1 Introduction

This Element addresses a hidden tier of public services: informal practices of frontline workers, with particular attention to the personal resources the workers provide to their clients. These are resources that go above and beyond formal role requirements and are given at the expense of the workers' own capital. Such practices are enacted within the contemporary changing environment in public administration, in which workers are developing new coping strategies.

Comprehensive literature has described how workers adapt as they deliver services and provide *formal* resources (Brodkin, 2011; Evans & Hupe, 2020; Gofen, 2013; Thomann, van Engen & Tummers, 2018; Tummers et al., 2015; Zacka, 2018). Alongside these important studies, there are some hints in the literature that workers also respond to the changing environment by diverging from formal role expectations and providing clients with *personal* resources (Tummers et al., 2015), particularly when they lack adequate formal organizational resources (Dubois, 2016; Eldor, 2017).

This preliminary evidence has been the impetus of my own research. I have long felt that there is an entire hidden phenomenon alongside formal service provision, not yet fully explored or conceptualized. To establish the foundation of this Element, I devote its introduction to three cornerstones upon which I have built research exploring the hidden provision of informal personal resources by frontline workers to clients.

The first cornerstone draws on the research of organizational sociologist Mario Small, which focuses on organizations as resource providers. In the context of the post–welfare reform era in the United States, Small (2006) examined relations between organizations located in low-income neighborhoods (defining them as "neighborhood institutions") and the residents receiving services from these organizations. He argued that it is particularly important to explore mechanisms of resource provision from organizations to clients in times of welfare reform and reduced governmental resources. Small came to the conclusion that organizations operate as "resource brokers," linking their clients to external organizations with resources. In his case study of childcare centers, he showed how parents (i.e., clients of the organizations) received a wide range of resources provided by external organizations and brokered by the childcare centers. To name but a few of these resources, they included health-related information and low-cost or free medical examinations and treatments; legal information and advocacy; domestic abuse counseling; substance abuse treatment and counseling; adult language studies and work training; free access to museums, zoos, and other events; and free toys for Christmas (see Small, 2006, for further reading). Alluding to William Wilson's book, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, Small concluded

that the truly disadvantaged are those who do not participate in organizations and thus lack access to the resources these organizations broker. What I have learned from Small's study is that organizations and their workers operate in varied ways, not always in keeping with their formal role definitions, and may provide resources beyond the formal organizational ones. These informal resources (IFRs) have the capacity to reduce inequality and enhance clients' well-being.

The other two cornerstones of this Element draw on studies I have conducted with colleagues, focusing on street-level workers who provide public social services in Israel. In the first set of studies, we examined what street-level workers do when they believe policy as designed might be harmful to their clients. We found that when workers believe there is a gap between designed policy and desirable policy, they engage in a variety of practices in an attempt to influence policy design (Lavee, Cohen & Nouman, 2018). For example, social workers who perceived urban renewal policy as severely detrimental to their low-income clients engaged in policy entrepreneurial practices, struggling to influence policy design (and succeeding). This required each of them to gain knowledge beyond their professional expertise, such as in planning, architecture, and engineering (Lavee & Cohen, 2019). From these studies, I learned that street-level workers take it upon themselves to "fix" inadequate policy in ways that go beyond their formal role, with the aim of protecting their clients and reducing inequality.

In the second set of studies, we examined practices of frontline service provision in welfare offices (Lavee & Strier, 2018, 2019) with the aim of understanding how welfare reform in Israel – where basic elements are similar to the neoliberal American reform – might be influencing the implementation work of social workers. Similar to Small's (2006) study, the larger context of our research was a reduction in formal governmental resources alongside increasing poverty rates. Focusing on discretionary practices during interactions with clients, we found that workers employ informal practices. In the absence of formal resources, they transfer emotional resources to clients. These emotional resources serve as a kind of capital that substitutes for the traditional social benefits that welfare services once provided to clients. From these studies I learned that, in an attempt to enhance clients' well-being, frontline social service providers struggle to implement policy, even partially, despite the absence of organizational resources. More specifically, I learned that, in the backdrop of scarce (formal) organizational material resources, workers provide informal personal-emotional alternative resources.

My main conclusion from the theoretical development in the field of organization–client relations and my own experience with studies of frontline providers of social services is that there is a hidden and unexplored tier of IFR

provision. Contemporary cumulative knowledge on discretion and coping practices within the implementation work of frontline service providers has focused almost entirely on decisions made about the allocation of formal resources (i.e., those provided by the organization). Yet, clearly, alongside the provision of formal resources, another layer of service provision is taking place where informal, hidden practices are routinely enacted, and that layer has mostly remained beneath the surface, receiving little scholarly attention. In this Element, I address this lacuna by exploring discretionary practices and decisions made in the provision of informal personal resources, with the aim of uncovering the nature and extent of resources provided by frontline workers that are not part of their formal duties, or formal resources provided in informal ways (after hours, off duty).

Why is it that this phenomenon – something both practitioners and scholars are aware of – has not yet been explored in depth? I believe there are two complementary answers to this puzzle. First, like other silenced phenomena, unsilencing might lead to some undesirable results for those who are comfortable maintaining the status quo. Highlighting the informal personal services and resources that workers have to provide in their encounters with clients, in a context of scarce formal organizational resources, might raise new questions regarding the mismatch between demands and responses. Second, the lack of a comprehensive exploration of the provision of personal resources might be linked to methodological difficulties in exploring hidden practices and discretionary decisions.

In light of these challenges, I have made considerable effort to provide a solid conceptualization for this elusive phenomenon. I have thus drawn on the qualitative method, which is more suitable for exploring "under-the-surface" phenomena than surveys and questionnaires (Charmaz, 2014). With the help of trained research assistants, I have conducted two large-scale studies of frontline workers in Israel. The first entailed 214 in-depth interviews of public-sector frontline workers from three occupational areas: welfare, health, and education. The second study complemented the first by comparing public, nonprofit, and private sectors in terms of IFR provision, as welfare-state restructuring in Israel (similar to many other countries) has led to the parallel provision of social services by nonprofit and private organizations. This latter study included 83 in-depth interviews of frontline workers in the three employment sectors providing services in the same three domains (welfare, health, and education).

The findings presented in this Element contribute to the literature by exposing one more layer in the necessary, yet often unrecognized, component of informal service provision and by explaining how workers manage to implement policy and provide service to clients/citizens even in times of reduced formal

resources. The study findings stress the fundamental role of frontline workers as mediators between designed policy and citizens' actual needs. Moreover, the comparative study of IFR provision between public, nonprofit and private sectors is essential in an era when the convergence of welfare reforms and New Public Management (NPM) imperatives has changed the nature of the provision of public services and has led to privatization of many public service areas.

The Element is structured in six sections. Section 2 provides a theoretical background, drawing on existing literature on discretion and coping strategies at the front line of public administration. The section places frontline practices in the context of welfare reforms and NPM imperatives, with a renewed focus on public value governance approaches. To set the frame for exploring informal service provision, this theoretical section concludes by presenting a few hints in contemporary literature of workers' provision of their personal resources.

Section 3 presents the general methodological design of the two qualitative studies. Study 1 was conducted with frontline workers in the public sector. Study 2 was conducted with frontline workers in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors.

The following two sections present the findings of these two studies. Section 4 establishes the existence of a phenomenon in which the vast majority of workers provide informal services and resources to their clients. The section also offers examples of the various types of IFRs provided. Section 5 then expands on the aspect of contemporary hybridity in the delivery of public services, establishing the rationale for sector comparison. It introduces the key finding of particular role perceptions, which constitute the rationale for the provision of IFRs in each sector. The section demonstrates how particular role perceptions shape the scope and content of IFR provision in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors.

Section 6 discusses an important aspect of IFR provision: its cost to frontline workers. This section empirically analyzes similarities and differences between sectors in terms of workers' perceptions of costs related to their informal practices. Findings underscore the key aspect of choice versus control over costs, which constitutes the main difference between workers from different sectors.

The Element concludes, in Section 7, by discussing several issues related to the provision of IFRs. These include its influence on clients'/citizens' well-being and social inequality; ramifications for public administration in general, particularly in terms of manpower renewal in the constrained environment of public-sector frontline workers; and gender ramifications, as the vast majority of social service workers are women. I close the section by suggesting that the

knowledge yielded from a nuanced conceptualization of the IFR phenomenon might inform more adequate future policy, proposing several policy examples.

2 Discretion on the Front Line in Context

Frontline workers' provision of IFRs to clients can be contextualized within the broader issue of discretion, as a type of coping strategy. As decisions about possible paths of action are always embedded in a specific institutional and organizational setting, I portray here the broader context in which public services are provided. The literature points to three main factors that most prominently direct contemporary policy implementation at the street level: welfare reforms, New Public Management (NPM) reforms, and values of competing approaches such as New Public Governance.

2.1 Welfare Reforms and Diminishing Governmental Resources

Most Western societies have witnessed welfare reforms in the past few decades, influenced mainly by neoliberal ideology. These reforms have led to massive institutional changes in social policies and related policies, which are often perceived as dismantling the welfare state (Hacker, 2019). Notwithstanding cross-country variations, the reforms include freedom of markets and marketization processes; championing values of personal responsibility and individualism; and restricted state action (Harvey, 2007; Maman & Rosenhek, 2011; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018).

As states have been restructured to operate according to market rationalities, profoundly changing the nature of the welfare state, the social contract between the state and its citizens has also changed. Scholars explain that whereas earlier welfare regimes used access to various public resources and services as a main means of protecting citizens from possible harm from the free market, contemporary regimes minimize the public safety net, reflecting withdrawal of the state's responsibility for its citizens (Hacker, 2019).

Most important in terms of policy implementation under these reforms is the component of massive budgetary cuts. Indeed, the problem of resources has always been integral to the implementation of public policy at the street level (Kosar & Schachter, 2011; Thomann, 2015). However, the difficulties and complexities in the contemporary work environment have been exacerbated by two consequences of the welfare reforms: (1) the adoption of austerity measures in the public services (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), such that workers have fewer public/organizational resources to use in their daily work; and (2) escalating poverty rates and social inequality in many countries. Consequently, frontline workers who provide public services operate under conditions of

increased demand and scarcer financial resources (Hupe & Krogt, 2013). Hupe and Buffat (2014) described these structural institutional constraints as a "public service gap" resulting from the large differences between the resources given to workers to fulfill their tasks and the actual resources needed to meet demand.

2.2 New Public Management

The second factor directing contemporary provision of public services is the work under NPM guidelines. Over the last few decades, NPM has been considered the dominant view in public administration (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). This approach emphasizes economic rationality in the conduct of public administration workers. Core characteristics of NPM are greater reliance on market mechanisms; adoption and assimilation of private-sector approaches and management methods in the public sector; encouragement of privatization and outsourcing; and an emphasis on results and productivity (Moynihan, 2008). Key values in this approach are efficiency and effectiveness (see Pollitt, 2010 for further reading on NPM).

As the literature has demonstrated, the introduction of market-like mechanisms into the implementation of public policy has drastically altered daily work on the front line (Evans, 2016). As part of the decentralization approach, policy is set by high-level politicians and bureaucrats, while it is the responsibility of street-level organizations and workers to decide how to implement it (Brodkin, 2011) in a way that ensures economy effectiveness (Soss, Fording & Schram, 2011). Moreover, in the context of street-level work, NPM focuses on result-oriented rewards related to workers' performance, as well as treating recipients as "customers" rather than citizens (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2014; Glinsner et al., 2019). New Public Management puts a strong emphasis on customer orientation while simultaneously introducing new forms of labor control: a system of performance measurement and benchmarking that has led to competition between administrative units and individual workers (Cohen, Benish & Shamriz-Ilouz, 2016). This transformation of public agencies fosters an "entrepreneurial spirit" (Bröckling, 2015), as workers are forced to compete for effectiveness and efficiency (Hartmann & Khademian, 2010; Moynihan, 2008).

To sum up, the public service gap created by welfare reforms converges with NPM economic values. Together with an emphasis on efficiency and client choice (Tummers, Steijn & Bekkers, 2012), the manpower and resources to achieve desired outcomes have been sharply reduced. Further complicating the situation for those who implement policy at the front line is an emerging new approach to public administration.

2.3 Public Value Governance

Alongside the dominance of NPM values, voices criticizing this approach have become prominent in the last two decades. These critics promote the assumption that government should not be run like a business, but rather as a democracy (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). The new approach, which does not have an agreed-upon label (Bryson et al., 2014), is represented in works such as Denhardt and Denhardt's (2015) New Public Service, Osborne's (2010) New Public Governance, and Boyte's (2005) call to reframe democracy. Such scholars, as well as others, maintain that the NPM focus on efficacy and effectiveness undermines other democratic values, such as inclusion, citizenship, and cultivation of the public sphere. This new approach highlights several main stances, including emphasis on public value and public values; a recognition that government has a special role as a guarantor of public values; belief in the importance of public management broadly conceived and of service to and for the public; and a heightened emphasis on citizenship and democratic and collaborative governance (Bryson et al., 2014). As part of this approach, policy implementation at the street level is expected to follow certain core principles: seeking public interest; valuing citizenship and public service above entrepreneurship; acknowledging the central role of frontline providers as serving citizens more than customers; and valuing people more than productivity (Bryson, Crosby & Bloomberg, 2015). In their symposium introduction on public value governance, Bryson and colleagues (2014) conclude that most of the main characteristics of NPM remain prominent and concurrent with the competing values of this new approach, creating a somewhat vague environment. It is not surprising, therefore, that this setting increases the ambiguity of daily work at the front line, compelling service providers to invent new ways of adequately doing their job (i.e., implementing designed policy).

2.4 Discretion and Coping Strategies

Today's frontline workers, regardless of the public service they provide (e.g., welfare, health, education), are confronted with the need to perform under the convergence of competing values of marketization, efficiency, and effectiveness, on the one hand, and public values based on citizens' needs, on the other. The constant demand to make decisions while implementing policy is considered an inherent characteristic of their work (Lipsky, 2010 [1980]). This is traditionally framed in the literature as "discretion," which has been defined as a fundamental feature of social service provision (Brodkin, 2006). In his classic book on street-level work, Lipsky (2010 [1980]) maintained that the

uncertainties and constant work pressure with which street-level workers have to cope makes such discretion necessary.

One main aspect of these work pressures is related to the fact that street-level workers embody the point of interaction between the state and its citizens, as workers have a dual commitment to the state and their clients (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, 2003). The authors demonstrated that street-level workers use two types of narratives to describe their decision-making about policy implementation: as citizen agents and as state agents. While they did not present these narratives as dichotomous, in actuality, decisions made as citizen agents often contradict possible actions as state agents, and vice versa.

Ample literature has focused on the component of discretion at the front line, in an attempt to understand the coping strategies service providers use in their daily work. These efforts have increased over the last twenty years, as scholars and practitioners have come to realize that the environment in the public services is changing and that workers have to develop new ways of coping, implementing policy in a post-welfare reform era (just to name a few: Brodkin, 2011; Cohen, 2016; Dörrenbächer, 2017; Evans, 2016; Evans & Hupe, 2020; Gofen, 2013; Hupe & Krogt, 2013; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010; Thomann, van Engen & Tummers, 2018; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014). The important insights yielded from these works reveal that although coping strategies are sometimes reflected in toughening practices and attitudes toward clients, frontline service providers often work hard to enhance the well-being of their clients (Evans, 2012), to "move toward clients" (Tummers et al., 2015), and to "do more with less" (Hupe & Buffat, 2014).

As more and more evidence has accumulated to support the tendency of workers to use their discretion in ways that emphasize their responsiveness to clients' needs, I have come to realize that two fundamental aspects of frontline service are not being addressed by the literature or fully understood. First, the literature maintains that discretion should be understood as a normative aspect of freedom and choice. However, as contemporary conditions *force* workers to employ discretion, is this not, in fact, a coerced element in their work? Second, if the contemporary institutional setting introduces such a constrained environment, how can workers *actually* deliver services to clients? In particular, how do they manage to provide resources in the absence of organizational ones? Resource scarcity does not allow workers to deliver designed policy; there are simply too few resources and too many needs. While "using discretion" seems to be the immediate solution, it can be overly simplistic when the math does not add up: too few and too many. Nonetheless, in interactions with clients, frontline providers *are* operating in *some* way. What do they do? What directs their decision-making and practices? These enigmas have led me to conclude that in

order to understand the nature of public service delivery in the contemporary environment, I need new conceptualizations and I have to seek hidden practices enacted by workers that might provide some answers.

2.5 First Hints of Workers' Provision of Personal Resources

The majority of studies examining public service delivery at the front line have focused on workers' decision-making and discretionary practices with respect to the formal organizational resources at their disposal, as part of their formal policy work. However, a careful read of the literature suggests a somewhat latent aspect of service delivery, where workers provide services in ways that are above and beyond their formal role requirements. One major example is Dubois's (2016) work on welfare offices in France, which describes his six-month observation of face-to-face encounters between frontline reception agents and clients applying for family benefits. In his field notes, Dubois wrote, "Often, you get to play a role that goes far beyond what might be expected of a reception agent in a family benefit office" (2016:105). The practices which go beyond the formal role are embedded in the fact that the workers are physically engaged with clients (meet clients in person), which leads to personal involvement. These practices include giving technical assistance beyond the mere processing of the application, helping translate forms, spending more time than formally allotted to each client, and giving advice that falls outside the institutional framework based on personal experience. Dubois emphasizes the emotional support workers give to clients, as described by one of his interviewees: "You can listen to them if they have a problem with their son, or with their rent, even if there's nothing you can do" (2016:105). Support beyond the formal role is given against a backdrop of reduced formal resources, staff downsizing, and expectations to do "a lot more than we did five years ago" (2016:103).

Tummers and colleagues (2015), in their review of street-level workers' coping strategies, categorized the personal involvement that Dubois describes as "moving toward clients" by using "personal resources." Dubois's study was, in fact, the only one to fall in this category of coping. I became familiar with Dubois's work when I was struggling to understand the findings of my own study on social workers in welfare offices in Israel. Together with Roni Strier, I found that workers had to implement policy under "structural deficiencies" (Lavee & Strier, 2019) resembling the conditions portrayed in Dubois's French welfare offices and in the context of the "public service gap" described by Hupe and Buffat (2014), where street-level workers have to "do more with less," implementing policy against the backdrop of reduced organizational resources and growing citizens' needs. In our study of Israeli social workers who operate under conditions of increased client poverty and social policy that disregards

clients' distress, social workers highlighted their interpersonal relationships with clients as their main tool in implementing policy. We found that workers used their emotions as resources provided to clients in place of traditional social benefits, as the latter were too limited to be of much assistance. We framed these practices as informal ones in which workers provide alternative personal resources to clients (Lavee & Strier, 2019).

Tummers and colleagues (2015) defined such personal resources as going beyond what is specified in the workers' job descriptions. Surprisingly, from the 277 texts they reviewed to map coping strategies, only 7 percent mentioned workers' usage of their own resources to assist clients. As I was trying to make sense of my own findings about the emotional resources that social workers provided to clients, and the personal involvement described by Dubois (2016), I was confused by the scarcity of such mentions in the literature on coping strategies. One possible explanation is that Tummers's review draws on studies published between 1981 and 2014. It is possible that, as the institutional context changes, workers' practices change accordingly. This insight can be inferred from Thomann, van Engen, and Tummers's (2018) claim that workers' discretionary practices are evolving under changing circumstances. Therefore, it can be argued that the environment described previously – in which a scarcity of formal resources coincides with concurrent values of NPM and new public governance – calls for a change in the traditional focus of discretion research on practices involving formal resources. When workers implement policy which itself is insufficient and does not provide an adequate response to citizens' needs, we need to delve deeper into the mystery of "what workers actually do" in their interactions with clients. It is my claim that a focus on the IFRs that workers provide to clients offers a comprehensive and nuanced explanation. To explore resources that are not formally provided by the organization, but are rather taken from the workers' own capital, I draw on Small's (2006:276) definition of a resource as "any symbolic or material good beneficial to an individual . . . including economic or social capital, information, a credential, a material good, or a service, among other things." As such, informal resources are defined as any of the aforementioned resources that are provided by workers and are not part of their formal duties, or formal resources provided in informal ways.

3 General Design for Exploring the Hidden Tier of Frontline Service Delivery: Qualitative Method

The dearth of empirical attention to frontline workers' provision of personal resources to clients, in a context of highly limited formal organizational resources, might be attributed to difficulties exploring hidden discretionary