact with citizens in the regular course of their jobs; have significant independence in decision making, and potentially have extensive impact on the lives of their citizens" (Lipsky, 1980:3). They are faced with uncertainties in their work related to inadequate resources, unclear policies, and caseloads/workloads that defy what may be possible to achieve by any one worker. Workers develop routines and "coping mechanisms," to manage their environments. The routines that they develop then become effective public policy for their clients.

The street-level bureaucracy theory has been widely applied, but generally with the assumption that street-level bureaucrats are homogenous across occupations and settings. Recent research suggests the need for more nuanced approaches, especially with regard to the effects of professionalism, individual characteristics of workers, and the variety of circumstances in which they interact with clients. Yet most research utilizes small numbers of cases, making it difficult to measure differences among types of workers. The present study addresses that gap with a large survey of social workers in Louisiana. Findings show that these street-level bureaucrats do exercise discretion, but circumstances in which they do so vary significantly, even within a single profession. Further, ways in which they exercise discretion differ from those described by Lipsky. Instead of using coping mechanisms to buffer themselves from an otherwise overwhelming environment, the respondents in this study report consultation with peers and management to find ways to serve client needs. These findings have implications for both the study of street-level bureaucracy and the practice of social work.

Keywords:Discretion, decision-making, street-level bureaucracy, social work, coping mechanism

Preface

As I approach my late 30s, I reflect on my life and upbringing, including all the decisions that have led me to exactly where I am today. I often say that my life has come full circle, and because of this journey, I am grateful. I was born in the great city of New Orleans, Louisiana, with service to others as a cornerstone of my life. Some of my earliest memories are of my mom preparing food that we would bring to the parking lot at St. Joseph Church's to serve anyone hungry. I can still remember the kind regard that my mom had for all those who came to eat. I accompanied my mom more on her mission as time progressed. I found that my love for service to others grew. At one point, my mom explained to me that she once "wore the same shoes" of many of those we served. I knew that service and social justice would forever be part of my life. After receiving my bachelor's degree from the University of New Orleans, I entered the Tulane University School of Social Work. I wanted to be like my mom, who had devoted her life to serving residents of New Orleans. I chugged through the program. It was far from the perception that some have of social work programs that it is unchallenging. I had to do self-work and reflection which was, in my opinion, just as tough as any physics course I had taken in undergrad.

Right before the start of my final semester at Tulane School of Social Work, the city of New Orleans had to be evacuated. We had evacuated several times before and returned in a few days to find the city and our homes in perfect condition. There was no reason for me nor my family to think that this wouldn't be the case for the current evacuation mandate. We packed minimally. My mom was washing clothes, and my dad was about to recreate the hot sausage sandwich from Gene's Po-Boy Shop at the edge of the Quarters. I must admit that I started to lose it with their relaxed attitudes. Although we didn't think this storm would be unlike the

others, I knew contraflow had begun and places that would usually take an hour to drive to will now take about five hours. We needed to leave ASAP! I packed enough food and water for the entire family, including Egg (my pup), that would last until we reached my maternal grandmother's home in Carriere, Mississippi. I had not been there since she passed away in March of that year. I never wanted to go back there because I knew she wasn't there. We went. I was depressed upon arrival, but by the time we left, I felt acceptance and hope for which now I believe carried me through this journey.

Since the hurricane had ravaged the southern part of Mississippi, we had to evacuate from there. Our next stop would be in Los Angeles County. Upon arrival, we had nothing but our car, which was repaired in Texas by kind strangers, and all that was in it. We were exhausted and broken, physically, and mentally. My dad had relatives in the area, so initially, we had somewhere to stay and food to eat. However, upon arrival at his relative's home, we were greeted outside with disdain by a man that looked somewhat familiar.

Nonetheless, we proceeded to enter the home. It was filled with people I had never met. They were all looking at us as if waiting for something to happen. We were on display. We were the entertainment. We were all disheveled from our travels, and it had been a few days since we had clean clothes. I can remember the woman of the house saying, "New Orleans is no more. You don't have a home." She turned on the television with live coverage of the devastation and beckoned for me to watch too. I could not watch it because I wasn't ready. I begged my dad to find us housing elsewhere. But where? My mom was in contact with a Vincentian, who was also a social worker, in Los Angeles who had suggested a hotel that St. Vincent De Paul Society would pay for. We were blessed to have that connection to people willing and able to help. This Vincentian was a Los Angeles social worker. She paid for our hotel and bought our groceries.

What prompted this woman to use her own money to pay for housing for people she had never met? How did she decide to use her resources on us rather than on residents of her city? I thanked her for her generosity and will forever be grateful.

Some days went by before parents began to ask me about finishing school. After all, I had one semester remaining until I could earn a Master of Social Work degree. I told them with great conviction and excitement that I wasn't going back to school. Instead, I wanted to work at Rite-Aid, near the hotel we lived at to make money for the family. My parents seemingly agreed. After all, at that time, I had just turned 24. I was a grown-up. The very next day, the entire family (and Egg) drove around Los Angeles to find work, so I thought. This city was different than New Orleans. There were bicycle riders in the street, cops on bikes, and that "button" walkers press when wanting to cross the road. I even passed right in front of the Shriners Auditorium. Well, directly across the street from Shriners, there was this large university. It was the University of Southern California! My parents stopped in front of the school. They told me in a very calm tone, "Go register for school and call us when you are done." I got out of the car. I called their bluff! But then, they drove off. They left me there. I could not believe it. Who does that? I was angry and scared. My family was broke. We had exactly -$200 in the bank. We didn't have either clean clothes or food neither know where we would live nor sleep. I wanted to work so that we could eat.

I was in disbelief after being "abandoned" at this "mini-city" called So Cal. I somehow found my way to the registrar of students. By that time, my face was dripping wet. I'm not too sure if it was sweat or tears. Someone one in the office said, "Let's get something to eat and drink first. Then we will come back to get you registered." I was so appreciative. I had not eaten since the day before. I figured that if I missed a few meals, then someone in my family could get

full. After all, when someone lets you eat first, then you know you are loved. I loved my family. They ate first. Perhaps I loved them more than I loved myself. Once registration was completed, I was then brought to the bookstore to purchase all my school supplies and books. I had even been offered student housing; however, I couldn't leave my family and Egg behind in the hotel, so I declined. It was the first time in my life that people were so giving and kind to me, but then again, I had never been homeless and hungry before either.

The university was massive. I badly wanted to be invisible. I was not stable enough to hold a conversation about anything. If someone talked to me, I knew I would cry. One class that I had enrolled in was to learn how to write grant proposals. The first day of class was horrifying. My professor introduced me to the entire class as I sat with my head down. He then said, "Do you have anything to say?" I responded, my head still down, and at this point, I was in tears, "I don't know what you want me to say. We flooded. I'm homeless. And yes, I think race had a lot to do with it". It was pure emotion. I was broken, and now my new classmates knew too.
The hurricanes in 2005 changed my life in significant ways. It changed how I viewed myself, my family, and friends, and it also changed my view of social work. My time on the receiving end of social services and the kindness of strangers sparked my interest in better ways to serve those in need. The first thing that I learned was that when someone in need is at their lowest, the last thing they need is to be put on display. Those that give from the kindness of their hearts do so quietly. It does not need to be part of a theatrical performance. In my line of work, I keep that in mind.

The second lesson I learned is that there are so many decisions made to assist those in need. The people I met along this journey have shaped the type of research I seek and find appealing. The very first encounter I had with a "street-level bureaucrat," as Lipsky categorizes

social workers, made the decision to bypass the paperwork of her organization and provide support out of her own pocket. For some reason or another, she had decided that we were worthy of immediate relief from her. Our needs would not have been met had she chosen to follow her organizational policies regarding eligibility to receive services. The first criteria were to be an individual living and residing in Los Angeles county. We didn't even have an address. I will never be privy to the answers to the many questions I have regarding this social worker's decision making. I will never know if there were discussions with peers or managers on how to handle the situation; or if the decision to help was an autonomous choice on her part. Knowing how social workers choose to help (or not) individuals with situations unique to the type of services provided through their jobs is invaluable. I need to know. In my research, I have chosen to dig deeper into the work of social workers. It takes a special kind of person to be a social worker. Not everyone can do it.

Bringing the Theory of Street-Level Bureaucrats into the Twenty-First Century: A Study of Social Workers in Louisiana

There has been increasing awareness of the role complexity of public service workers in the "corrupted world of service" (Lipsky 1980: xiii). Michael Lipsky (1980) stated that "public service workers currently occupy a critical position in American society" (3). They have discretion regarding the "nature, amount, and quality of benefits and sanctions provided by agencies" (Lipsky 1980:13). The street-level bureaucrat (SLB) theory states that public service workers who come face to face with clients or constituents make decisions on how services are delivered and develop routines that reduce some of the conflicts and stresses in their jobs. These routines become public policy for the affected population. Lipsky asserts that social workers, police officers, and teachers are street-level bureaucrats due to the discretion they have on the job.

Lipsky describes this phenomenon in very broad terms without specific details and attention to individual or professional variations. There is little doubt that social workers, police, teachers, and many other public servants do exercise discretion, but the assumption that SLB theory applies in the same way to such diverse groups ignores many potential differences in the nature of worker-citizen interactions. My strategy for this study is to narrow the focus to a single profession, social work, and a single state, Louisiana. This approach allows a more in-depth consideration of the circumstances in which the theory is applied and creates the potential to discover relevant variables that are missed at a higher level of abstraction. For example, Lipsky focuses on individual decisions by street-level bureaucrats interacting with citizens. My experience as a social worker, however, is that decision making is often collaborative. If that experience is widely shared among social workers, then it suggests an elaboration of SLB theory.

Mapping SLB theory onto a particular profession requires considerable information about that profession. For this reason, I have separated the literature review into two chapters, one on SLB theory and one on social work.

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter I, presents SLB theory and Chapter II presents recent research dealing with it. Chapter III describes the diverse jobs of social workers and summarizes relevant literature on that profession. Chapter IV presents the method used in this research. It was a survey of licensed social workers in Louisiana. This approach differs from most studies on SLB theory that rely on case studies. The choice of a survey brought certain disadvantages, as will be discussed, but it brought the advantage of a larger number of cases, allowing statistical analysis. The questions fall into three categories:

- To what extent do conditions of SLB theory fit the experience of social workers in Louisiana?
- Do social workers perceive that they have discretion, and if so, how do they use it?
- Do the experiences and perceptions of respondents vary significantly by subgroups based on background and work setting?

The analysis is presented in Chapter V. It is largely descriptive, as are most of the studies in this field, painting a picture of how SLB theory fits social work in Louisiana. Analysis of the last category of questions shows that there are significant differences across subgroups of social workers. Chapter VI summarizes the findings and sets forth implications for research and practice.

Chapter I: Street Level Bureaucracy

According to Lipsky's theory (1980:3), "most citizens encounter government (if they do at all) not through letters to congressmen or by attendance at school board meetings but through their teachers and their children's teachers and the policeman on the corner or in a patrol car. Each encounter of this kind represents an instance of policy delivery". Street-level bureaucrats are the most visible representatives of their profession to citizens or participants of social programs (Weatherly & Lipsky, 1977). Lipsky (1980) categorized the role of street-level bureaucrats as having autonomy in organizational authority.

This autonomy provides them with the power to shape policy outcomes and the lives of people they serve (Lipsky, 1980; Barnard, 2014; Alden, 2015). Lipsky went on further to state that street-level bureaucrats mediate aspects of their constitutional relationship of citizens to the country. They process citizens into clients, so, in essence, they hold the key to this dimension of citizenship. The SLB theory takes in to account the day-to-day difficulties of frontline work within street-level bureaucracies. These difficulties can cause workers to struggle with performing their jobs and providing services to the targeted populations. The theory states that public service workers encounter ambiguous organizational procedures, physical or psychological threats, and lack of adequate resources to implement public policies. Lipsky hypothesized that these working conditions caused workers to develop coping mechanisms to help them manage. Such mechanisms have been found to include limiting service information, extending wait times, and “creaming” cases. He called these workers street-level bureaucrats. Street-level bureaucrats, according to Lipsky, are public employees with discretion and autonomy from organizational authority. They are regarded as the gatekeepers to social service delivery and will be examined further in this study.

According to Lipsky the "decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out" (1980:3). Street-level bureaucrats encounter dilemmas when the policies to be implemented are conflicting and ambiguous, and when resources are limited. The pressures involved with the increasing demand for resources with limited supply and conflicting goals force street-level bureaucrats to manipulate their work and thus the concept of their job roles. The pressures have created a fear of discretion because it seemingly thwarts policies from being delivered as written.

Resources

The demand for services increases work-related responsibilities of street-level bureaucrats who, according to theory, are unable to meet the needs of their clients. Inadequate resources can come in the form of insufficient personnel and budgets but also inadequate training and inexperience of the bureaucrat on the tasks requested to complete and lack of support. Because clients do not directly pay for services, the cost of services does not limit demand, as it is expected to do in the private economy. Lipsky finds that the demand for services increases as more resources are made available. Unable to satisfy all demands with their limited resources, SLBs have to make choices. In this way, resource limitations can lead to the exercise of discretion.

Ambiguous, Contradictory, and Unattainable Policy Expectations.

Street-level bureaucrats are accountable for various relationships, including those from the top-down, the bottom-up, and "sideways" (Hupe & Hill, 2007:17). From a political standpoint, street-level bureaucrats are expected to perform tasks with specified outputs. The

bureaucracies must provide SLBs with resources to produce those outputs. Clients want street-level bureaucrats to take in to account their individual/unique situations; and from a professional standpoint, SLBs are required to follow ethical principles (Hupe & Hill, 2007). The decision making involved is seemingly multi-faceted (Meyers & Vorsanger, 2003:245). The multiple accountabilities guide and restrict the decision making of SLBs (Hupe & Hill, 2007). At times, numerous responsibilities result in role confusion and unclear performance measures. These conditions trigger coping mechanisms (Golden & Wiens-Tuers, 2005; Nielson, 2006) that are said to lead to the use of discretion on the frontlines (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2003). These challenges shape street-level bureaucrat behaviors. Street-level bureaucrats have discretion because “the nature of service provision calls for human judgment that cannot be programmed and for which machines cannot substitute" (Lipsky 1980: 161). The street-level bureaucracy theory tends to de-villainize public service workers, who are often seen as at fault when policy goals are thwarted. It emphasizes that street-level bureaucrats modify their job descriptions to join objectives with available resources and change how they define their clients to bridge the gap between goals and accomplishments made (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2012; 2003; Hill & Hupe, 2009; Lipsky, 1980; Bartels, 2013).

The frontlines of policy implementation are often plagued with the unavailability of resources, psychological threats, and unclear goals (Lipsky, 1980). This type of job-related stress can trigger coping mechanisms. Street-level bureaucrats employ coping mechanisms that lead to decisions being made to make their jobs more manageable and less psychologically taxing. The coping behaviors are those that can often limit time and policy requirements and are most apparent when there is high role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of resources, high caseloads and

when there is a discrepancy with perceptions of the workplace demands and perceived ability to cope (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt & Wang, 1995; Fisher, 1986).

Chapter II: Empirical Studies of Street-Level Bureaucracy.

A number of studies have utilized SLB theory as a basis for research. Most of the research involves a relatively small number of street-level bureaucrats whom the studies treat as an homogeneous category. The studies typically note how the workers utilize policy "shortcomings" to make decisions based on self-interest rather than that of the client or agency. The studies seem to corroborate that our knowledge of policy-to-action relationships lacks information regarding the applicability of the street-level bureaucracy theory to specific occupational groups and how their training, experience, and work settings contribute to decision making. Although attempts have been made, few studies have analyzed the theory's significance empirically. The goal of this literature review is to examine previous studies that are based primarily, or in part, on the street-level bureaucrat theory. Studies were chosen based upon their relevance to the current research, design, participants, and year of publication.

Using a case study as the preferred method of inquiry into the street-level bureaucracy theory, Tony Evans (2011) examined the profession of social work in England. The focus of the study was to determine if professional status was a significant factor in the way discretion was managed and whether the resources available were abundant. The study used interviews, observations, and documentary research to gather data from participants. The participants (n=15) were all qualified social workers.

Five out of the 15 social workers were social work managers. Evans (2011) found that the social work managers "developed detailed and extensive procedural manuals to manage the rationing of resources (eligibility criteria) and forms to record information for performance indicators" (376). The ten social work practitioners thought of the manual as being an abstract, occasionally relevant, book of policy directions that had to be interpreted and made practical by consulting with peers and managers alike. The social workers' attempts to make the manual functional resulted in autonomous decisions being made that reflected their commitments to the profession (Evans, 2011). Evan's study demonstrated that the street-level bureaucracy theory had potentially excluded an essential aspect of frontline work by introducing the idea of "shared professional commitments" (Evans, 2011:377).

As stated by the street-level bureaucracy theory, policies to be implemented by social workers are often vague and do not usually include alternative ways to act should the policy not fit the client's needs exactly. Evans' research indicates that when this occurs, social workers often find it necessary to consult with peers and refer clients to outside resources when their clients' needs are beyond the social workers' scope of practice. The shared commitments of the social workers in Evans (2011) study outweighed the dissimilarities and commitments between managers and workers, as noted in the street level bureaucracy theory.

Evans' (2011) findings that social workers have shared commitments to clients is demonstrated throughout the literature regarding social work practitioners. Decision making is thought to be a multifaceted and important activity for professionals; however, it has been somewhat overlooked as a focus of decision making in social work practice (O'Sullivan, 1999). Evans (2011), contends that discretion and policy implementation happen at all levels of an organization, especially between professionals within the same occupation, not just on the front

line. This emphasis on professionalism elaborates a point that Lipsky (1980) made but did not develop.

Like Evan's (2010:18) finding that decisions are more the result of a "complex multi-layered and multi-actor process than the result of one group of workers," Scourfield (2015) also found that the unanticipated policy outcomes that Lipsky ascribes to street-level bureaucrats are not theirs independently. Scourfield (2015) conducted a case study on the implementation of home care placement policies for the elderly by a small group of care managers. The decision-making regarding home care placements was disbursed among multiple state and non-state stakeholders. The "micro-power relationships observed in reviews were multidirectional, complex, and contingent" (928). Care managers were central in how reviews were conducted; however, "their discretionary power to shape a review or to set action points could be effectively challenged or curtailed by other review participants such as care home managers or relatives" (928). Home care placement decisions were based on the collaboration of multiple players.

Evans (2014) analyzed the street-level bureaucrat discretion of social workers in a government-funded program. The goal was to examine responses to dilemmas and tensions based on "professional commitments and values in policy implementation, and service delivery" (381). Particularly, Evans' interest was in "moral economies of practice." He argues that professionals' claim to discretion comes, not only from their expertise but also from a commitment to certain values and standards of behavior that are shared within a professional community. The idea is that professional morality is "acknowledged by professionals who are serious about moral responsibilities" (382). The moral economies of practice are a contrast between managerialism and professionalism when there are budgetary concerns. Managerialism is seen as a means of organizing workers' self-interest (through rewards and punishment) in

production, while professionalism is characterized by an occupational groups' service to others and their wellbeing, despite economic priorities. Evans (2014) found that certain factors decreased professional freedom, however. The factors include detailed policy directions, assertive management, and cuts in resources. Although these factors decreased professional freedom, they did not eliminate discretion. The discretion exhibited was a reflection of organizational expectations in which professional staff "should have a degree of freedom to exercise their judgment" (389). Although social workers are limited by what they can offer, they do acknowledge that they are agents of social control (Evans, 2014). They can advocate on behalf of clients, empower clients to advocate for themselves, and/or provide the services needed by clients.

Some theorists have predicted that managerial oversight and stronger policy regulation have led to a reduction in professional autonomy. Theorists such as Lipsky, however, find that discretion continues despite oversight and policy regulation. Jessen and Per (2014) examined, not only Lipsky's notion of the inevitability of discretion, but also the curtailment hypothesized by others. The study utilized Norwegian public welfare workers (some were trained social workers while others were officers with other types of educational backgrounds) in 435 Norwegian municipalities. It was conducted in 2004 and 2011 to study changes in the direction of reported discretion. The 2004 data was from a postal questionnaire with 1,146 respondents. The 2011 data was obtained from online surveys with 1,758 respondents.

Jessen and Per (2014) believe that Lipsky only tells part of the story regarding discretion because professionals, like social workers, are required to "develop workable policy in practice" (273). The study found that discretion continues despite managerial oversight and policy reformation, which is in line with the street-level bureaucracy theory (283). The study showed

that there was an increase in discretion over time with that of trained social workers being higher than other occupations (283). This will be further discussed in the results section of my study.

Street-level bureaucrats, according to Lipsky, are paramount in policy implementation. They not only implement public policies but also interpret the policies. It is this policy interpretation that provides them with significant independence in determining service eligibility and courses of action or inaction (Lipsky, 1980:272). Discretionary flexibility is further necessitated by the need for workers to provide individualized treatment to each client. As mentioned previously in this chapter stress on the job is more apparent when there is high role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of resources and high caseload (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt & Wang, 1995). There has been extensive field research that highlights organizational processes and structures that create an environment conducive to discretion, that at times conflict with policy agendas (e.g., Brodkin, 1997; Meyers, et al. 1998; Winter & May, 2001; Riccucci, 2005). The conditions on the frontlines, according to Lipsky (1980), are plagued with the unavailability of resources, physical and psychological threats, and unclear goals. A dilemma occurs on the street level of service delivery when the policies to be implemented are conflicting and ambiguous, and when resources are limited (Lipsky, 1980). These conditions trigger workers to employ coping mechanisms (Golden & Wien-Tuers, 2005; Nielson, 2006). Lipsky regarded coping mechanisms as a way for human service professionals to deal with challenges of bureaucracy and to make their jobs more manageable on the front line (Lipsky, 1980: 82). The coping mechanisms of street-level bureaucrats are behaviors that limit time and policy requirements.

Coping mechanisms are most evident when there is a discrepancy with perceptions of workplace demands and perceived ability to cope (Fisher, 1986). They are a means of survival on the frontlines of social service delivery. Coping mechanisms help frontline workers deal with

work-related stress, such as role conflict/ ambiguity, scarce resources, and high caseloads. Lipsky acknowledged the perpetuity of these coping mechanisms:

> People do not readily give up survival mechanisms. This is one reason it is easier to change articulated policy from the top than to change practice from below. The policy articulated from the top is not rooted in defense mechanisms developed to cope with the job, while the policy that emerges from practice is rooted in survival (1980:187).

To demonstrate the relevance of Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy theory regarding coping mechanisms utilized during policy implementation Soren Winter (1997) completed a study in which he found that coping mechanisms developed as a response to feeling that their resources are not enough to meet demand. The coping mechanisms uncovered during the study included: 1) intentionally limiting information about services, or 2) extending wait times for service access, or 3) creating additional barriers to service. Winter (1997) found that street-level bureaucrats use "creaming" in their work. Creaming is a coping mechanism in which street-level bureaucrats choose (or skim off the top) clients who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria. Creaming is done even if the ones most likely to succeed, according to bureaucratic standards, are not the ones who are in dire need. It was also found that due to large caseloads street-level bureaucrats prioritize clients by the level of follow-up needed. Focus is placed on clients whose issues can be solved by writing a prescription, rather than ones needing more intense follow-up.

Welfare reform is one such policy area that appears to require the flexibility of frontline workers to make decisions about other people and their access to social programs. Welfare reform in the United States moved from less aggressive tactics that encouraged training and

education to policies of enforcing sanctions should clients not accept employment opportunities. Administering the welfare reform sanctions became the responsibility of welfare workers on the frontline. In 2003, the United States Senate proclaimed that the welfare reformation was a success, but the studies on which this statement was based failed to look at how the sanctions were being implemented (Lens, 2008). Lens conducted a study of welfare reform that attempted to determine how sanction policies were applied in Suffolk County, New York. Respondents for the study were obtained through purposive sampling that eventually led to a snowball sampling type recruitment effort. A total of 28 clients (not workers) were chosen as respondents. Each engaged in semi-structured interviews to allow for "deep exploration of respondents' [sanctioning] experiences and overall behavior" (Lens, 2008:204).

The author took a retrospective look into each of the 28 clients' cases in which sanctions were applied due to their not engaging in work-related activities as required. The findings of the study fit well with the street level bureaucrat theory as workers tended to self-select clients with which to work due to policy ambiguity. To be "eligible" for welfare sanctions, one must violate welfare rules "without good cause" and exhibit "willful" non-compliance (Lens, 2008:207). The policy was not clearly stated. Lawmakers included a definition of the term "without good cause." "The statute explicitly provides that the good cause standard is met if the parent or caretaker of a child can show that childcare was unavailable for a child under age 13 (sec.342 [1]" (Lens, 2008:207). On the other hand, the definition of "willful" noncompliance was never provided. In response to this, clients often lost hearings to have benefits reinstated because "good cause" and "involuntary" noncompliance had not been established up to the frontline workers' self-defined definition of the term.

Lens' (2008) study revealed that front-line workers can chose which clients, cases, and violation explanations they would accept. This was seemingly a method utilized to limit the number of applications for hearings (Lens, 2008:208). According to Lipsky (1980), this is the behavior of street-level bureaucrats. They cope with the uncertainties of their job by setting priorities among tasks. They focus on selected clients, cases and solutions, and "at best they invent benign modes of mass processing that permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and successfully. At worst, street-level bureaucrats give in to favoritism, stereotyping, and routinizing - all of which serve private or agency purposes" (Lipsky, 1980: xii). The study did not note differences in sanction application based on demographics such as licensure or experience of the workers. The study took place in a suburban welfare office in Suffolk County.

Lipsky's (1980) focus was on the street level bureaucrats that come face to face with clients. This face-to-face interaction is the defining moment in determining how street-level bureaucrats will provide needed services. Keiser (2010), however, attempts to explain how street-level bureaucrats make decisions when they are not face-to-face with their target population. Keiser (2010) analyzed individual characteristics of street-level bureaucrats "such as their ideology, adherence to agency goals, attitudes toward clients, information about other bureau actors, and decision- making speed, on how generously they apply eligibility rules" (247). The participants were Social Security Administration employees who determined client eligibility for disability benefits. These employees never came in to contact with benefit seekers. There was a random distribution of benefit eligibility cases each with varying severity. Surveys were mailed to workers in three states (n=128) to obtain information on their characteristics and behaviors. The study found that variations in personal attitudes, values, and perceptions were

related to the worker's decisions on the allocation of benefits. These workers displayed characteristics of Lipsky's theory associated only with workers who come into direct contact with

Professionalism is also an important aspect of decision making on the frontlines. Professionalism includes codes of conduct, training, and experience. Evans (2010, 2011, 2014), Vinzant and Crothers (1998), Lens (2008), Jensen and Per (2014) demonstrated in their research that workers utilize their professional base when making decisions on the frontlines. Frontline decisions are often made based on a combination of professional judgment and practice wisdom or expertise. Bachman, Wachman, and Manning, etc., (2017) found that frontline workers can be influential in policy implementation but lack clarity about their role. Policies that they must implement are to serve vulnerable populations which is often central to the workers' mission, but their role is often overlooked when policies are written. .Maynard- Moody, and Musheno (2003) utilized narratives and surveys in a three-year study of the concept of discretion. The participants (N=48) provided stories (157 stories) of their interactions with clients. The narrative analysis revealed how participants viewed themselves in their daily interactions with citizens, "in terms of relationships rather than rules" (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2003:20). From a non- random stratified purposeful sample, with cops, teachers, and counselors as participants, two ‘narratives of street-level work' emerged.

The first narrative is called the citizen agent narrative. Participants who followed the citizen agent narrative grappled with personal beliefs, previous experiences, availability of resources, and policy guidelines. They perceived their role to be that of a provider of support to clients served. Their relationship with clients was paramount and driven, not by written policies, but by their feelings associated with who clients are and if they are deemed as deserving. It has a primary focus on the client. This type of discretion exhibited by participants that used it

encompassed their value systems and experiences and demonstrated their flexibility in the implementation process (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2003).

The second such narrative is the state agent narrative that has a primary focus on upholding the rules put forth in policies. Discretion in the state agent narrative is driven by self-interest as opposed to the client-focused citizen agent narrative. State agents create their interpretations of policies and procedures that eventually become routine. Their actions are perceived as automated or mechanical (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2003). Maynard- Moody & Musheno's (2003) study offers a theoretical perspective very different from that of Lipsky (1980). Their study finds that professionals do exercise discretion but do so for the benefit of the client, while Lipsky's theory states that workers do so based on self-interests. Their study utilized more cases than other studies, multiple professions (cops, teachers and counselors) and narrative analysis for its basis. This will be further discussed later in this thesis.

In their book, *Street-Level Leadership: Discretion and Legitimacy in Front Line Public Service*, Vinzant, and Crothers (1998), make an argument for reframing the way of thinking about workers on the frontlines of policy implementation. They conducted studies in Alabama, Washington, Illinois, and Arizona (n=100). They conducted 1500 hours of observation of public workers – social workers and police officers – as they performed their jobs. Social workers and police officers were characterized as exercising street-level leadership by the way they responded to client situations. Their study used the same methodology as Wilson's (1968) study of police, participant observation. Participant observer methodology has tremendous strengths and weaknesses. A major strength is that it provides a means to access "backstage culture" (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998:43). This backstage culture is important when the study requires detailed descriptions of "behaviors, intentions, situations, and events as understood by one's informants"

(DeMunck & Sobo, 1998:43). On the other hand, the disadvantages are great. There can be problems because the researcher may not be interested in what happens when study participants are not in the public eye (DeMunck & Sobo, 1998). In addition to this, researchers can interpret the same observation differently, which can undermine data collection.

Although the social workers and police officers may not have official leadership roles in their respective places of employment, they act as leaders on the frontlines (Vinzant and Crothers, 1998). According to the study, leadership is a positive attribute that "embodies questions of discretion, power, and legitimacy" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1998:6). Professionals that come in contact with constituents assess or evaluate the stories presented, thereby using discretion to determine the desired outcomes as well as the steps to achieve goals. The researchers acknowledge that frontline workers require ethical decision-making skills but also point out that they require more than just that. To make decisions on the frontlines, workers need an ethical and moral base that is the foundation of their profession and recognition of their bureaucratic responsibility as evident in their judgment.

In 2017, a study was conducted to analyze the role of social workers in the implementation of integration policies in the Netherlands (Bachman, Wachman, Manning, et al. 2017). There were 28 semi-structured interviews with teachers, counselors, and client managers in two cities who dealt with immigrant integration. The thematic scheme of the interviews was threefold: "the dilemmas street-level workers encountered in their work, the way they dealt with these dilemmas; and the motives for dealing with the dilemmas" (Bachman, Wachman, Manning, et al. 2017:137). The results of the study were similar to the studies of Maynard-Moody and Leland (2000) and the Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) study that determinations by street-level bureaucrats in the delivery of services depend upon the clients' worthiness as determined by

the bureaucrat. According to the study, street-level bureaucrats' discretion reflected the tension between competing demands (Bachman et al., 2017). The bureaucrats had a policy for immigrant integration; however, the policy was not practical for each clients' situation.

Summary

Lipsky (1980) developed the street-level bureaucracy theory that described the pressures and constraints under which frontline workers do their jobs. The research presented in this section demonstrates the perpetuity of the street-level bureaucracy theory. Frontline workers appear to have autonomy in decision making, as Lipsky had proposed in his theory; however, the autonomous decisions vary in significant ways. Key concepts noted in this variation includes the complexity in service delivery, policy ambiguity, and professionalism. According to the above research, discretion is complex and happens at all levels. Scourfield (2013), Keiser (2010), and Maynard-Moody Musheno's (2003) research discusses the multi-layered characteristics of decision making. Their research indicates that frontline workers make decisions based on rules, both formal and informal, personal beliefs, experiences, and resource availability. An important point that should be noted is that there are alternatives to Lipsky's (1980) interpretation of discretion on the frontlines. Specifically, Maynard- Moody and Musheno's (2003) research indicates that decisions are not based so much on self- interests, but rather the interests of the clients being served and Evans (2010, 2014) highlighted the importance of professional ethics in decision making. Cases are evaluated on their own merits, and procedures are individually interpreted.

Chapter III: Social Workers as Street-Level Bureaucrats.

The field of social work involves helping with intangible services such as aid in making life changes that are physical, emotional, or cognitive (Knudsen, Ducharme & Roman, 2008). Common terms such as therapeutic alliance or therapeutic relationship are often used to denote the "emotional bond" shared between the social worker and client (Connors et al., 1997:588). The emotional bond that is formed between the client and the social worker is based on the worker's ability to identify needs and to advocate and empower clients to make needed changes. Human service occupations, such as the social work profession, have high levels of burnout and turnover due to the emotional labor involved with having daily encounters with clients (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 1999). This is often due to their responsibility in evoking change within clients and co-occurring pressures emanating from the organizations in which they work.

The stress that social workers experience on the job has been positively associated with burnout or intent to resign (Houkes et al., 2003; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Mor Barak et al., 2001; Soderfieldt, Soderfeldt, & Warg, 1995; Um & Harrison, 1998). Social work is a helping profession that is replete with stress because providing services to clients and the community in which they live is challenging (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002). The stress associated with the social work profession has been linked to increased job demands like required paperwork, high caseloads, and reduction in resources (e.g., staff, managers, supervision and ultimately support), and lack of job recognition (Whitaker, Weismiller, Clark, Wilson, 2006).

The burnout literature regarding social work is extensive. Much of the research is based on Maslach and Jackson's (1986) theory of burnout suggesting that it consists of the following elements: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and pessimism on the job, and feeling as

though personal achievement at work is farfetched. Burnout in the literature has been shown as being positively correlated to stress and job turnover (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Demerouti et al., 2001). In a qualitative study conducted on the Louisiana Department of Child and Family Services, 75% of the child welfare workers reported feeling some level of burnout. Workers expressed "(a) unclear expectations and frequent criticism; (b) child welfare worker boundaries; and (c) unrealistic timeframes" (Ward, 2013). Stress on the job is thus more apparent when there is high role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of resources, and high caseload (Soderfeldt, Soderfeldt & Wang, 1995). Each concept will be discussed later in this chapter.

Social work within bureaucracies is challenging and often takes place in situations characterized by high levels of stress (i.e., unclear job roles, resource inadequacy) and complexity that requires quick decision making, such as in child protective services. Service delivery can take place in "environments that are rich in contextual clues and short on time for thinking" (Helm, 2011:905). Environments with abundant clues are common in the field of social work and require more than just "purely analytical thinking" (Helm, 2011:897). For example, home visits are often integral parts of social work and "may present hundreds of cues… that are all highly fallible" (Helm, 2011:897). Traveling to clients is an important part of social work practice as clients are met where they are, both literally and figuratively. During home visits, hundreds of clues are present all at once rather than in sequential order, making quick decision-making essential. Environmental cues in social work are abundant and fallible, leaving them open to competing practitioner interpretation and reasoning (Taylor & White, 2000). The homes of clients, in a sense, become part of the workplace where social workers must construct their practices away from organizational oversight (Pink, Morgan, & Dainty 2015:450).

The client's home is not the only mobile workplace of a social worker. Their workplace includes anywhere they practice social work. Mobile methods of social work practice include interviews while driving a vehicle, walking, or even playing in a park. Sheller and Urry (2006) proposed the "new mobilities" paradigm, which focuses on the flows and movements of people. Social services are no longer considered a sedentary science based on a theoretical black box. It is ever evolving and transforming urban/suburban spaces "scapes" to workplace settings. The face-to-face interaction between the worker and client in these settings is one of the most defining occurrences that impact street-level work (Lipsky, 1980; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003).

Social service organizations are meant to provide services to the vulnerable and to keep their well-being in the forefront through social justice and advocacy (Webb, 2006). Child welfare agencies, for example, are tasked with providing services to vulnerable children. They are often staffed by social workers. These agencies are often researched due to the inherent vulnerability of children and the decisions made by frontline workers. Services provided are extensively monitored and require social workers to make "statutory visits" to families of children identified as being at risk (Department of Education, 2013). According to Lipsky (1980), however, street-level bureaucrats find ways around policy mandates by taking shortcuts to make their jobs more manageable. In the literature on child service workers it is often found that the decisions made were based on emotions, negotiations of job role, experience, and reflection on managing multiple policy paradoxes (O'Connor & Leonard, 2014).

Social workers employed by the state government, for example, are held accountable for supervising children under the guardianship of the state. They make planned and unplanned visits to the homes of children to ensure their safety and well-being according to the Louisiana

State Legislature Children's Code (2003). Despite the rules and regulations, social workers have been accused of not reporting or inadequately reporting the physical abuse children experienced in the home. In 2016 four social workers in Palmdale, California were charged with child abuse in the death of Gabriel Fernandez, an 8-year-old boy. They were accused of not reporting incidents that would have led to his removal (Los Angeles Daily News, January 30, 2017). An incident by a Louisiana social worker could have posed a similar threat to the children involved. A social worker employed by the Louisiana Department of Child and Family Services used the state computer system to log monthly home visits. Foster parents of the four foster children confirmed that the social worker did not conduct the required visits, therefore putting the children in undue risk.

Decision making in government and non-governmental organizations are constantly under scrutiny. At times it has led to scandals (Reder & Duncan, 2004) and a flurry of legislation that has been reactive instead of proactive (Gillingham & Humphreys, 2010). Reactive policies and the mechanisms surrounding them may not be the ideal way to handle problems. Perceived failure to properly address the needs of constituents has led to polices being labeled as ineffective, resulting in funding being reduced or eliminated and the social worker being viewed as incompetent. The discussion of professionalism is often absent both when social workers are to implement policies and when they are criticized for not completing procedural demands as expected.

Lipsky often refers to street-level bureaucrats as ‘professionals' (Magnusson 1981:213). The occupations he noted included teachers, police officers, social workers, judges, and many other public officials that stand to mediate the clients' access to government programs. The theory, however, does not provide much information on how professional status intersects with

public organizations and their bureaucracy. A profession has been defined as "an admirable sense of responsibility" and "pride in service given rather than by interest in opportunity for personal profit" (Carr-Saunder & Wilson 1933:471).

The literature in the twentieth century viewed professionals as having superior moral fibers that aid in distinguishing professionals from other occupations (Carr-Saunderss & Wilson, 1933; Durkheim, 1957; Parson, 1954). Professional status influences the freedom that each occupational group has to make decisions (Friedson, 2001; Evetts, 2002). Professional status is linked to discretionary freedom and establishes values that inform discretion (Friedson, 1994; Noon and Blyton 2002: 210-21). As a result of their autonomy and expertise, professionals are viewed as "stabilizing elements in society" and "centres of resistance to crude forces which threaten steady and peaceful evolution" (Carr-Saunder & Wilson, 1933:497).

A key assumption in the street level bureaucrat theory is that the decisions made on the street level become effective policy. The policies implemented by the street-level bureaucrats may differ from what policymakers intended. The discretion exercised on the frontlines is in part a result of social workers' professional status, lack of organizational oversight and authority, and their encountering situations in the field that are unexpected. According to SLB theory, when managers are providing oversight, they can conflict with frontline workers who have opposing viewpoints. Frontline workers can resist the direction of their managers, which can lead to job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, or other actions that might avert the implementation of policies.

In the social work profession, however, managers are often supervisors that provide clinical supervision on the job, after hours or both. Clinical supervision in social work is regarded as a positive addition to social work practice and a way to uphold professional

standards. Dorothy Hutchinson (1935) established that the supervisor-supervisee relationship in social work is not only a vital part of training and readiness, but it is also important in the practitioners' recognition of self and the application of knowledge:

The supervisor-worker relationship should be a growing, dynamic one in which each is free. The supervisor is essentially a leader and a teacher of workers and does not impose herself or her ideas on the worker. She assumes responsibility for the worker in that it is her job to attend to the worker's thoughts and feelings and how this impact the worker-client relationship. (As cited in Munson, 1979: 37).

The description of the supervisor-supervisee relationship provided by Hutchinson (1935) remains relevant in the 21st century. It has educational, supportive, and administrative components (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Munson, 2002; Shulman, 1993). Contrary to the street level bureaucrat theory, supervision is neither a mode that is utilized to limit discretion and autonomy nor is it a cause of conflict with the supervised social workers as suggested of frontline workers in the street level bureaucratic theory. Supervision provides education and support to improve the clinical skills of both new and experienced social workers. In the field of social work, the clients' needs are supposed to be placed above self-interests; consequently, supervision is also geared toward improving the experiences of patients/clients/consumers when they seek assistance.

Supervision is a major source of social work support (Collins & Murray, 1996). House (1981) defined social support as helpful connections or exchanges of resources between people in both formal and informal relationships. Social support, as described by Howe (1981), has been found to reduce the negative effects of job-related stress (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Emotional

support, like that received through social work supervision, decreases burnout on the job (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Himle et al., 1989) and employee turnover (Mor Barak et al., 2001, Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005).

Professional status includes commitments, ethics, and responsibilities of each professionals' field that may affect decision making. The term ‘professional' is used so loosely within the theory that it can be used when referring to white-collar workers, blue-collar workers, or a certain occupational group, or those with similar power or status within a bureaucracy (Johnson 1972:21). Lipsky (1980: xvi) states that "in developing the street-level framework, I identify the common elements of occupations as apparently disparate as, say, a police officer and social worker." Lipsky appears to group professionals by common experience without noting that there may be differences among workers who are thought to have the same experiences on the job (Lipsky 1980: xvi).

Organizations are looking to hire professionals because of their flexibility and ability to adapt to the changing environment in social service delivery (Harrison, Exworthy & Halford, 1999; Hood et al. 2000). Professional status significantly affects the relationship with managers as the employee and managers frequently come from the same occupation (Friedson, 1994). The lack of attention to professional status in the street level bureaucrat theory may prove to be problematic in determining its applicability to the field of social work.

Researchers contend that professional autonomy and discretion are being curtailed by managers because they are now in control of what happens at the street-level (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Harris, 1998; Jones, 2001). The growth of management roles in service delivery settings signifies a shift in the amount of discretion exercised on the frontlines by street-level

bureaucrats (Howe, 1991). Howe (1991) stated that the SLB theory is an "interesting and clever boost for the advocates of professional discretion, through its emphasis on the active role of street-level bureaucrats, including social workers, in the implementation and interpretation of public policy" (203-204). Yet, he is seemingly skeptical about the application of the street-level bureaucracy theory to the field of social work due to the shift from practitioner discretion to social work practices interpreted and driven by their managers (Howe, 1986, 1991, 1991b; Howe, 1996).

Howe (1986) demonstrated this shift in a study of social workers employed in public services. From this research, he concluded that the procedures that street-level workers followed depended greatly on the interpretation of legislation by managers. Managers, according to Howe, are the only ones within the bureaucracy with discretion. They can interpret legislation, manipulate resources, and determine how exceptions are handled. Managers alone determine how subordinates do their jobs. Simply put, according to Howe (1986, 1991) management controls social worker discretion in the field through surveillance, budgeting, and procedural work of subordinates (top-down approach to implementation).

According to some researchers in the literature, managers are a necessity in the social service arena because public policies are constantly in flux. They interpret legislation for frontline workers. Policy instabilities could include more regulations, procedural changes, and the reduction of funding which requires some form of guidance by management (Clark, 2005). Managers' routines facilitate monitoring and surveillance of street-level bureaucrats (Carey 2003). The routinization of decision making or the "managerial technicist" practice could be expected to limit discretion within a bureaucracy (Harlow 2003).

Evans (2010, 2011) conducted studies that emphasized that public services are not functional without discretion. Research has indicated that situations continue to arise on the frontline of service delivery which is not covered by bureaucratic procedures (Evans & Harris 2004). Also, research indicates that a considerable amount of negotiations in service delivery still occur outside of managerial scrutiny. These negotiations occur privately between the frontline worker and the client (Foster et al. 2006). Evans (2011) does not disagree that implementation is important. However, he questioned whether it is possible to focus only on front line workers in organizations to understand how policies are implemented.

Little is known about the extent that frontline workers help each other solve problems when meeting regularly; however, in Goldman and Foldy's (2015) study this practice seems to have at least some effect on decision making. Goldman and Foldy (2015) conducted two qualitative case studies on employment services workers, who had limited formal education, and child welfare workers who had at least a bachelor's degree and were able to practice social work. Instead of focusing on what influences workers' behaviors as in previous studies, their focus was on the process through which workers made decisions and how they deliberate amongst each other (co-workers) in the field to provide quality service. They found that the cumulative knowledge obtained from peer group discussion is mostly geared toward purposely advancing policy goals (Goldman and Foldy, 2015). The group discussions functioned as a way to maintain accountability for the delivery of services with "diverse perspectives" (Goldman and Foldy, 2015:194).

The findings in the Goldman and Foldy (2015) study contrast with the view of the street-level bureaucrat theory that states that street-level bureaucrats develop coping mechanisms to deal with policy ambiguity as opposed to seeking clarification of what may not be explicit.

Decisions made by the street-level bureaucrats were not made in isolation. There is very little doubt that street-level bureaucrats are often tasked with implementing vague and contradictory policies; however, with peer consultations, street-level bureaucrats can effectively navigate through the ambiguities of public policies (e.g., Bardach 1998; Feldman and Pentland 2003; Wagenaar 2004).

Goldman and Foldy's study seems to support Evans (2010) statement that policy outcomes are the result of a "complex, multi-layered and multi-actor process." It is difficult to pinpoint where discretion lies, but it does not seem to be in the hands of one particular individual — identifying who or what entity was responsible for implementing and making ultimate decisions in the study was unclear. The inability to answer the question "Who made the decision" indicates this. The peer consultation groups formed by the employees guided the decision-making process and problem-solving. This conclusion questions the notion made in the street level bureaucrat theory that discretion is exercised when individuals attempt to cope with stress on the job. This study showed that frontline workers rely more on a group process involving coworkers and peers to make difficult decisions.

There has been extensive research on the influence of coworkers on the job. Research recognizes that colleagues play a key role in how employees conduct themselves on the job, strategize to promote workplace rights, form social bonds, and establish professional identities (Cozier 1964; Van Maaren and Barley 1984; Feldman 1992; Brehm and Gates 1999; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The social bonds and professional connections of public service employees have the potential for creating peer discussion and reflection among front line workers.

In social work literature, it is frequently stated that social work is a stressful occupation due to role confusion (function and context) (Dillon, 1990; Gilbar, 1998; Rushton 1987). The role confusion results from the conflict between social work idealized goals, such as social justice and advocacy on behalf of clients, and expected job performance (Balloch et al., 1998; Borland, 1981; Dillon, 1990; Jones & Novack, 1993; Rushton, 1987). Within healthcare settings, for example, the emphasis on outcomes sometimes supersedes the worth of individual clients. Social work ideals may not always be cost-effective. This causes conflict for medical social workers as they try to maintain a supportive relationship with the client that is based on social work values and ethics (Borland, 1981).

Social workers continue to have boundary issues relating to the different roles and functions expected by the employer that conflict with the social work profession. Social workers are an asset to organizations as they can adapt and respond quickly to change; however, the strength of adaptability and responsiveness increases their role ambiguity that is experienced in bureaucratic organizations.

Outside the social work community, very few people understand what a social worker does. Misconceptions of the social work profession lead to frustration because their role within the organization is misunderstood (Reid et al., 1999). Similar studies were conducted that found that social workers experienced conflicting role expectation and that there was little understanding of their role by coworkers (Kadushin & Kulys, 1995) and that there was stress resulting from role conflict, disagreement about what best practices are and the lack of recognition (McLean & Andrew, 2000). Role conflict increases social work burnout and job dissatisfaction (Um & Harrison, 1998).

Resource scarcity can force social workers to make decisions where policy is silent. In his book, Reamer (2006) advances the concept of “social justice”, for which uses the definition from Robert Baker's Social Work Dictionary that states that "Social justice is an ideal condition in which all members of society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits." Having the same rights, protections, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits is the "pursuit of the ideal" (Berlin, 1988). Unfortunately, this is a rare occurrence. These definitions do not tell street-level bureaucrats what to do when there is not enough to go around. There is no definition of "social justice" in the NASW Code of Ethics.

As a result of economic unrest and major political shifts, some states have reduced social services provided to constituents. Louisiana, in particular, has faced drastic cuts in state services, including: health care, child protection (including workers, and board and care), and elderly and disabled services. Doing more with less has been the reality for nearly all social service programs in Louisiana. In these social service settings, some decisions must be made regarding the allocation of limited resources.

In a qualitative study of 30 social workers, a major finding was that they perceived social justice dilemmas in the field. The social workers came from a variety of settings, including the following: child protection, mental health, youth work, disability services, elderly services, education, and health and counseling services. In addition to face-to-face interviews, "Email-Facilitated Reflective Dialogue" was used in the study (McAuliffe 2005). Thirty ethical dilemmas were formulated and emailed to each of the participants. Below is one profile of the ethical dilemmas presented to participants and an example of coping mechanisms:

> A client of a disability service requested that Nell, the social worker, arrange respite care for her child, as she was no longer able to cope. No respite care was available due to lack

> of resources. Nell decided to covertly assist the mother to ‘abandon' the child so that she could receive emergency respite. The ethical dilemma, as framed by Nell, was that she assisted the mother to deceive the government, placing the client in a potentially difficult situation, and putting her job at risk in the process. The mother did receive the necessary respite as well (McAuliffe 2005:46).

McAuliffe found that social workers used a wide range of coping mechanisms that were both adaptive and maladaptive. Some of the social workers developed strategies that enabled them to review the pros and cons of decisions and maintain control of the decision-making process. These types of coping strategies are similar to those the Lipsky describes in the street-level bureaucratic theory. The strategies that they implement are political. For example, in the above dilemma, the social worker helped the client to receive services despite eligibility criteria. In this case, the goal was to help the client, not to ease the workload of the social worker. Empirical research supports the conceptualization that the attitudes that street-level bureaucrats have toward their clients affect their decisions (Hasenfeld and Steinmetz, 1981; Moore, 1987; Winter, 2002; May and Winter, 2009). Attitudes can include things like the feeling that this person is worthy of help (Reisch, 1984).

According to the street level bureaucrat theory, high caseloads limit time for decision making. High caseloads are accompanied by more documenting, case planning, scheduling, and coordinating. Caseload size is important because it impacts services rendered and the management of cases (King, 2009). These requirements take time away from the face-to-face interaction with clients and increase the strain on street-level bureaucrats. The interaction between the client and the street level bureaucrat impacts the decision making of the frontline

worker. To make their jobs sensible and more manageable, when there are high caseloads, street-level bureaucrats develop routines and simplifications of their work.

According to the Case Management Society of America (CMSA) case managers assist clients in reaching goals of wellness in their lives through advocacy, education, and facilitation and service. The term, "case manager," can be used to describe social workers, nurses, psychologists, or any human service profession. Several studies conducted on case managers attempt to determine the influence that having high caseloads has on work done within the bureaucracy. For example, a quantitative study was conducted on 300 community case managers to explore the relationship between caseload size and perceived clinical effectiveness (King, Le Bas & Spooner 2000). The study's larger purpose was to identify and quantify caseload effect on the quality and type (role performance) of work produced by case managers. The study found that larger caseloads weaken case managers perceptions of self-efficacy. Case manager views of self-efficacy were affected by factors more likely to be time demanding. These factors included tasks such as visiting clients at their home or in the hospital and managing acute episodes, like crisis management, that require flexibility. According to King et al (2000), these tasks are restricted by high caseloads and deceases case manager efficiency. At times, it is not merely the number of cases that cause undue stress and overload. Having a few difficult cases can have the same effect. Measures that reflect the needs of each client are better indicators of workloads than just a representation of the number of cases (Carson et al., 1996).

The Role of Social Workers in Medical/ Hospital, Child Welfare, School

Medical / Health Care Social Work

The role of the medical social worker has evolved since the 1970s and 1980s such that it now places patients as the direct recipients of social work services. Medical social work is practiced all over the world. They often come in to contact with people in the community that has been diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses (i.e., cancer, AIDS, HIV, kidney failure, diabetes, etc.), chronic illnesses (COPD, asthma, arthritis, chronic pain, etc.), and those with other mental disorders or physical limitations.

Medical social workers work amongst medical professionals with whom they must collaborate to determine appropriate care for patients after discharge. This multidisciplinary process includes professionals throughout the hospital, including physicians, nurses, and therapists. When in a hospital setting these individuals, who are invested in the care of patients, come together to create a medical team. Each participant in the medical team decides what is pertinent, in their area of expertise, to ensure the continuity of care. Specifically, the social worker decides what resources to tap for patients to reside safely in the community. It is up to the social worker to identify resources based on the needs of the patient and to take the necessary steps to promote linkages like contacting the particular resource, scheduling appointments, and locating additional resources to address any other unmet needs. Medical social work is necessarily collaborative.

Social work in child welfare agencies:

Within child welfare, a social worker's main role is to protect children from abuse and neglect, then connect them to available resources. Social workers in child protection agencies

typically carry a caseload of children that come to the attention of the state due to abuse, neglect, or other forms of maltreatment, like child sex trafficking. Child trafficking is a form of abuse that does not get as much attention. This is potentially due to the difficulty in identifying its victims. The identification of these victims is a serious barrier in counter-trafficking efforts (Bump & Duncan, 2003; Gozdziak & MacDonnell, 2007; Oketch et al., 2012; Refferty, 2008; Rigby, 2011).

Unlike child sex trafficking, other forms of abuse, both physical and emotional, may not be as difficult to identify. Social workers may visit the homes of the families and report on the condition. Often during the home visits, social workers assume the role of an educator that teaches families how to meet their basic needs and the needs of their children. Throughout the visit, the social worker is making decisions about whether the home environment is safe, secure, and can provide the necessities for the minor children.

In some circumstances, child protection social workers visit homes to remove children should they determine that the environment is unsafe or that caregivers are inadequately prepared to meet the basic needs of the children. The issues that might cause caregivers to be deemed inadequate is sometimes due to unemployment or underemployment, poverty, domestic abuse, mental illness, and substance abuse. In all actuality, the list of concerns that can be deemed inadequate for minors can go on forever. It is usually the decision of the social worker that identifies what circumstances are inadequate and/or requires them to follow up and complete reports.

Not all child welfare workers are in child protection. They can work in numerous areas of child welfare, including foster care, adoption, kinship, and family reunification. The children in

these areas of the child welfare system have already been removed from dangerous environments. Similar to child protection social workers, the social workers in this area of child welfare are typically expected to ensure the safety of children in their environment. They determine if the foster care, adoption, and kinship placements are suitable to meet children's needs. The social workers have an important role that requires them to be aware of any signs of maltreatment, report it, and ultimately remove the child from the home if accusations are substantiated. They may address issues of abandonment, coordinate community services, and help children adapt in their new home environment. Many of the children have had several placements with different families. The social workers for these children are often the only constant adult figure in their lives.

School Social Work

Currently, the role of school social workers is determined mainly by legislative authorities (Allen-Meares, 2004). The Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (P.L. 103-382), for example, increased social workers in schools because of a push to improve the academic success of low income and at-risk youth (Blyth & Huxtable, 2002). Inner-city youth often had difficulties in the school environment, not because of their inability to learn, but, due to issues at home and in their communities. According to Constable, McDonald & Flynn (2002) school social workers have seven roles within this one position: 1) direct counseling with individuals, groups, and families, 2) advocacy, 3) consultation, 4) community linkage, 5) interdisciplinary team coordination, 6) needs assessment (i.e. psychosocial assessment), and 7) program and policy development. School social workers may have to maintain these roles despite opposition from school administrators, parents, and teachers.

The school social worker is responsible for looking at the complete picture of the student to develop a personalized psychosocial intervention. School social workers may make decisions about which resources students need based on their assessment of the situation. Social workers may often have to collaborate with professionals to ensure the safety of children. Social workers may have to contact the Department of Child and Family Services or law enforcement to report abuse and neglect of students. In other cases, social workers may be able to assist the family by providing information on resources that could help repair the family unit like shelter, food, medical, and mental health care. The school social worker uses the information gathered from the psychosocial assessment to decide which resources are most appropriate.

Commonalities among social workers in different settings

Social workers interface with individuals in a variety of settings. Despite the different settings where social workers are employed, some commonalities exist. Social workers that are employed within bureaucracies are often excluded from policy and decision making at the administrative level. Bureaucracies are unable to predict the types of situations that social workers will encounter in the field. Established protocols may not exist in response to each client situation. Social workers rely on ethics, previous experience, peer consultation, and education to make decisions. These variables affect how each clients' obstacles will be addressed by the social worker.

Decision making is a multifaceted and important activity for professionals; however, it has been somewhat overlooked as a focus of social work practice (Sullivan, 1999). Social work decisions are about potential actions that will take place in the future (Banks, 1995:9). The policies to be implemented by social workers are often vague and do not usually include

alternative ways to act should the policy not fit the client's needs exactly. When this occurs, social workers in hospitals, schools, and public health departments often find it necessary to refer clients to outside resources when their clients' needs are beyond the social workers' scope of practice, or outside of agency policies, procedures and capabilities.

When visiting social service agencies, clients usually have an idea of what they need, and they convey this to the social worker via one-on-one interview, initial phone call, or intake paperwork. Once the problem is identified, the social worker would need to complete an assessment and review information that is provided by the client. This is achieved by the social worker by completing a psychosocial assessment. In this assessment the social worker obtains a brief history of the family, educational attainment, religion, and many other historical factors, like childhood trauma or health status, that may help the social worker understand what circumstances have caused the client to present to the agency to receive social service assistance. Social workers empower their clients to identify and assess potential solutions to their problems. The social workers obtain additional information by observing how clients interact with their environments. This observation helps the social worker determine if clients are ready to be referred. The way that individuals interact with their environment, as well as their perceptions, responses, and coping mechanisms, vary from person to person. Then, finally, the referral is made to another agency that may be better equipped to assist clients with their problems. Each referral made by social workers is aimed at improving the clients' quality of life. At one time or another, social workers across all settings, come across needs for resources that may not be accessible. In this role, social workers would provide advocacy for the rights of the vulnerable by helping others see their legitimacy. They all make decisions that could affect the lives of individuals and the communities in which they reside.

Summary

Although social workers seem to fit the street-level bureaucracy theory in many respects – decision making, job stress due to work volume, policy ambiguity, and scarcity of resources – this review highlights aspects of the profession not emphasized by the theory. First, much of the work completed by social workers occurs outside of managerial oversight. However, social workers are required to document their activities which creates indirect opportunities for supervision. Further, this supervision is often seen as a collaborative process to serve vulnerable populations rather than an attempt to limit decision making on the frontlines as Lipsky contends. Supervision is also a requirement for governing boards of social work throughout the United States. Second, professional status including standards of practice, licensure, agency, and experience may predetermine how decisions are made in the field, making decision making a multi-faceted process rather than one that is individualized and based solely on self-interest. This review of the literature informed the design of the survey described in the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Methods

This is an exploratory study. It uses a a large survey of social workers, which is rare in the literature, and it focuses on a single profession and a single state. The data is mostly descriptive, as is most of the literature. I do provide tests at the end of Chapter V to determine whether there is significant variance within the sample according to a set of control variables described below. My study deviated methodologically from the past precedent of utilizing case studies or mixed methods. In utilizing a survey and much larger sample size, I have provided an additional mode of inquiry to the existing mix of research. The street-level bureaucracy theory states that street-level bureaucrats can come from various occupations. Street-level bureaucrats

are "teachers, police officers, and other law enforcement personnel, social workers, judges, public lawyers, and other court officials and many other public officials who grant access to government programs and provide services within them" (Lipsky, 1980:3).

Like all methods, a survey has advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is a large number of cases that provide more confidence in the generalizability of results and that can be divided into sub-groups to explore possible variations within a single profession. A disadvantage is that a survey must rely on self-reports. One of the themes developed in the literature is that professional norms may offset self interest in the ways in which discretion is used. But self-reports may, themselves, be self-serving. There is a well-known tendency for respondents to provide socially acceptable answers. For example, election surveys routinely overstate turnout. So, it is possible that my survey overstates the frequency of client-serving discretion. Yet the existing literature has not attempted to systematically measure the frequency of the self-serving activities that SLB theory predicts. This study attempts to compare them.

Social workers are employed in a variety of settings. The Occupational Outlook Handbook (2014) provides a list of settings that are common work environments of social worker practitioners:

- Hospitals, primary care settings, and clinics, including veterans' clinics
- Senior centers and long-term care facilities
- Settlement houses and community centers
- Mental health clinics
- Private practices
- State and local governments

- Schools, colleges, and universities
- Substance abuse clinics
- Military bases and hospitals
- Correctional facilities
- Child welfare agencies
- Employee assistance programs

Sample Selection

The eligibility criteria of the study required individuals to be registered with the Louisiana State Board of Social Work Examiners (LABSWE) and have an email address. A Mailing List Request form was completed and later returned to the researcher from the LABSWE. It identified those individuals who matched the selection criteria. More than half of the social workers registered in the state of Louisiana had an email address on file. The study software was important in the elimination of duplicate email addresses and those that were missing a domain name. Next, an email was sent to each social worker. The email included the following: information about how the individual was identified, who is doing the study and why, what is involved with participating, an overview of risks and benefits, information about how to contact the principal investigator and/or myself regarding additional questions.

Human Subjects Considerations

Ethical considerations are important, regardless of the type of research being conducted. Before the commencement of this research, ethical clearance was obtained from the University of New Orleans Institutional Review Board. The ethical principles of a study center around

protecting the participants (respondents) and to "do no harm." The goal was to minimize physical, psychological, and social risks, which was accomplished in this study.

Research Software

Qualtrics Research Software was used for the collection of data and survey. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was utilized for data analysis.

Instrumentation

This study provided the unique opportunity to enhance the understanding of discretion in decision making within social service provision and to test the significance of a theory developed more than 30 years ago. The operationalization of discretion was paramount in the completion of this task. This required a bit of ingenuity as discretion is not concrete. As a guide, this study utilized the instrument developed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003). The instrument was utilized in their study to measure discretion reported by participants. Their study focused on three professional groups (cops, teachers, and counselors) from a few Midwestern states. They utilized mixed methods in their study as opposed to previous studies that used solely qualitative methods. The methodology of the Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) study in this regard is unique as it is one of the first to utilize narratives and surveys to study the concept of discretion. The participants provided stories of their interactions with clients. The use of narrative analysis yielded interesting results that further developed a method of measuring discretion. It revealed that workers viewed their daily interactions with citizens, "in terms of relationships rather than rules" (Maynard- Moody & Musheno, 2003:20). According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003):

> These stories are not philosophical discourses on law or fairness. They are pragmatic expressions about acts and identities and assertions of social dominant, yet jumbled societal views of good and bad behavior and worthy and unworthy individuals (25). Fairness has little to do with the bureaucratic norm of treating everyone the same or even fairly implementing laws and regulations. Fairness and justice mean responding to citizen-clients based on their perceived worth (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003:94).

Maynard- Moody and Musheno utilized the finding from their survey and from stories told by participants to identify the following variables as being related to discretion: task authority, authority to establish rules, authority to make exceptions, extent to which agency goals are clear, frequency of client exceptions, percentage of time procedures deal with work or specified task, task routinization, face to face contact with clients, workload, and views toward their agency. Since the Maynard- Moody and Musheno survey had been tested and validated as a measure of discretion on the frontlines of service delivery, the current study utilized similar variables and modified survey questions to create a tool to be administered to Louisiana social workers.

The survey administered to the Louisiana social workers was separated into subcategories based on SLB theory and the tool developed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003). The three categories of the survey tool are as follows:

1. To what extent do the conditions Lipsky describes in the street level bureaucrat theory fit social workers in Louisiana?

2. Do Louisiana social workers perceive discretion? If so, then how do they use it?"

3. Control variables to determine if there are differences within and between groups of participants.

Each category will be discussed below. The first category queries the adequacy of the street-level bureaucrat theory's applicability to social workers. In his theory, Lipsky did not differentiate between professions, leaving the readers and students of public administration to assume that all function in the same or a similar paradigm. Twelve survey questions were systematically selected to help make the distinction between (and even within) professions that the street-level bureaucrat theory ignores:

a. What percentage of your workday is spent in the office?
b. How much of your work deals directly with clients face-to-face?
c. About what percent of the time are you faced with more work than you can process in normal business hours?
d. To what extent do you perform the same tasks from day-to-day?
e. How often are you expected to report to management?
f. When considering the various situations that arise in performing your work, what percentage of the time do you have written procedures for dealing with them?
g. To what extent do you find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented in your workload?
h. During a normal work week, how often do exceptions arise if you encounter work for which policies are unclear?
i. To what extent are the resources you have adequate to meet client-specific needs?
j. To what extent does your place of work (i.e. office, hospital, etc.) have enough resources to serve the targeted population?

k. To what extent does your workload vary over time?

The role of street-level bureaucrats is paradoxical in that they must follow a "rigid" script (policies) and be compassionate (a type of psychological flexibility) as they realize the nature of the target population (Lipsky, 2010). In this paradoxical role, Lipsky states that street-level bureaucrats shape the public policies that they are implementing by using their discretion to find the middle ground between the rigidity of policy expectations and human compassion. Lipsky's assumption of discretion in decision making leads to the second category: "Do Louisiana social workers perceive discretion? If so, then how do they use it?" This question expands upon Lipsky's notion that social workers are a subset of street-level bureaucrats. According to the street level bureaucrat theory, there is discretion in the decisions made by public service workers. The second category contained the following four questions:

a. How much influence do you have in determining what tasks to perform day-to-day?
b. Are there situations in which you have to make decisions about how to handle your work?
c. If there are situations in which you have to make decisions about your work, is it due to policy, workload or inadequate resources?
d. If you experience work overload, do you use the following to cope?
    i. Work after hours?
    ii. Prioritize cases by addressing the most critical cases first?
    iii. Prioritize cases by first addressing those with the quickest resolutions?
    iv. Prioritize cases by addressing those that you can help the most first?
    v. Spend less time on cases?
    vi. Ask for help?

vii. Refer cases elsewhere?

viii. Other?

e. How much authority do you have in determining how exceptions are to be handled if you encounter situations for which policies are unclear?

f. If you encounter cases for which policies are unclear or do not fit unique client circumstances, to what extent are you able to utilize professional training, professional experience, peer or superior consultation and professional ethics?

The third and final category consisted of the control variables. The control variables were an important aspect involved in hypothesis testing. By comparing each, one can determine if differences exist with regard to the independent variables. The survey questions for this category are as follows:

1. Which of the following describes your licensure status? (Licensure is an indicator of formal qualifications.)

a. BSW

b. CSW

c. RSW

d. LMSW

e. LCSW

f. LCSW-BACS

2. How many years have you been a social worker?

a. 0-5 years (Entry-level) (1)

b. 5-10 years (Mid- Career) (2)

c. 10-20 years (Experienced) (3)

d. >20 years (Late- Career) (4)

3. Which of the following best describes your current work setting?

a. Hospital/ Medical

b. School

c. Business/ Non-profit

d. Government (federal or state)

My research survey provided the opportunity for investigation of possible variance within a single profession. As stated previously, Lipsky includes the field of social work in the street level bureaucrat theory. With this, it is important to note that social work has greatly evolved from its settlement house beginnings in the Progressive Era, where the privileged class worked as missionaries to the poor. The role of social workers is more complex in the 21st century as it involves collaboration, facilitation, and providing recommendations on the job. The practice of social work involves intricate processes that exceed the one-dimensional homogenous frontline worker described in the street level bureaucrat theory. Utilizing survey research has aided in unraveling these intricacies to examine the extent to which differences exist within the social work profession. Perceived discretionary freedom can vary within the social work profession regarding licensure status, experience, and type of setting for which the social worker is employed.

Social work is a regulated profession, and thus licenses are granted and issued by regulatory boards based on criteria set forth by the state in which they are obtained. A social worker's license has levels that indicate whether practitioners can practice social work independently or under the supervision of other social workers; thus, power within the profession

is not shared equally. As stated previously, a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW or LCSW-BACS) is licensed to practice social work independently. This indicates that what takes place when an LCSW meets a client is essentially a private, professional matter that the practitioner has constructed. On the other hand, social work practitioners with licenses that are deemed lower in the hierarchy of the profession (Certified Social Worker- CSW, Registered Social Worker- RSW and Licensed Master Social Worker- LMSW) are engaged in private professional matters but are directly supervised by LCSWs and have less latitude of independence granted by the regulating board and often by the employer.

In addition to professional endorsements via licensure, like other professions, the social work profession has developed a market for the expertise that its professionals possess. The experienced social worker has insight into how the profession has evolved as well as the clients served. These experiences within the professional realm are different for each practitioner and shape their decision making. Although substantive elements of the jobs of social workers may be determined by others (Howe, 1986), it is their knowledge (i.e. experiences, training and education), both formal and informal, that determine the different ways the elements of their jobs are carried out (Freidson, 1986: xiii-iv; Howe, 1986). It is this variation in the application of knowledge that makes the social work profession a heterogeneous occupational group.

Social work is a unique profession, as there are endless possibilities for employment. Organizations that employ social workers each have their policies and procedures that employed social workers must implement. The social workers in the study came from four settings. Each may provide insight on how discretionary freedom is perceived and used: schools/ other educational (n=132), hospital/ other health service (n=284), business/nonprofit (n=136), and government (n=198). In general, social workers in government settings are often subjected to

increasingly detailed policies and more assertive and intrusive management techniques. This could potentially decrease the perception of discretion and limit the manner in which discretion is used on the job in comparison to other social workers. Social workers employed in non-governmental settings are not usually regulated by the government directly. They are regulated by their organizations and other stakeholders with policies that are not always as extensive as those in governmental settings. Policies that are vague and less regulated create circumstances for social workers to exhibit more professional freedom in decision making.

For Lipsky, the extent to which street-level bureaucrats use discretion is dependent upon the stress of the work environment. Social work is inherently stressful in that it deals with an infinite client base all needing the same finite resources, thus making decision making a significant function of the profession. Social workers are unique, and so is their freedom to exercise professional judgment on the job. My research examined those possibilities as key contributors to the perception of discretion.

Construct Validity

Construct validity is a test of research quality that is crucial with obtaining evidence (Yin 2009). Construct validity is "identifying correct operational measures for the concepts being studied" (Yin, 2009:41). Street-level bureaucrats are characterized by the following: 1) human judgment (discretion); 2) managerial oversight; and 3) direct contact with clients. Ascertaining measures of discretion and the subsequent managerial oversight occurred through a thorough review of the literature in which the Maynard-Moody and Musheno study revealed an exemplary tool. Their study outlined key variables thought to be components of discretion in decision making. The variables outlined coincided with the conditions that Lipsky mentions in the street

level bureaucrat theory, including lack of resources, policy ambiguity, and coping mechanisms utilized to make their jobs less psychologically taxing. Choosing the right questions to include in the survey was paramount as the entire study depended on the results; thus, conducting a pilot study was paramount.

Pilot Study

Prior to the launch of the study, a soft launch was conducted (N=8) to test for validity and understandability of the survey tool to be utilized. Pilot testing is beneficial because it provides insight into potential issues associated with the research protocol as well as whether the instrument is appropriate for studying the concept (Van Teijlingen, Hundley, and Graham, 2001). Piloting also allows the researcher to run through the process of data collection, clarify any areas of ambiguity, and enhance reliability (Padgett, 2008). Pilot testing also provided an opportunity to test the variables that comprise the type of discretion Lipsky described in the street level bureaucrat theory mentioned above. Possibly the most important benefit of pilot testing was to determine the practicality of the instrument, the approximate length of the time commitment for participants and to identify questions that needed rewording.

Categories of Respondents

Licensure: The state of Louisiana is in recognition of numerous levels of the licensure of social workers; thus, it was important for all levels to be represented in this study. The following categories apply: RSW – the Registered Social Worker, CSW – Certified Social Worker, LMSW – Licensed Master Social Worker, LCSW – Licensed Clinical Social Worker, and LCSW/BACS – Licensed Clinical Social Worker- Board Approved Clinical Supervisor.

The survey was sent to 7200 Louisiana social workers. The number of responses was 954, of which a maximum of 922 were usable. However, the number of cases will vary across tables because of missing data on different questions. To determine how representative of the population this study responses were, the results were compared to the current social work license record reported by the state. These numbers are slightly different from those at the time of the study, but there is no reason to believe that they vary significantly. As can be seen from Table 1, distribution of licenses within the sample is pretty close that within the state. After checking the distribution of licenses, I combined CSW with RSW because there were so few of the former and they have similar degrees of independence within the social work profession.

Table 1 State and Study Licensure Stats Compared

	Licensure	Percent	Study Licensure Data (N)	Percent	State Licensure Data (N)
	CSW	6%	14	2%	472
	RSW	19%	103	13%	1550
	LMSW	27%	241	29%	2240
	LCSW	36%	339	40%	2999
	LCSW-BACS	12%	132	16%	959
Total		100%	829	100%	8220

Two other control variables were collected: levels of experience and work setting. There is no population data on these variables, so they cannot be used to judge the representativeness of the sample. I present the data here to show that there is considerable variation in the sample. The number of cases reported in the following two tables will vary from the licensure numbers because of missing data.

- **Experience:** Social work experience encompasses internships, volunteering, and jobs held in the field. Moreover, the scope of practice of social workers includes varied

activities such as supportive counseling, advocacy, information and referral, community organization and policy administration. Below participant data reporting their experience. Entry-level social workers reported having five years of experience or less. There were 14% of the study participants that reported entry-level work. Mid-career social workers have between five years and ten years' experience; Experienced social workers have between 10- and 20-years' experience; Late career social workers have greater than 20 years' experience.

Table 2 Participant Experience

Career Level	Percent	N
Entry-level	14%	113
Mid-Career	19%	155
Experienced	30%	256
Late-Career	36%	299
Total	100%	823

- **Settings:** The street-level bureaucracy theory was based on the observation of public workers who are highly regulated by policies. Public workers, according to this theory, are all treated as a homogeneous unit. The study obtained information from social workers from a variety of settings so that this theory could be tested. Policy implementation occurs in a variety of challenging environments in which frontline workers are charged with implementing potentially ambiguous policy mandates. Below is a summary of the workplace settings of participants of this study.

Table 3 Work Setting of Participants

Work Settings	Percent	N
Schools/ Educational	18%	132
Hospital/ Health Service	38%	284
Business/ Non-Profit	18%	136
Government	26%	198
Total	100%	750

Summary

From the results of the survey, social workers are disbursed across a variety of work settings. Within these work settings, social workers have different levels of experience and licensure. Despite the street-level bureaucracy theory that treats them like a homogenous unit, this study indicates that social workers are heterogeneous as they vary by experience, licensure, and working conditions.

Chapter V: Findings

As indicated in the previous chapter, the survey results were divided in to three categories:

1. To what extent do the conditions Lipsky describes in the street level bureaucrat theory fit social workers in Louisiana?

2. Do Louisiana social workers perceive discretion? If so, then how do they use it?"

3. What control variables are significant in examining the differences within and between groups of participants?

In this chapter, each category and the associated results to the survey questions will be presented.

I first present the descriptive statistics for the first two of these questions. Then I create composite scales from these variables and analyze them using the control variables (category 3).

Category 1: Conditions Believed to Foster Discretion

As discussed in the previous chapters, the results of the survey will be presented based on the three categories. Table 4 provides an overview of seven of the 11 variables from the first category: To what extent do the conditions Lipsky describes in the street level bureaucracy theory fit social workers in Louisiana? According to Lipsky (1980), street-level bureaucrats have working conditions that include being subjected to ambiguous role expectations, physical or psychological threats, and lack of adequate resources to implement public policies. The variables in this category capture the structural dimensions of the street-level bureaucracy theory in terms of perceived organizational characteristics.

The answer choices for the variables in Table 4 were on a Likert type scale. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the questions being asked based on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (No Extent or none) through 5 (Very Great Extent). Each variable was given a one- or two-word title for use in the table.

a. To what extent are the resources you have adequate to meet client specific needs? (Client Resources)
b. To what extent does your place of work (i.e. office, hospital, etc.) have enough resources to serve the targeted population? (Workplace Resources)
c. To what extent does your workload vary over time? (Workload)

d. To what extent do you find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented in your workload? (Standards)
e. To what extent do you perform the same tasks from day to day? (Routines)
f. How often are you expected to report to management? (Report)
g. During a normal work week, how often do exceptions arise if you encounter work for which policies are unclear? (Ambiguity)

The results of the respondent's perceptions of organizational policies are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 Variables Associated with Discretion

Variable	None (%)	Little (%)	Some (%)	Great (%)	Very Great (%)	N
Client Resources	3	11	41	34	11	829
Workplace Resources	3	19	42	27	10	823
Workload	5	18	48	22	7	894
Standards	5	19	45	26	6	853
Routines	4	7	31	40	18	899
Report	22	37	12	12	6	861
Ambiguity	2	6	18	47	28	847

It is difficult to see relationships between and across the variables when there are multiple categories within each. The variables in the above table were re-coded to analyze them as they relate to each other. The categories (no extent, little extent, some extent, great extent, very great extent) for each variable in Table 4 were collapsed into three: rarely, sometimes and most times.". Like discretion itself, there is not an agreed-upon measure of how individuals might interpret "rarely," "sometimes," and "most times." The variable "ambiguity" was re-coded so that the circumstances that promote the use of discretion are on the left column labeled "rarely." Each interpretation varies, and thus there is no way to determine if a significant difference exists

between the individual interpretations. The categories that were originally labeled "No Extent" and "Little Extent" were combined to form a category "rarely" as indicated in Table 5.

According to street-level bureaucrat theory, the column labeled rarely would be indicative of frontline work in which discretion is most evident. The work that street-level bureaucrats engage in according to the theory is characterized by the unavailability of resources, both personal and organizational, the existence of psychological threats, and ambiguous or unattainable role expectations. According to Lipsky, these working conditions cause street-level bureaucrats to develop coping mechanisms that make their jobs simpler. Coping mechanisms are believed to lead to an inevitable use of discretion that is typical street-level behavior.

The categories "Great Extent" and "Very Great Extent" were combined to form the "Most times" category, while "Some Extent" was relabeled to indicate "Sometimes." It would be expected, based on the street level bureaucracy theory, that these two categories are not necessarily indicative of street-level working conditions or are not as evident as those in the category labeled "rarely."

Table 5 Variables Associated with Discretion (recoded data)

Variable	Rarely	Sometimes	Most times	N
Client Resources	14%	41%	45%	829
Workplace Resources	22%	42%	37%	823
Workload	23%	48%	29%	894
Standards	24%	45%	32%	853
Routines	11%	31%	58%	899
Report	59%	23%	18%	861
Ambiguity	8%	18%	75%	847

Client Resources: To what extent are the resources you have adequate to meet client specific needs?

According to Lipsky, inadequate resources is one characteristic of street-level working conditions that leads to the use of discretion in decision making on the frontlines. When resources are inadequate to meet the need of clients, workers may have to make choices regarding who get resources and to what extent unless there are guidelines establishing priorities. Table 5 indicates that 14% of workers, those on the low end of the variable labeled "Adequate," perceive that organizational resources rarely meet the needs of clients. This low end is important in identifying whether the street-level bureaucracy theory is applicable.

According to the above table, 45% of those surveyed perceive that the resources allocated for the targeted populations by their respective organization, via funders/ stakeholders/ etc., meet client-specific needs most times. Further, the table depicts that 41% of participants reported that resources are sometimes adequate to meet client-specific needs. There is very little difference between those scores obtained from the survey that report adequate resources most times (45%) and sometimes (41%).

The main point is that scarcity of resources is far from universal. Lipsky does not specify how widespread scarcity is, only that it fosters the use of discretion by workers. Table 5 indicates that only a small percentage of respondents deal with this problem most of the time. Most workers experience it intermittently.

Workplace Resources: To what extent does your place of work (i.e., office, hospital, etc.) have enough resources to serve the targeted population?

This question is similar to the preceding one in that it deals with resources, but in this case, the resources are for office use in serving clients rather than being given to clients directly. It is not clear whether respondents made this distinction. The results are similar. Table 5 shows that about 22% of the participants that indicate that organizational resources are rarely enough to meet the needs of the targeted population in their work environment. In general, public services offered by programs are finite and usually cannot be replenished once depleted. If resources are replenished, "pressures for additional services utilizing those resources are forthcoming" (Lipsky, 1980:33). Additional resources are always accompanied by an increase in demand; thus, demands for resources will always exceed supply. When this occurs, street-level bureaucrats tend to make decisions about a) who will be granted access to programs to obtain the limited supplies and b) how much each will receive (Lipsky, 1980). The decisions made are a result of coping mechanisms in which street-level bureaucrats attempt to mold their job duties and clients in such a way that makes conflicting demands manageable.

While 42% of social workers report having adequate resources some of the time to meet client-specific needs, only 37% report that organizational resources are enough to meet the needs of the population they serve most times. The results indicate that there certainly are situations in which social workers encounter discrepancies between supply and demand. Programs have limits on the amount of the resource that each client receives. Those limitations may or may not be adequate to fully address the needs of the population that the program was intended to serve.

Workload: To what extent does your workload vary over time?

According to the street-level bureaucracy theory, unattainable expectations, like high caseloads on the job, are indicative of the working environment of street-level bureaucrats.

Lipsky speaks in terms of caseload, which is the number of clients the street-level bureaucrats are assigned to help navigate through the process of service eligibility. According to the SLB theory, high caseloads limit time for decision making. Street-level bureaucrats make decisions quickly because they are face to face with "clients who interpret indecision as incompetence or lack of authority, with consequences for subsequent client interactions" (Lipsky, 1980: 30). When there are high caseloads, street-level bureaucrats develop routines and simplifications of their work to make their jobs sensible and more manageable.

Caseload is important because it affects how services are rendered; however, social work practice includes more than just the cases assigned. The survey question asked participants about their workloads instead of their caseloads in terms of what is indicated in the street level bureaucracy theory. Workloads encompass documenting, case planning, scheduling facilitating, and coordinating. The workload is a measure that better reflects the needs of clients and the actual work completed by the worker rather than just a representation of the number of cases assigned (Carson et al., 1996).

According to Lipsky (1980), the unpredictable and complex nature of street-level bureaucracies enable workers to make decisions that may not be apparent to managers, the bureaucracy, or the public. This unpredictability is a major aspect of the field of social work. Social work practice is an "untidy, unpredictable business. The best that social work can do is to be wise about this uncertainty and complexity" (Howe 2009:193). The unpredictability of the workloads makes it more likely that social workers will encounter situations in which they must make autonomous decisions. Social workers' workloads shift periodically. There is no reliable way to predict the volume of referrals, consulations, or the nature of the situations that social workers will encounter, especially when resources are limited.

Table 5 demonstrates the unpredictability of the social work profession. It shows that 23% of participants perceive that their workloads vary rarely. This could indicate that workloads are consistently low or high. The way in which the survey question was framed makes it impossible to determine the direction from this question alone. The table also provides information regarding those that report that their workload sometimes varies (48%) and most times (29%). The results indicate that workloads are not consistently heavy as is typically the view in public service organizations in which social workers are employed. Nonetheless, opportunities for autonomous decisions exist. The street-level bureaucracy theory acknowledges that discretion varies by the street level task at hand. Variations in workload can alter street-level behavior, but discretion itself is "difficult, if not impossible" to reduce or eliminate (Lipsky, 2010: 15).

Standards: To what extent do you find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented in your workload?

In addition to resources, the lack of relevant procedures may also contribute to the latitude of discretion on the job. The table depicts that 32% of participants find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented by clients in their workloads most of the time, and 45% find that sometimes operating procedures fit.

Procedures that do not fit situations in the workload may present a situation in which exceptions can be made. Many studies determined that when exceptions are made, they are based on the relationship between workers and clients or the workers' determination of client worthiness. Client worthiness is based on who the street-level bureaucrat believes the clients are in general (Maynard- Moody and Musheno, 2003).

The decision making involved with producing outputs is seemingly multi-faceted (Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003:245). From a political standpoint, street-level bureaucrats are expected to perform tasks with specified outputs according to policy directives; the organizations at which they are employed are tasked with providing them with resources to produce those outputs; clients want street-level bureaucrats to take in to account their individual/unique situations; and from a professional standpoint street-level bureaucrats are required to follow ethical principles (Hupe and Hill, 2007). However, when procedures do not quite fit the population, street-level bureaucrats are left to make judgments about clients based on their personal beliefs or paradigms.

Routines: To what extent do you perform the same tasks from day-to-day?

I have labeled this variable "routines," but it is important to distinguish two types. One is the official organization routines that bureaucracies use to get their work done. It is the same concept as standard operating procedures. The other type is the set of unofficial routines that, according to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats develop to manipulate their work by to cope with work uncertainties and pressures (Lipsky, 1980). That is why the question did not use the word "routine," but asked about performing the "same tasks."

In the street level bureaucracy theory, Lipsky (1980:86) discusses common routines of frontline workers, including those that aim to ration limited services, control clients, and conserve work-related resources. Examples of routinization are characterized by workers "skimming" off the top or "creaming" instead of treating clients the same. Both are processes by which street-level bureaucrats choose (or skim off the top) those clients who seem most likely to succeed in terms of bureaucratic success criteria (Winter, 2002).

It is apparent, from the above table, that 58% of study respondents find that they, for the most part, perform the same daily tasks, while 11% indicate that they rarely engage in routine work and 31% are in the middle. The 11% would indicate street-level bureaucrat behavior according to theory. That is, 11% of the study's participants likely have complex tasks on the job, and the ability to devise mechanisms for task manageability. Routinization makes difficult tasks less psychologically taxing. Routine client cases are easier to handle, as they require do not require planning (Winter 2002). Routines can dominate work activities that take more planning. At its onset, routines are a means to deal with complex tasks on the job but end up becoming a reflection of agency services and the policy from which the program was developed (Lipsky, 1980:86).

Report: How often are you expected to report to management?

According to Lipsky (1980:19), "street-level bureaucrats perceive their interests as separate from managers' interests, and they will seek to secure those interests." This perception of separate interests leads street-level bureaucrats to pursue security in the goals they have identified. In the street level bureaucratic theory, Lipsky assumes the homogeneity of managers and that "they act simply as policy lieutenants" (Evans, 2011:72). This presumes that managers' goals align with that of administration and are different from the goals of the frontline workers.

Despite the contextual conflict between street-level bureaucrats and their managers, they rely on each other: The idea of mutual dependence may be apparent with the results of Table 5. According to Table 5, 18% of participants perceive that they are required to report to management most times while 59%, more than half of the participants of this study, perceive that they report rarely. The results indicate that the participants have high independence on the job

and more opportunities to exercise discretion outside the watchful eyes of management. This autonomy and independence from authority can be important in molding clients into compliance with rules that are loosely based on written policies.

Lipsky (1980) acknowledges that managers in bureaucracies accept their limited ability to control workers and thus find ways to benefit mutually. The idea that managers are in acceptance of their limited ability to control workers certainly seems to be evident in the survey results of this variable. It is possible that there is a mutual understanding between workers and managers, so much so that the need to micromanage is greatly diminished.

Ambiguity: During a normal work week, how often do exceptions arise if you encounter work for which policies are unclear?

Policies offer customary ways to deal with social problems as top-level bureaucrats see them. Therefore, the policies are not likely to describe social problems as they occur on the frontlines. Often, policies have a vague language with multiple goals that may be conflicting. According to theory, street-level bureaucrats deliver policies to clients. The SLB theory states that street-level bureaucrats are policymakers. They are responsible for implementing policies, vague or not, on the frontlines. Street-level bureaucrats are left to their own devices on the frontlines to interpret policies and must make decisions about how to implement.

The table provides revealing results regarding policy clarity. Approximately 75% of the sample reported that policies were clear most of the time (or rarely unclear). This indicates that most of the participants have a clear understanding of policy objectives. It is unclear whether this policy understanding comes from professional training or specific policy-based training. Only 8% reported that policies are rarely clear. According to the street-level bureaucracy theory, this is

where discretion is most likely to occur. Confusion due to policy ambiguity requires that workers make decisions on how to apply them in the field.

The following four variables in Table 6 also deal with circumstances that could promote discretion, but they are not included in Table 5 because the responses are given in percentages of time, rather than the less specific concepts of rarely, sometimes, and most times.

Table 6 Time Estimates of Conditions Promoting Discretion

Variables	**0-20%**	**21-40%**	**41-60%**	**61-80%**	**81-100%**	**N**
Office	19%	12%	15%	16%	40%	922
Face	11%	18%	16%	34%	21%	910
Overload	34%	18%	17%	17%	14%	888
Written	26%	18%	20%	24%	12%	861

For explanatory purposes, 0-20% and 21-40% shown in Table 6 were combined to form one category. The same was done for 61-80% and 81-100%. The middle column, 41-60% remained unchanged. The recoded variables are depicted in Table 7.

Table 7 Time Estimates of Conditions Promoting Discretion (recoded data)

Variable	**0-40%**	**41-60%**	**61-100%**	**N**
Office	31%	15%	56%	922
Face	29%	16%	55%	910
Overload	52%	17%	31%	888
Written	42%	20%	36%	861

Office: What percentage of your workday is spent in the office?

Proximity to managers is believed to affect the decisions made by street-level bureaucrats. The above presents the variable for the participants' account of their time spent in

the office. Approximately 56% of participants report that they spend between 61-100% of their time in the office. It may be that they are more subject to managerial oversight than are those who spend more time in the field. The question does not directly measure managerial contact. The following question gives a clearer picture.

Face: How much of your work deals directly with clients face to face?

According to Table 7, 55% of the participants report that 61-100% of their work deals directly with clients face to face. This might seem inconsistent with the fact that 56 percent of respondents spend most of their time in the office. However, it may be that some client encounters take place in worker's offices. The issue is important because Lipsky's (1980) focus was on street level bureaucrats that come face to face with clients. This face to face interaction is the defining "moment" in determining how street-level bureaucrats will provide needed services. The interaction between the client and the street level bureaucrat impacts the decision making of workers. Workers deal with face to face contact with clients both literally and figuratively. Face-to-face contact with clients assists workers in determining who is deserving of the limited services offered.

There were 29% of participants that report having 0-40% of the daily work spent face to face with clients. The participants who rarely have this connection with their clients could be the social workers in administrative type positions or who provide services by phone or online. The street-level behavior indicated by the street-level bureaucracy theory may not be as evident in this group of workers as that of workers with more time spent face to face with clients.

Overload: About what percent of the time are you faced with more work than you can process in normal business hours?

Limited budgets and resources often plague bureaucracies. The volume and variety of work can be overwhelming to workers. According to the above data, 31% of respondents report experiencing more work than they can process during normal business hours, between 61-100% of the time. The theory predicts that these participants are more likely to cope with the uncertainties of their job by setting priorities among their tasks. They do this by focusing on selected clients, cases, and solutions, and they "invent benign modes of mass processing that permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and successfully." (Lipsky, 1980: xii). This will be analyzed further upon investigation of how participants deal with work overload.

Written: When considering the various situations that arise in performing your work, what percentage of the time do you have written procedures for dealing with them?

The above table shows that 44% of participants find that there are written procedures to deal with work situations 0-40% of the time. Street-level behavior would be most evident at this level if there are no formal procedures or directives given to workers to follow. The table also indicates that 36% of participants report having written procedures to deal with the various situations 61-100% of the time. According to theory, street-level bureaucrats will modify their job descriptions to join objectives with available resources and change how they define their clients to bridge the gap between objectives and accomplishments made (Maynard- Moody & Musheno 2012; 2003; Hill & Hupe 2009; Lipsky 1980; Bartels 2013). If there are no written procedures to follow, workers will improvise.

Summary

There are two main points to be taken from the data presented in this section. First, while the conditions that promote discretion in street-level bureaucracy do occur, they do not occur all

of the time or even most of the time. Second, there is considerable variance across the conditions. For example, policy ambiguity seems to present less of a problem for the participants than resource constraints and workloads. This again provides support for the notion of the unpredictability of bureaucracies as discussed by the street-level bureaucracy theory. Work-related procedures are also clear for the most part, as indicated by Table 5 (75% clear most of the time) with only 36% perceiving that written procedures fit actual client situations (Table 7). This indicates that not all organizational procedures are written but that participants have a clear understanding of those procedures, nonetheless.

More than half of the participants report that they spend at least 61% of their time in the office. Office work, most times, places workers physically closer to managers and the oversight described in theory. However, those that report more office work seems to be parallel to the results depicted in Table 5 for the variable labeled "report" in which 59% of participants perceive that they rarely report to management. A possible interpretation is that while workers spend most of their time in the office, their managers are not located in the office. In the last few years, there has been an increase in telework in social services which would allow for workers and managers to be miles away from each other. Another possibility is that the workers who are in the office are constantly monitored by management as they are in the same physical location. In this instance, the working conditions would allow for the reduction in requirements to report to management directly since the oversight routinely occurs with workers being in the office the majority of the time. The results are too unclear at this point to definitively provide an explanation.

In response to the time spent in the office, 31% of participants reported 0-40% of their work occurs in the office, 15% reported 41-60% and 56% reported 61-100%. Interestingly, this data indicates that it occurs at a similar frequency to those participants that report coming face to

face with clients (29%, 15%, and 55%). This possibly suggests that face-to-face encounters are more likely to occur in the office rather than in the field. This is an interesting result as social work is considered an occupational group that meets clients where they are, literally and figuratively. The fact that participants report that most of their encounters with clients are office-based interactions may suggest a shift in the profession or the idea of front-line work in general.

Category 2: Behaviors believed to be utilized when discretion exits

Moving beyond the conditions that promote discretion, this section deals with how the respondents report using the opportunities for discretion.

The first question is “Do Louisiana social workers perceive discretion?

To begin to understand if the perception of discretion exists among survey participants, they were asked the following question: "Are there situations in which you have to make decisions on how to handle your work?" The table below indicates the summary of participant responses.

Table 8 Autonomy in Handling Work

Response	Percent	N
Yes	96%	850
No	4%	36

According to Table 8, the answer to this question is "yes." The results indicated that 96% of participants perceive that they have some autonomy in handling their work. According to Lewin (1936), people behave based on their perceptions of reality, rather than on reality itself. The results of the study indicate that almost all Louisiana social workers perceive discretion in

their work. Given that practically all social workers perceive discretion, in the following section I will explore a few conditions that influence decision making.

Exceptions and Tasks:

1. How much authority to you have in determining how exceptions are to be handled if you encounter situations for which policies are unclear? (Exceptions)
2. How much influence do you have in determining what tasks to perform day to day? (Tasks)

Table 9 provides further insight into how much authority and influence participants perceive:

Table 9 Authority and Influence over Work

Variables	None	Little	Some	Quite a Bit	Very Much	N
Exceptions	6%	16%	32%	27%	19%	843
Tasks	4%	8%	21%	33%	35%	892

For analytical purposes, the above data was recorded as follows: The categories labeled "none" and "little" were combined to form a new category "rarely." The category "some" is labeled "sometimes," and finally, the categories labeled "quite a bit" and "very much" was combined to form the category "most times."

Table 10 Authority and Influence over Work (recoded data)

Variables	Rarely	Sometimes	Most times	N
Exceptions	22%	32%	46%	843
Tasks	12%	21%	68%	892

Approximately 68% of participants report having influence over tasks they perform most times. Only 12% indicates that this is a rare occurrence. Regarding authority in determining exceptions when policies are unclear, 46% of participants report that most times they make

decisions in determining the courses of action in these instances. These results elaborate the findings of Table 9 by demonstrating two of the ways in which respondents exercise discretion – making exceptions and determining which tasks to perform.

Decisions due to: If there are situations in which you have to make decisions about your work, is it due to the following:

1. More cases than you can process in the allotted time frame
2. Ambiguous or contradictory policies
3. Unique characteristics of cases, not covered by policy
4. Disagreement with policy
5. Not applicable

The choices provided to participants were combined based on policy (Ambiguous or contradictory policies, unique characteristics not covered by policy, and disagreement with policy) and workload (More cases than you can process in the allotted time frame). The answer choice "not applicable" was recoded as "NA".

According to Table 11, 38% of participants report that they make decisions about their work due to policy while 29% report that their decisions are due to workload. Interestingly, 34% of participants report that their decision making is neither due to policies nor workload.

Table 11 Decisions Due to Policy or Workload

Variables	Percent	N
Policy	38%	317
Workload	29%	240
Other	34%	284
Total	100%	841

Overload: If you experience work overload, do you use the following?

1. Work after hours?
2. Prioritize cases by addressing the most critical cases first?
3. Prioritize cases by first addressing those with the quickest resolutions?
4. Prioritize cases by addressing those that you can help the most first?
5. Spend less time on cases?
6. Ask for help?
7. Refer cases elsewhere?
8. Other?

This question provides insight into how participants handle work overload. Table 12 indicates that the vast majority of participants either prioritize the most critical cases (46%) or work overtime (34%). Further, 46% of participants report that cases in which clients with the most critical needs are prioritized. The remaining options were picked by only a few respondents. There were 5% of participants that reported that they identify and prioritize cases for clients that they perceive can be impacted most. Approximately 4% of participants indicated that they choose to ask for help or refer cases elsewhere when experience overload. The referral system in social work goes both ways. Only 2% reported that they prioritize cases that they perceive can be worked through quickly. Only 1% report that they spend less time on cases. The

responses indicated are inconsistent with the street-level bureaucracy theory in that they are not self-serving on the part of the social workers. As noted above, these results could reflect a normal tendency to give answers that enhance respondents' self-images.

Table 12 Work Overload

Variables	Percent	N
Prioritize Most Critical	46%	361
Work After Hrs.	34%	263
Prioritize Impact Most	5%	35
Other	5%	40
Ask for Help	4%	32
Refer	4%	28
Prioritize Quickest	2%	17
Less Time	1%	10
Total	101%*	786

*Percentages do not total to 100% due to rounding.

Unique Circumstances: If you encounter cases for which policies are unclear or do not fit unique client circumstances, to what extent are you able to utilize professional training, professional experience, peer or superior consult and professional ethics?

Table 13 Handle Unique Circumstances

Variables	None (%)	Little (%)	Some (%)	Great (%)	Very Great (%)	N
Experience	2%	4%	12%	41%	42%	821
Peer Consultation	3%	10%	20%	34%	34%	819
Superior Consultation	7%	8%	21%	29%	35%	821
Prof. Ethics	2%	3%	13%	38%	45%	829

For analytical purposes, Table 13 was recoded as depicted in Table 14: The categories labeled "none" and "little" were combined to form a new category "rarely." The category labeled

"some" is labeled "sometimes." The final two categories, labeled "great" and "very great" were combined to form "most times." The re-coded data is depicted in the table below.

Table 14 Handle Unique Circumstances (recoded data)

Variables	Rarely (%)	Sometimes (%)	Most times (%)	N
Experience	6%	12%	83%	821
Peer Consultation	13%	20%	68%	819
Superior Consultation	15%	21%	64%	821
Prof. Ethics	5%	13%	83%	829

According to Table 14, respondents rely very heavily on experience and professional ethics when policies are unclear or do not fit clients' unique circumstances. Regarding consultations when policies are unclear, the table indicates that there is a strong reliance on peers and superiors alike. Reliance on professional ethics and consultations, especially consultations with superiors, are inconsistent with SLB theory, which emphasizes workers' desire for independence.

Summary

The above tables indicate that social workers utilize a variety of behaviors when they perceive discretion in their work. First, they choose to address critical client cases. Critical cases might include those that lack necessities of life, such as food, water, and shelter. Social workers often work after hours so that these clients have those needs met. If a unique situation should arise, social workers report that they utilize previous experiences or professional ethics most of the time but that they also rely on consultation with peers and superiors. This picture is inconsistent with SLB theory, which depicts workers as seeking independence in order to use self-serving routines in reaction to environmental pressures.

Category 3: Participant Categories

The previous sections of this chapter presented responses from the entire sample. This is in keeping with Lipsky and much of the literature that treats street-level bureaucrats as homogenous. The results, however, indicate substantial variance among the target population of social workers in Louisiana. The next question is what accounts for the variance? My survey asked about three job-related characteristics: licensure level, experience, and current work setting. The substantial number of responses to the survey permit further analysis.

I attempted to group the responses to the individual questions from Category 1 into additive scales. There were not enough questions to build separate scales for workload and resources, so I combined them. The logic behind this decision is that workload and resources are closely related although they seem different. The concept of workload can be challenging depending on the resources available to complete the work. The new scale is labeled "resource constraints". Recall that under the SLB theory, constrained resources force workers to make choices, which promote discretion. The questions for this scale are listed below:

1. To what extent does your workload vary over time?
2. About what percent of the time are you faced with more cases than you can process during normal business hours?
3. To what extent are the resources you have adequate to meet client specified needs?
4. To what extent does your place of work have enough resources to serve the targeted population?

The responses to the individual questions were presented in Tables 5 and 7.

The additive scale for the variable resource constraint is in Table 15. I dichotomized each variable as close to the midpoint as possible and assigned values of zero and one with one being pro discretion.

Table 15 Additive Scale of Resource Constraints

Score	Percent	N
0	24%	132
1	24%	132
2	29%	208
3	23%	164
Total	100%	704

Adding the values produced the resource constraint scale presented in Table 16. I dichotomized this scale into scores of 0 and 1, with 1 being pro-discretion.

Table 16 Resource Constraints Scale

Score	Percent	N
0	47%	332
1	53%	372
Total	100%	704

Similarly, the questions below were included in the computation of policy discretion:

1. When considering the various situations that arise in performing your work, what percentage of the time do you have written procedures for dealing with them?
2. During a normal week, how often do exceptions arise if you encounter work for which policies are unclear?
3. How much authority do you have in determining how exceptions are to be handled if you encounter situations for which policies are unclear?

4. To what extent do you find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented in your workload?
5. How much influence do you have in determining what tasks to perform day to day?

Table 17 Additive Policy Discretion Scale

Score	Percent	N
0	12%	109
1	29%	257
2	34%	302
3	18%	157
4	7%	60
5	1%	10
Total	100%	895

This scale (Table 17) is not as evenly dispersed as the resource constraint scale. Interestingly, a sizable minority of respondents (12%) scored zero, and three fourths of them picked two or fewer of the policy discretion options. This suggests that policy ambiguity is not a significant issue for most of the social workers surveyed. In most situations they feel that the know what they are supposed to do. This result does not negate the possibility that contradictory or ambiguous policies cause social workers to make choices, as SLB theory holds, but it does suggest that such occurrences are not the norm. As with the resource constraint scale, I dichotomized the policy discretion scale for use in the following analysis.

Table 18 Policy Discretion Scale

Score	Percent	N
0	41%	366
1	59%	529
Total	100%	895

The next question is whether the resource and policy scales vary by the categories of experience, licensure, and work setting. I utilized the crosstabulation function within SPSS on each variable with each of the control variables and calculated statistical significance using chi-square. For ease of discussion, I present the results in combined tables that list the percentage giving the pro-discretion responses for each category of the control variables.

Table 19, for example, depicts the variable "social work experience". It is divided into four categories from "entry level" to "experienced" and presented in the first column. The second and third columns present the percentages and numbers of pro-discretion responses for the resource constraint variable. The fourth and fifth columns present the same information for the policy discretion variable. In essence, there are two independent analyses presented in Table 19, and statistical significance is indicated separately for each by the asterisks next to the variable name.

Table 19 Resource Constraints and Policy Discretion by Experience

Social Work Experience	Resource Constraints*	N	Policy Discretion*	N
Entry Level (0-5yrs)	63%	88	57%	113
Mid-Career (5-10yrs)	53%	126	52%	155
Experienced (10-20yrs)	58%	222	54%	256
Late Career (+20yrs)	46%	264	68%	299

*p<.05, **p<.01

In the column labeled "resource constraints," we see that the entry level workers are the most likely to report experiencing resource constraints and the late career social workers are the least likely. The two middle categories of experience produce results in between. Under policy discretion we see that a majority of respondents report conditions promoting discretion at all experience levels, but the entry level is still the lowest and the late career level stands out from

the group as the highest level. The results of the chi-square test indicate that both resource constraints and policy discretion based on social work experience are statistically significant.

In terms of the SLB theory, workers with more experience find that resources are adequate because they may be less likely to engage in gatekeeping that can permit or deny access to resources, and thus do not deal directly with clients. They are likely to hold higher positions within their organization's hierarchy or they may have more access to resources. Social workers with more experience are less likely to fit the definition of street-level bureaucrats. This finding supports the SLB theory but also highlights the difficulty of applying it to entire professions without differentiating positions and roles within professions and the organizations for which the workers are employed.

The relationship between experience and policy discretion is more difficult to interpret in terms of SLB theory. There is not a great deal of difference in the discretion reported by the lowest three levels. The fact that the most senior level workers report the most policy discretion is consistent with management practices in almost all organizations. It is less consistent with the SLB theory's characterization of street-level workers seeking to maintain a distance from management so that they can manipulate rules to their own advantage. The evidence from the survey indicates that social workers tend to seek advice from peers or managers and refer cases. An interpretation of this can be construed as more senior workers will encounter more the difficult cases upon referral or consultation and are more likely to have decision making authority based on policies. Of course, these interpretations depend on the assumption that organizational positions are based on experience and that the scales used in my study accurately measure discretion. The results should be considered hypotheses, rather than conclusions, as is common in exploratory studies.

The table below compares the ranks of each licensure type within the columns. The majority of RSWs and LMSW participants report that their discretion is high due to resource constraints. In terms of the SLB theory, this finding is accurate in that these workers that deal directly with clients and encounter limitations based on resources. The resources that they have access to are not enough to serve the clients they encounter. The state licensing board mandates that RSWs and LMSWs receive supervision from an LCSW or LCSW-BACS; thus, RSWs and LMSWs rely on higher level workers who may have access to additional resources. The chi-square test confirms that resource constraints and policy discretion findings are statistically significant.

Table 20 Resource Constraints and Policy Discretion by License

Licensure	Resource Constraint**	N	Policy Discretion*	N
RSW	63%	79	51%	103
LMSW	60%	205	59%	241
LCSW	49%	297	62%	338
LCSW-BACS	45%	111	70%	132

*p<.05, **p<.01

While the majority of lower level workers experience resource constraints, LCSW's and LCSW-BACS report that resource constraints are less of an issue. Their discretion is due to policy. In terms of the licensure status, these results can also be interpreted based on licensure requirements by the state of Louisiana. LCSW and LCSW-BACS are likely to have more experience due to the requirements necessary to achieve the LCSW status. Prior to becoming an LCSW, an LMSW must complete 5,760 hours of post graduate social work with at least 3,840 hours of the post graduate social work under the supervision of a board approved clinical supervisor (BACS). The additional experience would likely place LCSW and LCSW-BACS workers in higher positions within their organizations and less likely to interact directly with

clients. They are also able work independently. This could also mean that they have more decision-making authority based on policies. These results are consistent with SLB theory in that the lowest level workers are more likely to experience resources constraints while the higher level workers have more policy discretion.

Turning to work setting, in Table 21 we see considerable variance across categories. Social workers in schools and government are the most likely to report resource constraints. This fits the conventional wisdom of these institutions being underfunded in relation to the demands for services. Social workers in hospitals and health services report the lowest incidence of resource constraints, again in keeping with conventional wisdom. The business/non-profit category falls in the middle, probably because the two types of institutions tend to cancel each other out in terms of resources. Not surprisingly, social workers in businesses or non-profits report the most policy discretion as the other institutions are all more tightly regulated.

Table 21 Resource Constraints and Policy Discretion by Work Setting

Work Setting	Resource Constraints**	N	Policy Discretion**	N
Grade Schools/ Other Educational	64%	98	54%	127
Hospital/ Other Health Service	47%	236	53%	278
Business/ Non-Profit	56%	102	75%	134
Government	60%	157	50%	195

*p<.05,**p<.01

Summary

The most important conclusion from this section is that social workers vary in the extent to which they fit the model of street-level bureaucrats. The implication for research in this field is the need to look beyond broad categories and more precisely identify the characteristics that

match the model. The characteristics used in this study – experience, licensure, and work settings – could be refined and new characteristics added. A question for future surveys could ask how many people, if any, each respondent supervised. This might be a better way to measure organizational position than relying on experience or licensure.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

The present study considered the SLB theory as its foundation. The theory focuses on the pressures that street-level bureaucrats endure on the job and the actions they take to ease those pressures. According to theory, street-level bureaucrats encounter unfavorable situations when clients' demands exceed available resources. Street-level bureaucrats cope with the situations by using discretion to make their jobs less psychologically taxing. The coping mechanisms that they use thus become effective policy for their clients.

The SLB concept has been widely used, but not widely tested. Almost all empirical investigation is based on case studies. They show the validity of the concept, but not the extent of its application. Although Lipsky's theory focuses on the behaviors of those he refers to as street-level workers, studies have not been able to differentiate behavior by organization levels because of their small numbers of cases. Consequently, the concept gets applied broadly to entire professions. As a result, scholars must often assume that members of certain professions – teachers, police, social workers, etc. – exercise discretion and do so in ways that help them manage their own environments. My study is the first to collect data on a large number of respondents in one of the professions that is characterized by street-level bureaucracy, social work.

In the literature, social workers have been described as “street-level bureaucrats” because of their sense-making (or having flexibility) when implementing policies (Lipsky 1980; Evans & Harris 2004). Social workers have discretion in their work; that is the nature of a profession. They are required to determine what has happened to clients, what is currently happening and what may happen in the future. The SLB theory indicates that street-level bureaucrats develop routines and simplification tools. Unsanctioned coping mechanisms such as rubberstamping, screening and stereotyping limit access to resources and are self-serving, However, in the field of social work individual cases are often too complex for the simple application of standard operating procedures. My research demonstrates that social workers find that their cases are unique and do not fit within policy, thus routinizing cases is not possible.

According to the results of this study, social work within bureaucracies is challenging and often takes place in situations characterized by elevated levels of stress (i.e., unclear job roles) and complexity that requires decision-making (i.e. child protection). Due to these conditions, social workers often consult with one another rather than applying simple devices to ease their work. In addition to this, the SLB theory shares an assumption with much managerialist literature that managers and workers are antagonistic. However, in the context of bureaucracies employing social workers, it appears that this assumption does not hold. Social workers are less likely to avoid contact with management to preserve discretion. They often seek advice from management and peers where the application of policy is unclear as indicated by the results of this study. Most of the social workers indicated that they consult with peers or a superior when client needs are unique.

This study examines the effects of licensure, work setting, and experience on resource constraints and policy discretion. Licensure, work settings, and experience were the chosen

variables due to their importance in the social work profession. Each variable selected was invaluable to this empirical research and has been explained throughout the current thesis. This study provides support for the notion that social workers engage in levels of discretion on the job; however, the perception of discretion does not occur uniformly across the profession as indicated by the SLB theory. The results of my study find that the perception of discretion varies across all levels of social work experience, licensure, and work setting, although in some cases this variation is slight.

A key question is whether social workers' decision-making is done in ways to benefit their clients or serve themselves. My study indicates that the majority of social workers will place client needs above their own by working on cases deemed more critical, not necessarily basing decisions on which will save time. My study found similar results to that of the Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) study. Workers often find that the demands of policy rules, client needs, professional codes of ethics and their own personal value systems conflict. This study indicates that, despite personal conflict, social workers make decisions based on client needs or that of policy directives. Social workers strive to empower clients and support their need for self-determination and autonomy.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions

Q1 Which of the following best describes your current work setting?

- ○ Medical school/ pharmacy school/ or other academic (1)
- ○ Grade schools/ other educational (2)
- ○ Hospital/ other health service (3)
- ○ Business/ non profit (4)
- ○ Government (federal or state) (5)
- ○ Other (6) _____

Q2 What percentage of your work day is spent in the office?

- ○ 0-20% (1)
- ○ 21-40% (2)
- ○ 41-60% (3)
- ○ 61-80% (4)
- ○ 81-100% (5)

Q3 How much of your work deals directly with clients face-to-face?

- ○ None (1)
- ○ About 25% (2)
- ○ About 50% (3)
- ○ About 75% (4)

○ All of my work. (5)

Q4 To what extent do you perform the same tasks from day to day?

○ To no extent (1)

○ Little extent (2)

○ Some extent (3)

○ Great extent (4)

○ Very great extent (5)

Q5 To what extent does your workload vary over time?

○ To no extent (1)

○ Little extent (2)

○ Some extent (3)

○ Great extent (4)

○ Very great extent (5)

Q6 How much influence do you have in determining what tasks to perform day to day?

○ None (1)

○ Little (2)

○ Some (3)

○ Quite a bit (4)

○ Very much (5)

Q7 About what percent of the time are you faced with more cases than you can process during normal business hours?

- ○ None (1)
- ○ 1-20% (2)
- ○ 21-40% (3)
- ○ 41-60% (4)
- ○ 61-80% (5)
- ○ 81-100% (6)

Skip To: Q8 If About what percent of the time are you faced with more cases than you can process during normal b... = None

7a If you experience case overload, which of the following do you use to cope with it?

- ○ Work after hours (1)
- ○ Prioritize the most critical cases (2)
- ○ Prioritize the quickest cases (3)
- ○ Prioritize the cases that you can help the most (4)
- ○ Spend less time on cases (5)
- ○ Ask for help (6)
- ○ Refer cases elsewhere (7)
- ○ Other (8) _____

Q8 Are there situations in which you have to make decisions about how to handle your work?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Skip To: Q8a If Are there situations in which you have to make decisions about how to handle your work? = Yes

Skip To: Q9 If Are there situations in which you have to make decisions about how to handle your work? = No

Q8a If so, is the decision due to any of the following:

- ○ More cases than you can process in allotted time frame (1)
- ○ Ambiguous or contradictory policies (2)
- ○ Unique characteristics of cases, not covered by policy (3)
- ○ Disagreement with policy (4)
- ○ Not applicable (5)

Q9 How often are you expected to report to management?

- ○ Very rarely (1)
- ○ Occasionally (2)
- ○ Quite often (3)
- ○ Very often (4)
- ○ Constantly (5)

Q10 When considering the various situations that arise in performing your work, what percentage of the time do you have written procedures for dealing with them?

- 0-20% (1)
- 21-40% (2)
- 41-60% (3)
- 61-80% (4)
- 81-100% (5)

Q11 To what extent do you find that standard operating procedures fit the situations presented by your clients?

- To no extent (1)
- Little extent (2)
- Some extent (3)
- Great extent (4)
- Very great extent (5)

Q12 During a normal week, how often do client exceptions arise if you encounter cases for which policies are unclear?

- Very rarely (1)
- Occasionally (2)
- Quite often (3)
- Very often (4)

○ Constantly (5)

Q13 How much authority do you have in determining how client exceptions are to be handled if you encounter cases for which policies are unclear?

○ None (1)

○ Little (2)

○ Some (3)

○ Quite a bit (4)

○ Very much (5)

Q14 If you encounter cases for which policies are unclear or do not fit unique client circumstances, to what extent are you able to utilize the following?

	None (1)	Little (2)	Some (3)	Great (4)	Very great (5)
Professional Training (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Professional Experience (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Peer to Peer Consult (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Professional Ethics (4)	○	○	○	○	○
Consult Superiors (5)	○	○	○	○	○

Q15 To what extent are the resources you have adequate to meet client specified needs?

- ○ To no extent (1)
- ○ Little extent (2)
- ○ Some extent (3)
- ○ Great extent (4)
- ○ Very great extent (5)

Q16 To what extent does your place of work (i.e. office, hospital, etc.) have enough resources to serve the targeted population?

- ○ To no extent (1)
- ○ Little extent (2)
- ○ Some extent (3)
- ○ Great extent (4)
- ○ Very great extent (5)

Q17 To what extent does your workload vary over time?

- ○ To no extent (1)
- ○ Little extent (2)
- ○ Some extent (3)
- ○ Great extent (4)
- ○ Very great extent (5)

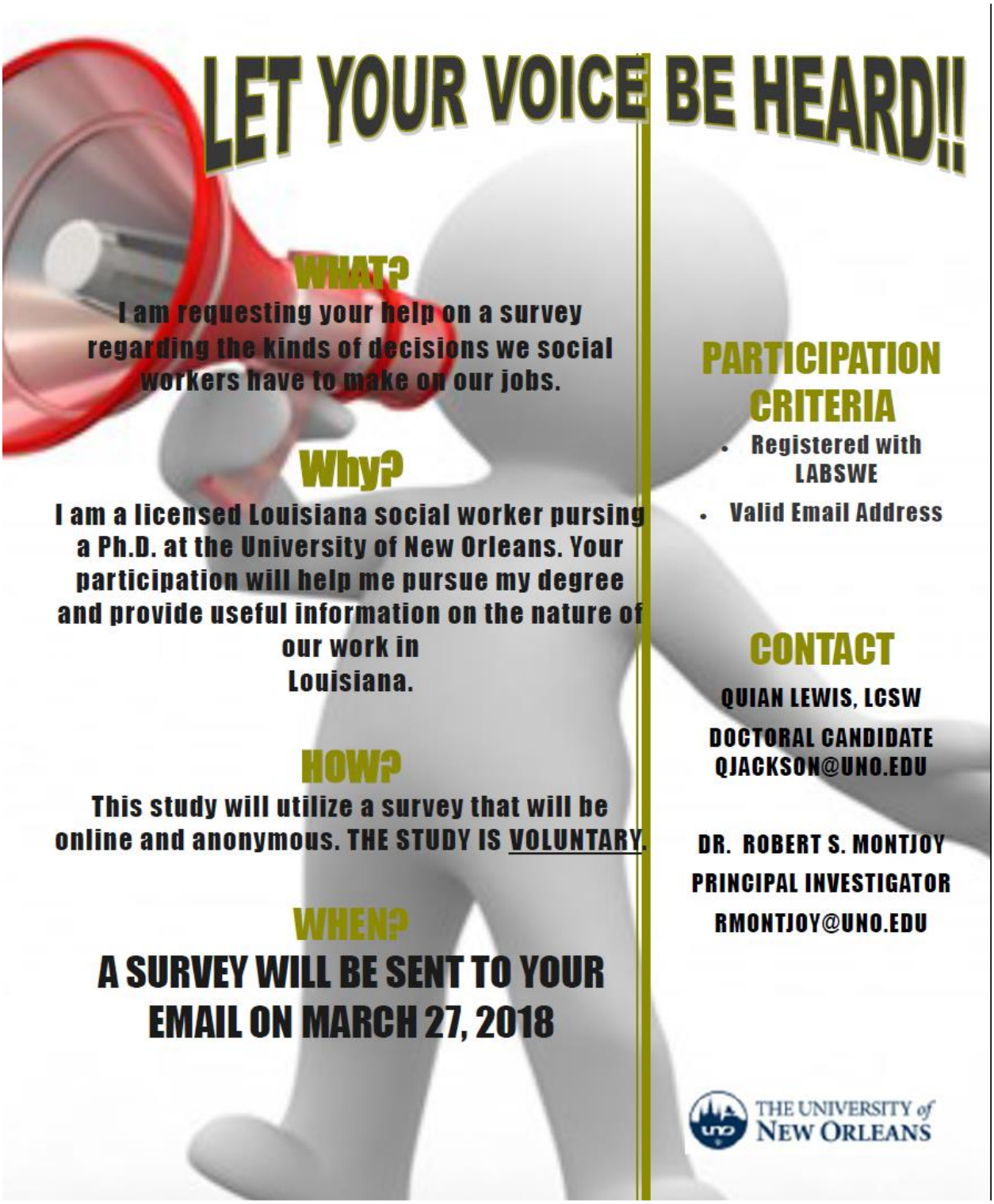
Q18 How many years have you been a social worker?

- 0-5 years (Entry- level) (1)
- 5-10 years (Mid- Career) (2)
- 10-20 years (Experienced) (3)
- >20 years (Late- Career) (4)

Q19 Which of the following best describes your current Louisiana social work license status?

- BSW (1)
- CSW (2)
- RSW (3)
- LMSW (4)
- LCSW (5)
- LCSW- BACS (6)

Appendix B


LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!!
WHAT?
I am requesting your help on a survey regarding the kinds of decisions we social workers have to make on our jobs.
Why?
I am a licensed Louisiana social worker pursing a Ph.D. at the University of New Orleans. Your participation will help me pursue my degree and provide useful information on the nature of our work in Louisiana.
HOW?
This study will utilize a survey that will be online and anonymous. THE STUDY IS VOLUNTARY.
WHEN?
A SURVEY WILL BE SENT TO YOUR EMAIL ON MARCH 27, 2018
PARTICIPATION CRITERIA
Registered with LABSWE
Valid Email Address
CONTACT
QUIAN LEWIS, LCSW
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE
QJACKSON@UNO.EDU
DR. ROBERT S. MONTJOY
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR
RMONTJOY@UNO.EDU
THE UNIVERSITY of NEW ORLEANS

Vita

Quian is a May 2003 graduate of the University of New Orleans. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology. The following year, Quian entered the Tulane University School of Social Work. Her final semester at the University was the same semester in which hurricane Katrina ravaged her home state of Louisiana and surrounding areas. Quian completed her last semester of the social work program at the University of Southern California Susan Dworak-Peck School of Social Work. Despite completing her last semester at USC, Quian's Master's degree in Social Work was obtained from the Tulane University School of Social Work in December 2005.