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**The Frontline Supervisor:  
On the Study of Leadership at the Street-Level**

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**Abstract**

Street-level bureaucrats can be seen – often institutionally, but certainly in an actual sense – as professionals in public service. While at the same time they are civil servants, these professionals have bureaucratic chiefs. As such the latter have the task to see to it that the laws and regulations coming ‘from the top’ appropriately are being transformed into policy outputs and outcomes. Operating ‘at the bottom’ they also are faced with the sometimes unforeseen circumstances apparent at the street-level. This fact makes front-line supervisors of street-level bureaucrats in a varying degree sensitive to the kind of problems their subordinates daily encounter. New Public Management (NPM) arrangements may have increased the inherent tensions between managerial and professional values. This makes it even more relevant to see how the first-line manager at the street-level is functioning very much in the middle.

About the ways frontline supervisors in public organisations do their work relatively little is known. This is even more so for chiefs of street-level bureaucrats. Gaining knowledge about this ‘missing link’ between the vertical and horizontal perspective on public management against the background of NPM seems crucial. In this paper the objective is a theoretical one: making connections between existing theoretical-empirical insights. The central questions are: What insights are available about the ways frontline supervisors in street-level bureaucracies fulfil their

tasks? With what kind of factors can the variation in task fulfilling be related? And what are the possible effects of NPM arrangements here?

## 1. Introduction

### *The story of Stella*

Stella is a frontline supervisor in a street-level bureaucracy. She is working at a district office – there are four of them - of a municipal social services department in a city of around one million inhabitants. Stella is 36 and has a college background. This is her second job as a social worker in a department like this. Having a senior position now she leads a team of social workers deciding on granting assistance benefits to clients – nowadays these workers are called ‘client managers’ – while recently the task has been added to guide the clients actively to work. Though the municipal department has a role in the implementation of a number of laws, of these the formerly called National Assistance Act is the principal one. While Stella is a team leader, she still has a contingent of her ‘own’ clients.

The social security law involved has aspects that raised substantial political controversy. These regard, for instance, enforced child support by fathers who left their families. The result was that even after the bill in the representative organs at the national layer had become a law, the public debate, particularly among professionals about how to interpret such aspects of the law, has been going on. For insiders it is clear that the text of the law and the accompanying white paper comprises several party-political, bureau-political and ideological compromises. A complicating circumstance is that the legislator not only wanted to deal with the substance of the law, but also has redesigned the institutional framework within which it has to be implemented. Municipalities now are granted a larger autonomy in implementing this law than was the case with its predecessor.

This has led to additional goals with which Stella and her colleagues have to reckon with. It is in that context that the director of the municipal social services department gave the assignment to a few graduated functionaries in the department, assembling them in a project team, to formulate an ‘implementation policy’. In the weekly work meeting Stella regularly discusses specific difficult cases presented by the members of her team. Doing so she tries to establish a common way of dealing with what the Constitution calls ‘equal cases’; common, in any case for the members of the team in her district.

Stella promotes that her team members have regular contacts with each other, but not in the least also with functionaries of what used to be the Manpower Planning Agency – which recently got a different name. Though she knows older colleagues don’t like it, she advances contacts with the Tax Authorities as well, particular in a case of a seemingly uncooperative client. Stella is a member of the National Association of Social Workers and active in the working group ‘From Welfare to Work and its Consequences’. Once in a while she puts a specific issue discussed there on the agenda of one of her weekly team meetings. Two times she managed in giving a presentation in the executive board of the municipal social services department.

Since two years the frequency of incidents with aggressive clients has risen. Stella has raised the subject in her district management board and has also written a policy note to the director of the municipal department. From the latter she did not get a response, but the manager of her district seems to take her signal seriously. In the meantime Stella gives opportunity to the members of her team of social workers to relieve one’s feelings the somethingth time an incident has taken place.

This story of Stella, a fictitious narrative construction, pictures the subject of this paper. It is about what is happening in the organizations working at the basis of government. In particular the focus is on how frontline supervisors deal with the expectations they are confronted with, the sources of which may vary. Addressing government like a business corporation can be characterised as the essence of the ideology of New Public Management (NPM; see Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004). Assumption in this paper is that on the scale of the individuals working in government agencies at the street-level, the factors determining the impact of NPM arrangements are not fundamentally different from the ones influencing the impact of other external forces on the scale of public organizations as such. If this is so, exploring existing insights about these forces, about the ways public functionaries do their work, as well as about the factors related to that, becomes relevant. Furthermore it can be assumed that frontline supervisors in these agencies, being ‘the (wo)man in the middle’, in their task fulfilling show resemblances both with higher-level public managers and street-level bureaucrats. The former, their superiors, are the ones that usually get attention in public management research, while the latter, street-level bureaucrats as their subordinates, are the central subject in the literature on the corresponding scholarly theme.

In a general definition frontline supervisors can be described as ‘individuals responsible for the work of non-supervisory employees’ (National Academy of Public Administration 2003: 2). The number of articles reporting on systematic empirical research on this subject is limited (for an exception see Brewer 2005). As far as street-level bureaucracies are concerned since the publication of Lipsky’s study (1980) considerably knowledge has been gained. Nevertheless, efforts aiming at aggregating insights and synthesizing knowledge have been scarce. What Keiser and Soss (1998: 1152) observe regarding discretion seems to have a general purport:

‘(S)cholarship on social welfare policy continues to lack strong theories of local implementation. More attention should be given to identifying the factors that systematically influence the uses of bureaucratic discretion and to understanding why and how these factors transform policy outcomes’.

Recently also under the heading of public management research the street-level gets more attention (Maupin 1993; May and Wood 2003; Riccucci 2005). The general focus in that field, however, on average is on the executive leading a public organization; the ‘manager’ called that way (Riccucci and others 2004).

Given this state of - dispersed - knowledge the character of this paper is a theoretical and synthesizing one. The two assumptions mentioned above justify an exploration of the multiple-sourced insights about the ways frontline supervisors in street-level bureaucracies fulfil their tasks, the kind of factors the variation in that task fulfilment can be related, and the effects of NPM arrangements for that variation. This being the elements central in this paper, it is part of an ongoing project in which the author is aiming at grounding a theory of functional discretion going beyond Lipsky’s classic monograph (1980). Part of this project was a systematic scan of articles from 36 international journals aimed at mapping explanatory variables (see Hupe 2006; Hupe and Torenvlied 2006; Hupe 2007). In the second section of this paper the dependent variable is specified: what needs explanation? Next, modelling the independent variables gets

attention (third section). Accordingly a limited number of them is elaborated, particularly rules (fourth section) and networking, as a dimension of managerial craftsmanship (fifth section). The theoretical argument is concluded in three summarising hypotheses (sixth section).

## **2. Performance as the dependent variable**

The goal in this paper being a theoretical one, it seems wise to specify the *explanandum*: what needs explanation. Therefore we propose to focus on the kind of public organization Stella in the description at the beginning of this paper is working in.

Weatherly (1980) stresses that the work activities of teachers, doctors and others, are certainly responsive to public policy.

‘But their activities are also responsive to a number of other influences over which the (official – PH) policy maker and administrator may only have limited control. The pyramid-shaped organisation chart depicting at the bottom the frontline worker as passively receiving and carrying out policies and procedures dispensed from above is a gross oversimplification. A more realistic model would place the frontline worker in the center of an irregularly shaped sphere with vectors of differing size directed inward’ (Weatherly 1980: 9).

It can be assumed that Weatherly’s ‘vectors of differing size directed inwards’ via the actual behaviour of both street-level bureaucrats and their direct supervisors have an impact on what in the study of government nowadays is called performance. Variety on the side of the ‘vectors’ may be mirrored by differentiation on the side of such performance. Referring to behaviour the latter term can take as many forms as manifestations of actor’s appearances in the public domain can be distinguished. Public performance refers to the behaviour of government-, profit- and non-profit-sector organizations and the hybrid variants between these sectors as all active in the public domain. Government performance may be used as the term pointing at the macro-level of aggregate statistics, relevant for instance in comparisons between countries. Policy or programme performance relates the outputs and outcomes to the throughputs and inputs of a specific policy process. Organizational performance indicates a similar relationship: the outputs in terms of products and services per single organization. Individual performance refers to the behaviour of a person in relation to a specific set of criteria. Political performance, for instance, indicates the behaviour of individual actors active in the subdomain of politics, in terms of political-administrative craftsmanship.

Aiming at parsimony in this paper the specification of the sort of performance as the ultimate dependent variable is being left open. It is obvious, however, that the ways in which the behaviour of street-level bureaucrats affects such performance will vary. The latter do their work in settings of a multi-dimensional nature, while factors on each dimension may have a different impact and a specific ‘logic of governance’ is working (Lynn, Heinrich and Hill 2001). Governance is multiple (Hupe and Hill 2006), because these settings not only can be characterised as multi-layered (nested systems), but also as multi-scaled, multi-actor and multi-

level (activities), while actors act with varying craftsmanship (multi-skilled). Using a *ceteris paribus* clause, two dimensions will be highlighted here: the type of agency and the type of work within that agency.

At the street-level a variety of types of agencies can be observed. Wilson makes a distinction between production-, procedural-, craft- and coping agencies (Wilson 1989; see also Gregory 1995; Considine and Lewis 1999). Although he speaks of the observability of outputs versus outcomes we propose here to label the dimensions in terms of the visibility of the activities of agencies as distinguished from the visibility of the results of those activities.

#### TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Also the type of street-level work seems relevant. Bovens and Zouridis (2002) specify the consequences of information technology for different kinds of street-level bureaucracies, identifying ‘screen-level’ and ‘system-level’ bureaucracies as additional types.

#### TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Variety not only can be observed in types of tasks fulfilled at the street-level, but also on the side of personnel. Street-level bureaucrats of the same category working in the same organizations to a certain extent will react differently to similar circumstances because they have varying antecedents (gender, age, experience in the job, belief schemes, personality, etcetera). In the fifth section of this paper we’ll elaborate on this.

The kind of organization Stella is working in now conform Wilson’s typology can be identified as a coping agency, as well as perhaps, in Bovens and Zouridis’ distinction, a screen-level bureaucracy. Coming from the ranks of street-level bureaucrats Stella personifies the frontline supervisor *par excellence*. Given Weatherly’s notion of vectors as a configuration of factors, where may explanatory mechanisms be sought? Although a further deductive grounding from a variety of academic sources remains to be aspired, here the point of departure is chosen in the fundamental distinction between factors stemming from a vertical perspective and those from a horizontal perspective (cf. the distinction between managing upward, downward and outward, Moore 1995; see also the distinction between the vertical and horizontal dimension of inter-organizational processes, Hill 2005; while Hill and Hupe 2002: 126 speak of ‘vertical public administration’). In an inductive rather than deductive search for factors that may explain the nature and use of shown managerial craftsmanship – and, finally, performance - the concept of rule pressure summarizes factors of ‘vertical government’. The concept of networking is used as label for factors of ‘horizontal government’. In the following sections on the basis of a synthesis of gained insights subsequently some hypotheses will be formulated.

### 3. Modelling ‘vectors directed inward’

#### *Performance and public management*

In a few studies the relationships between performance and public management have been modelled (Heinrich and Lynn, eds 2000; Lynn, Heinrich and Hill 2001; Boyne 2003). Since O’Toole and Meier developed their model in 1999, in a range of articles they have provided empirical evidence about how organizational and programme performance in a non-linear way is affected by the manners in which public management in varying contexts is being practised (a.o. 1999; Meier and O’Toole 2002). On the side of the independent variables Meier and O’Toole distinguish between management, stability, and environmental forces. With X the authors assign a vector for the latter, while S is a measure denoting structural, procedural and other elements that support unperturbed production. M denotes management as consisting of three parts: ‘management’s contribution to organizational stability through additions to hierarchy/structure as well as regular operations’; ‘management’s efforts to exploit the environment’ and ‘management’s effort to buffer environmental shocks’ (Meier a.o. 2007: 6; for a full treatment see O’Toole and Meier 1999). The authors distinguish three forms of such buffering: a blockade, a filter, or a dampener, respectively insulating, selecting, or reducing the amplitude of external influences (ibidem: 4).

Using this model in an adapted form Meier, O’Toole and Hicklin (2007) have investigated how disrupting environmental forces, in this case Katrina and Rita, the two major hurricanes that in 2005 hit the Gulf Coast region in the USA, affect the performance of public organizations, here public school districts. The authors state that, as implied by their model, impacts on the organization will be addressed by two major classes of forces: structural and managerial ones. Both kinds are labelled as buffering. Meier and his co-authors (ibidem: 17) distinguish three forms of such buffering in this case: ‘the stabilizing effects of structural (and other) elements, the operations of management in supporting and reinforcing performance-related operations, and/or the inertia that carries established practices forward into the future (past performance)’. The authors include relative size of central management staff and stability in the teaching corps as, respectively, an ‘S’-measure that taps structural-stabilizing capacity in the organizations, and a ‘M’-measure that draws from an aspect of internal human resources management. Their findings make them conclude that at higher levels of these two factors - structural and management variables – school districts dealing with disturbances from the two hurricanes ‘see no reductions on their all-pass rate that are attributable to the unexpected shocks’ (ibidem: 23). In other words: in mitigating performance implications of external influences, organization and management do matter.

#### *Identifying other vectors*

It is clear that in this case the external influences with a potential impact on performance had the character of unexpected negative shocks. It can be assumed, however, that the modes of reaction to such shocks are not fundamentally different from the modes of reaction to influences with a more stable and perhaps less unexpected character. When Weatherly speaks about ‘vectors of

different size directed inward' one could think in particular of the steadily growing number of rules as decided upon on the various layers of the public-administrative system and 'piling up' on the scale of single agencies, like in the case of Stella's organization. Both frontline supervisors as line managers and street-level bureaucrats as professionals exercising a specific vocation, have to deal with a total of rules, coming from different sides, implying compliance. It is obvious that the nature of this total of rules may not be comparable to the nature of a hurricane, and certainly the character of their respective consequences is not. At the same time the constant adding of rules, to a number that on the scale of a single agency is multiple already, may enhance what can be called rule pressure. This concept can be defined as the number of rules x the probability of adverse consequences of non-compliance. These consequences get the most articulate form as concrete sanctions. The higher the number of rules multiplied by the probability of sanctions on non-compliance, the higher the rule pressure.

Similar to the distinction of Meier, O'Toole and Hicklin one could now specify the ways frontline supervisors react to this rule pressure. Managing downward they may add rules to be followed by street-level bureaucrats as their subordinates (*strengthening*). Managing downward they may also just pass the rule pressure on (*passing*). Managing upward they may do the opposite: counteract the rule pressure, preventing enhancing it towards their subordinates (*buffering*). The choice between these three reaction modes may be related to the nature and degree of managerial craftsmanship, of which networking can be seen as an important dimension. As Meier and O'Toole (2001, 2003) have shown this networking (managing sideward) can have positive effects on organizational performance. Like the craftsmanship (skills and competence) of a street-level bureaucrat can be measured as professionalism, the craftsmanship of a frontline supervisor can be called leadership. In turn, personal antecedents can be expected to influence the degree of this craftsmanship.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

In the following sections the independent variables as indicated in this robust variable scheme will be elaborated; first this happens for rule pressure.

#### **4. Rule pressure**

##### *Sorts and sources of rules*

Rules usually are seen as formal, judicial ones, stemming from the institutions legitimately exercising the rule of law. Discretionary competence (*freies Ermessen*) means the complementary, additional action space enabling the differentiated, context-bound application of uniform political-administrative rules. Focusing on the scale of agencies and the public functionaries working there, there are reasons, however, to look at other sorts of rules as well. Elinor Ostrom (1999: 50) gives the following general definition of rules:

'Rules are shared understandings among those involved that refer to enforced prescriptions about what actions (or states of the world) are *required, prohibited, or permitted*' (italics from the original).

Thus conceived the term rules refers to action prescriptions in the broadest sense, that may take the form of norms for behaviour as inducements, constraints, or standards. When researching the way individual public functionaries at the street-level deal with rules it seems relevant to specify the concept of rules, broad as it is, further by tracing the different sources they come from. Hudson (1997: 48) distinguishes different types of accountability street-level bureaucrats are supposed to show: to the organization; to consumers; to the law and to professional norms. Meijer and Bovens (2005: 7) observe ‘various institutional practices for account giving’. Thus defining public accountability they distinguish organizational, professional, political, legal and administrative accountability as different types. Extending the two-fold distinction between an accountant and an accountee Behn (2001: chapter 11) speaks of a ‘360-degree accountability for performance’. Making a typology of forums of public accountability Hupe and Hill (2007) stress that the ‘to whom?’ and the ‘what?’ question concern different dimensions. They specify the forms of accountability practised by actors on the action scales of, respectively, the system, the organization and the individual. Differentiating between public-administrative, professional and participatory accountability the authors distinguish three different *accountability regimes*. On the basis of this typology three major sorts of rules can be identified both street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors have to deal with.

#### TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Although stemming from varying sources these three sorts of rules have in common that they all function as action prescriptions: norms meant to guide behaviour in street-level bureaucracies.

*Public-administrative rules.* From the system-scale there are the official rules laid down in laws and forms of other legislation, as well as the policy goals and policy instruments documented in white papers and related statutes agreed upon between the executive and legislative branches of government (for an elaboration of the concept of action scale see Hupe and Hill 2006). Besides there are norms expressed in decisions of the judicial branch of government, constituting jurisprudence. Norms to be applied at the street-level can also be found in meta-policies aiming at the reform of either the substance of sectoral policies (cf. ‘from welfare to work’) or the restructuring of the institutional relations between political-societal (cf. privatisation) or between inter-governmental (cf. devolution) actors. Not always is communicated to the street-level of government if the goals of these reforms are meant to substitute the existing policy goals to be implemented. It may be that the public officials working there perceive that the former goals come ‘on top’ of the latter, or that they otherwise do not know how the goals of the reform and the existing policy involved are meant to relate to each other.

Additionally, norms from the system-scale may be made explicit concerning operating procedures. On the scale of organizations the official rules and/or goals stemming from the system scale will be ‘translated’. In the case this leads to additional rules; dependent on the judgement of the observer these may be called ‘red tape’. The latter concerns a specific category of rules. Bozeman (2000: 82) designates with this label ‘a rule that remains in force and entails a compliance burden for the organization but makes no contribution to achieving the rule’s functional object’. One could ask here: Who is to decide? Kaufman (1977: 4) points at the

possibility that '(O)ne person's "red tape" may be another's treasured procedural safeguard'. In a more neutral definition red tape can be seen as additional rules made by the organization involved in the implementation of laws or policies containing rules legitimately agreed upon. Then the working of rules labelled as 'red tape' empirically is open (see, for instance, Scott and Pandey 2000). While these 'rules' still have a link with the official ones, distinct from the latter there are organizational goals. They concern the functioning of the organization as such: budget, personnel, etcetera. It may be that about the official goals or about the organizational goals agreements are made with actors on the system scale. The growth of such agreements can be observed as one of the core elements of *New Public Management*. These 'targets', 'performance indicators', or how they may be called, at the street-level form an additional sort of 'rules' to be complied with. Standard operating procedures also often will be stemming from the organization-scale.

*Professional norms.* The basis for professional accountability is the expertise to a certain vocation, practiced in horizontal relations within (intra-) and between (inter-) professions. Norms specific for a certain profession also in a substantial way will be formulated on the scale of a system as a whole. Within a certain branch 'local' professional guidelines may be formulated. On the scale of the individual public servants may have developed their own 'policy' in dealing with the official rules to be implemented. This goes even more for frontline supervisors who, managing upward and downward, by definition are functioning within a vertical perspective. Where the nature of such a 'policy' partly will be related to the degree of craftsmanship and personal antecedents of the person involved, for frontline supervisors a functional element is added, sometimes implied by more or less institutionalised peer consultation. In this sense the frontline responsibility fundamentally is a hybrid one. He or she is both a subordinate and a leader; a manager, although perhaps coming from the ranks of the professionals he or she is supposed to manage; while possibly aiming at being a 'professional manager' at the same time.

*Participatory requisites.* A third category of sources for action prescriptions can be situated in the accountability regime Hupe and Hill distinguish as based on what they call participatory accountability. In their work both frontline supervisors and street-level bureaucrats not only have to comply with political-administrative rules and behave in accordance with the standards of their profession, but also citizens in client and other roles are holding them accountable. On the system scale this happens via national associations patients, parents or clients have organised themselves in. Around agencies like a municipal social services department clients may be consulted in so called 'client councils', while 'citizen's charters' may imply norms for street-level behaviour. On the scale of interpersonal contact citizens will respond to the way the individual frontline supervisors and street-level bureaucrats fulfil their tasks, holding them accountable for their decisions. Besides, leading a team means that the frontline supervisor to a certain extent may participate in the street-level work itself, acting as 'one of us'.

### *Rules and discretion*

Rules and discretion can be seen as narrowly related, in any case in an institutional sense. Davis (1969: 4) gives the following definition of discretion: 'A public officer has discretion wherever

the effective limits on his power leave him free to make a choice among possible courses of action and inaction'. Davis recognizes that functional administrative discretion must be granted. Ballou (1998) and Batey and Lewis (1982) define autonomy as the freedom to make discretionary decisions. The impact of the rule of law and democracy seems obvious here. Empirically, however, the link between rules and discretion is not immediately transparent. The notion of discretion normatively seems to specify the action space granted for the application of formal political-administrative rules. If, however, 'rules' are conceived in a general sense as action prescriptions stemming from a variety of sources, a more open, less normative concept seems appropriate.

Workers have an idea of what constitutes 'normal' supervision. They will resist attempts to tighten that supervision (Gouldner 1964: 154-62). 'The greater efforts made to control subordinated officials, the greater the efforts by those subordinates to evade or counteract such control'. This is a 'general law' of organizational behaviour as formulated by Downs (1966). Prottas (1979: 298) seems to stress the other side when stating: 'A general rule in the analysis of power is that an actor with low "compliance observability" is relatively autonomous. If it is difficult or costly to determine how an actor behaves and the actor knows this, then he is under less compulsion to comply'.

Rules stemming from New Public Managerial decision-making share a vertical orientation with those having a formal political and/or legal background. While their common basis is an authoritative and legitimate jurisdiction, these rules can be jointly addressed as functioning as elements of public-administrative accountability. The clarity of goals matters (for instance Chun and Rainey 2005). As goals of a meta-policy, goals of institutional or policy reforms are 'piled up' on top of the goals of the regular policies of the policy domain involved. It is therefore that Meyers et al. (2001: 193) conclude the report of their research observing that 'goal congruence appears to be more problematic either when policy goals are complex or when organizational systems are complex; when both are complex, substantial uncoupling of formal and operational goals is observed'.

The following axiomatic insights (A) and hypotheses *H* now can be formulated.

(A) The greater efforts made to control subordinated officials, the greater the efforts by those subordinates to evade or counteract such control (Gouldner).

(A) Low observability increases autonomy.

*H1 Goal clarity reduces discretion.*

*H2 The larger the number of rules (as the label for action prescriptions in general), the greater the chance of inconsistencies and conflicts between rules, and thus the greater the freedom to make decisions (= degree of relative autonomy).*

*H3 An increase in rules enhances efforts to increase autonomy.*

### *Dimensions of rules*

In the public domain the way the term ‘rules’ usually is being used as referring to juridical frames or other formal results of legitimate public decision-making. The premises for additional, ‘discretionary’ decision-making at the street-level are supposed to be implied by these rules themselves. This assumption also seems to apply for formal rules stemming from other than judicial sources in the strict sense, like policy instruments or even NPM incentive structures. Normatively these kinds of rules may be seen as most important; empirically, however, frontline supervisors and street-level bureaucrats see themselves placed to act according to other sorts of action prescriptions as well. In a nested configuration these different sorts of rules all seem to apply, leaving the what, when and how to the practical judgement of the individual functionary acting in given circumstances here and now. In general, influences of factors from different administrative layers and action scales, at the scale of a single agency may have cumulative effects that hardly can be predicted. Not in the least, because these influences cannot be added up in a linear way.

Although the nested configuration of the various sorts of rules does not imply a prescriptive, hierarchical order, analytically, as indicated, per action scale sources of rules can be identified. On the scale of the organization, for instance, the organizational culture may enhance certain codes of conduct. On the directive level an agency may have developed an ‘implementation policy’, leading to ‘the handbook’ street-level bureaucrats are supposed to consult daily. And on the operational level action prescriptions may have been formulated that outsiders perceive as ‘red tape’, although used selectively by the street-level bureaucrats involved. Given the great variety of their background and the different sorts of accountability involved rules as conceived in the broad definition of Ostrom’s can function as constraints (‘prohibited’), standards (‘permitted’) and inducements (‘required’). Rules can be contradictory as they are, by their substance; but certainly when either an individual frontline supervisor or a street-level bureaucrat is faced with a range of rules stemming from a variety of sources (cf. the plural principal-problem).

The scale of the individual frontline supervisor being pivotal, and while generally taking NPM arrangements as enhancing rule pressure, the reactions of the former to this subset of public-administrative rules influence performance. Strengthening the rule pressure means increasing the number of action prescriptions for street-level bureaucrats. Buffering that pressure will mean preserving the existing rule pressure on the latter; in fact, enhancing their autonomy as the freedom to make decisions. Passing the rule pressure means at least preserving the existing degree of street-level autonomy, because exactly enlarging the number of rules enhances the available freedom to make choices regarding their applicability. So, whatever changes implied by NPM arrangements, the effects from a vertical perspective ultimately are related with street-level autonomy.

(A) Whether a given rule R has a constraining or enabling effect on variable X is a matter of empirical observation and judgement from a certain perspective.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

## 5. Networking and other dimensions of managerial craftsmanship

### *Scales of interaction in networks*

‘Policy networks are (more or less) stable patterns of social relations between independent actors, which take shape around policy problems and/or policy programmes’. This is the definition Kickert et al. (1997: 6) give of a concept that would become an integral element of the empirical study of contemporary government. Referring to Alexander (1993) and De Bruijn and Ten Heuvelhof (1995)

Peters (1998) distinguishes pluriformity, interdependence, formality and instruments as dimensions of variation in networks. Although much research has been done already while ‘treating networks seriously’ (O’Toole 1997; see also Mandell, a.o. 1999a and 1999b; Klijn et al. 1995; Klijn and Koppenjan 2005), most of that concerns what Scharpf (1978) calls interdependency analysis, stressing the horizontal dimension of organizational action in the public domain.

It seems relevant to distinguish ‘structural networks’ from the behaviour of individuals in networks (Meier and O’Toole 2004). In a similar way management in networks or network management is not the same as management or governance *of* networks. Furthermore it seems worthwhile to specify the individual networking actor. O’Toole et al. (1997) look more specifically at the tasks to be performed in the implementation of public policies. The latter will involve a number of functionally specified networks. The authors state: ‘And although there may be an officially mandated, or self-selected “overall manager” of these implementation activities, the management of implementation involves the sharing and coordination of “management” between multiple parties, often located at different levels of government’ (O’Toole et al. 1997: 138). Implementation comprises:

‘managing across and through different functional subnetworks. Such structural differentiation compounds the complexity of the context within which the implementation manager must operate. They will often need to juggle different groups of actors, depending on the functional activity in progress, and will also need to address questions of coordination between these sets of network participants. At the same time, making these functional distinctions provides a way of linking decision processes within these inter-organizational networks back to the organizations with which individual networks are affiliated’ (ibid.: 141).

Being implementation researchers as well, Hjern and Porter (1981) explicitly look at networks as the unit of public service delivery. With their concept of ‘implementation structure’ they refer to ‘a cluster of parts of public and private organizations (in which) subsets of parts of members within organizations (...) view a program as their primary, or an instrumentally important, interest’ (Hjern and Porter 1981: 216).

Therefore now the scales of interaction in networks can be specified.

## TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The distinction between different administrative layers and action scales makes it obvious that not only horizontal networks can be observed, but multiple-scaled ones as well.

### *Managerial networking*

Most literature on network management refers to networking as the behaviour of managers acting in networks. In its most general sense networking can be defined as using relations for advancing interests. Then the nature of these relations and interests, as well as the networking actors, have to be specified. Meier and O'Toole (2001: 279) link managerial actions in networks explicitly with assessments of actual programme performance. They formulate and test the following hypotheses:

1. 'School system output is higher if superintendents exert management effort in the networks surrounding them.'
2. 'Network managers deal with environmental shocks in different ways than do those public managers who do not manage in the network.'
3. 'Network managers tapping resources in their networked environments enhance programme performance.'

To measure network management the authors look at the time school superintendents interact with several sets of significant actors in the environment. Network management appears to be related to overall organizational performance, while management appears to interact with other organizational resources in a non-linear way.

'Performance improves in districts where superintendents engaged in more network interactions, even if one controls for a variety of factors that affect this performance and even in an autoregressive model. Further, the interactive nature of management is apparent, both in relatively simple assessments of management and in relatively complex autoregressive assessments. Network management appears to allow superintendents to translate resources into outputs at a more efficient rate' (ibidem: 291).

Conclusion is that network management itself can be important for performance. In another article Meier and O'Toole (2003) measure a network management style by selecting five sets of actors from the organization's environment. In case of the Texas school districts these were school board members, local business leaders, other school superintendents, state legislators, and the Texas Education Agency. The authors asked them how often they interacted with each actor, on a six-point scale ranging from daily to never. It proved that, on the whole, network management improves environmental support (from school boards, the community and parents), leading to better performance as expressed in the percentage of students passing the yearly tests. Networkers in the sample spent less time running internal operations than did others, 'but the trade-off paid in results' (ibidem: 697). '(M)anagers operating in their networked environment create room for manoeuvring. More networking in more directions means less limited, incremental changes in performance from one time period to a the next' (ibidem: 697).

However, not all networks are the same. Some of them are mandatory or prescribed, others voluntary. Therefore also acting in networking has to be specified.

TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

*H4 Managerial networking (maintaining relations in the organizational environment) improves organizational performance.*

*H5 Multiple managerial networking improves long-term organizational performance.*

*H6 Informal (voluntary) managerial networking improves organizational performance.*

#### *Personal antecedents*

In his research on the role of frontline supervisors in the twenty-two largest federal agencies in the USA – mind: not a priori street-level bureaucracies of Wilson’s ‘coping’ type - Brewer (2005: 512) remarks that he tried some demographic variables, but dropped them because they appeared to be weak and insignificant predictors. These variables regarded age, race, gender, minority status, education level, years employed by the government, and place of employment (headquarters or field). It may be, however, that particularly the way individual frontline supervisors see themselves in their task-fulfilling and role, influences the degree of networking they practise and, therefore the way they react to rule pressure. The frontline supervisor seeing him- or herself primarily as a public servant may be responsive a priori to rules to be compliant with. Defining his or her role in a vertical relationship, he or she will practise networking as far as necessary: particularly in prescribed, mandated networks. Confronted with formal and other rules he or she will be inclined to make additional rules, thus strengthening rule pressure on his or her subordinates. Frontline supervisors having a self-perception as ‘real’ managers will see rules like the ones implied by performance contract or other NPM arrangements as targets to achieve. They will practise the nature and degree of networking deemed functional. At the same time, being aware of the circumstances at the street-level, they will try to avoid imposing additional rules to the professionals they manage. Rather they will pass the rules downward, having confidence in the craftsmanship of the latter to deal with these rules from a position of relative autonomy. The frontline supervisor seeing himself as a foreman (m/f) stresses the active participation as a member of his team, taking his managerial responsibility as an opportunity for buffering rule pressure. Networking is practised in function of that.

TABLE 7 ABOUT HERE

#### *Dimensions of managerial craftsmanship*

The relative autonomy as the general ‘action space’ available to and actually used by frontline supervisors is independent of one source of rules in particular. Actors acting in such autonomy do acknowledge various sources of rules and apply the latter as prescriptions for their behaviour, not in the least the official rules laid down in laws and policy documents stemming from

political-administrative sources. At the same time these actors perceive the use of their autonomy not as *a priori* constrained by the rules coming from the latter. The other way around, the freedom actors actually use to make decisions, defines their perception of the degree of freedom granted to them by other actors as *discretion*.

TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE

These mechanisms can be supposed to work for street-level bureaucrats as well as their supervisors in a similar way, inherent as they seem to the settings they work in. Like the former show in the way they use the autonomy available to them their professionalism as a social worker or police officer, in a similar fashion the frontline officials supervising them exhibits managerial craftsmanship.

*H7 Frontline supervisors seining themselves as a 'foreman' will sooner practise buffering rule pressure than their co-managers with a different self-perception.*

TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE

## **6. Fire, rain or rules**

What insights are available about the ways frontline supervisors in street-level bureaucracies fulfil their tasks? With what kind of factors can the variation in task fulfilling be related? And what are the possible effects of NPM arrangements here? These were the central questions in this paper. Two assumptions were made explicit; both regarding the expected similarities with comparable subject matters. First, the factors determining the impact of NPM arrangements are supposed to be not fundamentally different from the ones influencing the impact of other external forces on public organizations. Second, in their task fulfilling frontline supervisors in street-level bureaucracies are expected to show resemblances both with higher-level public managers and with their subordinate professionals working at the street-level.

Looking for external forces comparable to the impact of NPM arrangements in the third section of this paper the report of Meier, O'Toole and Hicklin (2007) on the consequences of two major hurricanes for the performance of school districts was identified. The similarities particularly are sought in the modes of reaction the authors distinguish in terms of variants of 'buffering'. Accordingly, the various reaction modes were related to the nature and degree of managerial craftsmanship. Networking was treated as an important dimension; it may compensate for rule pressure.

The question may be asked what justifies the theoretical treatment of rules similar to the one of 'fire and rain'. The answer would be: the probability of adverse consequences of non-compliance of certain rules as an essential element of the conceptualisation of rule pressure given in this paper. The differences are obvious – unlike in the event of a hurricane most rule application is not a matter of life and death, in any case not on the scale of Katrina and Rita. Crucial for both the impact of shocks, NPM arrangements and rules in general, however, is the way individuals

within public organizations deal with these external forces. They do so while using the action space at their disposal ('management'), in the settings (Meier and his colleagues would say: 'structure') that are given. This situation of available autonomy does not seem to be fundamentally different for both the frontline supervisor and the street-level bureaucrat. All other things being equal, the degree of craftsmanship they show – the latter as a professional, the former as a manager – seems to be related to their self-perception in the task and role they fulfil. Networking can be considered as an important dimension of such craftsmanship.

Then the theoretical argument can be summarized as follows:

*H8 The higher the ratio of sanction bound rules in the total number of rules, the higher the rule pressure.*

*H9 The higher the rule pressure, the more decisive the degree of managerial craftsmanship.*

*H10 As part of managerial craftsmanship networking compensates for rule pressure.*

#### FIGURE 2 ABOUT HE

After all, it all comes down on what is happening within public organizations and on their boundaries. Particularly in street-level bureaucracies like the one Stella is working in, reactions of front-line supervisors to rule pressure are crucial. Their networking may be seen as important as managerial networking in general. Differences on the same (sub)scale to a certain extent may be explained by the self-perception of the individual front-line supervisors as practising public leadership.

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Table 1. Wilson's typology of agencies

Results of activities	Visible	Less visible
Activities		
Visible Orientation:	Production agencies Production	Procedural agencies Procedures
Less visible Orientation:	Craft agencies Craftsmanship	Coping agencies Direct contact with citizens

Based on: Wilson 1989: chapter 9.

Table 2. Office technology and types of street-level bureaucracy

	Street-level bureaucracy	Screen-level bureaucracy	System-level bureaucracy
Organizational aspect			
Judicial-administrative regime	Open	Closed	Closed
Degree of policy discretion	Large	Little	Very little
Administrative involvement in individual cases	Full	Partial	Absent
Structuring principle	Personal contact	Electronic exchange of information	Programme design
Function of information technology	Data registration  virtual	Case assess- ment and external assembly line	Execution, control, and communication
Role of information technology	Supportive	Guiding	Decisive
Key figures within the organization	Contact- public servants as case managers	Production managers	System designers

Source (slightly adapted): Bovens and Zouridis (2002: 180).

Table 3. Specifying sorts of rules in relation to accountability regimes

Sources	Public-administrative	Professional	Democratic
Action scale	decision making	standards	values
System	<b>Public-administrative</b>	<b>Professional</b>	<b>Participatory</b>
Organization	<b>rules</b>	<b>norms</b>	<b>requisites</b>
Individual			

Based on Hupe and Hill (2007).

Table 4. Dimensions of rules

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Action prescriptions: specifying which actions are required, prohibited or permitted  
 Public-administrative rules empirically equal to other sorts of rules  
 Sources: public-administrative, professional, participatory accountability regimes  
 Nested configuration  
 Effects of ways of use of rules on performance

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Table 5. Scales of interaction in networks

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Scale	Interacting actors (subscales)
Organization	Organizations/other organizations ( <i>implementation structure</i> ) Parts of organizations/parts of other organizations ( <i>service-specific links</i> ) (= Inter-agency networks)
Individual	Managers/other managers Street-level bureaucrats/other street-level bureaucrats (= Interpersonal or micro-networks)

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Table 6. Types of networking

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Character of network	Formal (prescribed)	Informal (voluntary)
Action scale		
Organization	Maintaining organization-bound relations	Advancing organization-bound interests
Individual manager	Representing organization-bound interests ('Meetings')	Maintaining organization-bound interests ('Drinks')
	Network as identifiable sublayer	Networking as maintaining public relations

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Table 7. Dimensions of networks

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Stable patterns of interaction  
 Subscales of interaction in networks  
 Manager and street-level bureaucrat as the networking actors  
 Prescribed and voluntary networks  
 Various forms of interaction in networks  
 Networking roles  
 Power in network interaction

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Table 8. Front-line supervisor, networking, and rule pressure

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Self-perception	Accountability regime	Networking	Mode of reaction to rule pressure
'Bureau-chief'	Political-administrative	Formal	Strengthening
'Manager'	Professional	Formal and informal	Passing
'Foreman'	Participatory	Informal and formal	Buffering

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Elaboration of: Hupe and Hill 2007.



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