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Accomplishing the Public Encounter: A Case for Ethnomethodology in Public Administration Research

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Abstract

Public encounters between street-level bureaucrats and citizens predominantly function through interpersonal interactions. However, there has been relatively little study of the role of talk, what we refer to as language-in-use, in accomplishing the tasks and related objectives within the encounter. This oversight has limited our understanding of the collaborative, negotiated process of public encounters, rendered citizens mostly invisible, and left unexamined the connection between encounters and outcomes. Drawing on the rich but under-utilized tradition of ethnomethodology, a methodology created for studying routine interactions, we provide an analytical example of the language-in-use in one encounter to demonstrate how ethnomethodology is uniquely appropriate for understanding public encounters. We argue that an ethnomethodological approach illuminates the mechanisms that make some outcomes possible, others improbable, and that these accomplishments are important for understanding a variety of outcomes.

Introduction

Face-to-face public encounters have long been recognized as critical elements in understanding administrative experiences. Inspired by Lipsky's (1980/2010) seminal work *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*, most studies have focused on how contextual and organizational factors affect street-level bureaucrats' decision-making behaviors (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Tummers et al. 2015). More recently, there have been calls to broaden the study of public encounters to include examination of relational processes and communicative practices to understand how the encounter itself is associated with "the quality of services, decisions, and outcomes" (Bartels 2013, 469) and how citizens[1] experience "the state" (Brodkin 2013; Jakobsen et al. 2016; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018; Stout and Love 2017). This line of inquiry differs from traditional research on public encounters because it explicitly focuses on *how* the encounter is accomplished, compelling researchers to investigate patterned, relational, situated behaviors within the encounter by both the frontline service provider *and* citizen in order to understand the connection between particular practices and related outcomes. What happens in encounters has been neglected in favor of a focus on outcomes, without understanding how the encounter is implicated in accomplishing those outcomes (Brodkin 2013). In other words, how is the encounter accomplished when viewed as an interactive, relational process rather than as simply a generic setting within which street-level bureaucrats enact decisions?

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1 The use of the term "citizen" here is not intended to denote a particular legal status, but is used in a general way to indicate anyone who interacts with a representative of the state.

In this article, we advance the practical, empirical, and theoretical understanding of public encounters by arguing that systematically examining the real-time, routine interaction process between street-level bureaucrats and the people they serve is vital to understanding *how* encounters are accomplished and connecting them to their associated outcomes. We start from Bartels' (2013) perspective that interactions within public encounters are a phenomenon in their own right, and a fruitful way of studying these is through attending to talk, or what is referred to as "language-in-use" (Francis and Hester 2004, 8). Public encounters are produced by the people involved in a locally, situated context that reflects members' understanding of the situation at hand (Wagenaar 2004). Encounters are thus envisioned as a collaborative, negotiated process where street-level bureaucrat and citizen alike contribute to what is accomplished. We argue that such an endeavor requires a methodological approach that is uniquely suited for systematically examining language-in-use, but has rarely been used in the street-level bureaucracy literature: ethnomethodology.

To this end, we demonstrate ethnomethodology's potential contributions through a detailed analysis of an excerpt from a public encounter observed in Arizona's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). We use ethnomethodological principles, not as a how-to guide, but to illuminate the relational, situated process of the encounter, identify how language-in-use constitutes and sustains the encounter, and provide insight into what is accomplished. We demonstrate how close attention to language-in-use renders each party's understanding of the situation at hand at least partly observable. We make the citizen's participation and street-level bureaucrat's responses visible, showing the collaborative, negotiated nature of the encounter. Finally, we discuss how adding ethnomethodology to the methodological toolbox will facilitate more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

Public Encounters—an Evolving Literature

Public encounters research has focused on street-level bureaucrats who have some level of discretion and autonomy and work under conditions of competing demands, large caseloads, and insufficient resources (Lipsky 1980/2010). The primary objective of this research has been to understand decisions made by street-level bureaucrats as they cope with the organizational and policy constraints under which they work. Coping is conceptualized as street-level bureaucrat behaviors such as creaming, bending or breaking rules, routinizing, and rigid rule following, with the purpose of making their workload more manageable (Halliday et al. 2009; Hupe and Hill 2007; Tummers et al. 201). Coping behaviors are problematic because they create inefficiencies and inequities in service delivery, even if they benefit the individual citizen during the interaction (Lipsky 1980/2010; Tummers et al. 2015). Early research focused on coping behaviors as a principal-agent problem that, when coupled with street-level bureaucrats' autonomy and discretion, resulted in varying degrees of adherence to stated laws, rules, and policies in their decisions (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

However, the past two decades has seen a shift from a focus on the association between organizational and policy factors on decision making, to research more fitting to Goodsell's (1981) definition of public encounters as "the interaction of citizen and official as they communicate to conduct business" (5). This literature acknowledges that additional characteristics, namely social, communicative, and interpersonal, affect the ways service delivery is accomplished (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Prior and Barnes 2011; Sandfort 2000). Organizational culture, professional norms, previous experiences, and employee interactions have all been found to contribute to decisions made on the front lines (Riccucci 2005; Sandfort 2000).

Street-level bureaucrats' decisions are also influenced by judgments about the behaviors, identities, and worthiness of citizens during encounters (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Scott 1997). Citizen demeanor during the interaction (Raaphorst and Groeneveld 2018), ability to conform to normative values such as showing deference to the street-level bureaucrat or presenting as responsible and hardworking (Dubois 1999/2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), and ability to persuade and negotiate (Prior and Barnes 2011; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018) affect the decision-making process. These decisions result in what Tummers et al. (2015) categorize as "moving towards clients" (going the extra mile, bending or breaking rules), "moving away from clients" (routinization, rationing) and "moving against clients" (strict rule adherence) (1103). This literature demonstrates that street-level bureaucrats make decisions based on assessments of the situation at hand, and draw from their local, taken-for-granted, shared experiences and knowledge (Durose 2009; Sandfort 2000; Wagenaar 2004). Thus, encounters take on an improvisational quality, where subjective judgments and negotiation contribute to street-level bureaucrat decision making (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012; Prior and Barnes 2011; Wagenaar and Noam Cook 2003).

Acknowledging the improvisational, negotiated nature of public encounters has led to an increased interest in the *social process* of encounters, what

Bartels (2013) refers to as the "in-between." The in-between is where and how policy rules, organizational factors, individual judgments, communicative practices, and other characteristics are employed during the interaction. As such, it

> is not simply a communicative void for the neutral transmission of information but, instead, a multifaceted process of interwoven situated performances which enables or disadvantages the actual abilities of public professionals and citizens to make claims, influence decisions, and understand each other. (Bartels 2013, 476)

This changes the question from "what organizational and/or interpersonal factors affect decision-making?" to "how are those factors used and communicated during the encounter, for what purposes, and to what effect?" The encounter is conceived as a relational process primarily constituted through talk.

While limited in the street-level bureaucracy literature, there are important contributions that can serve as a starting point for understanding the relevance and importance of the in-between by analyzing talk in public encounters. For example, Dubois (1999/2010) found that street-level bureaucrats created barriers through bureaucratic language, capitalizing on asymmetries in citizen understanding of institutional rules and procedures to reinforce deference towards their authority. Dubois thus connects what happens during encounters to potential future outcomes, arguing that the interactions were intended to shape beneficiaries into "model recipients," (65) by promoting "supposedly universally shared models and values" (71) that have lasting effects beyond the encounter.

Paying attention to talk can provide nuanced insight into how the situation at hand is understood by the parties within the encounter and affected by interactional dynamics such as the use of power and expertise. Power asymmetries are inherent in public encounters, and citizens' behaviors, identities, requests, and responses influence how "institutional rules and norms are invoked and negotiated, and thus how assessments and decisions are made in concrete practices of interaction" (Bruhn and Ekström 2017, 212). For example, Lens et al. (2013) studied how judges in administrative hearings differed in how they dealt with citizen claims of incorrect denial of welfare benefits. Judges employing an "adjudicator" style tended to minimize the power asymmetries between the citizen and the agency representative through practices such as reducing technical legal talk and treating citizens' counter narrative of the agency's version of events as equally credible. In contrast, judges with a "bureaucratic" style upheld existing relations of power by limiting citizen contestation and prioritizing the agency's side of the story. The research demonstrates that power asymmetries are not simply a static characteristic of the administrative hearing, but are actively invoked, maintained, or minimized in ways that influence the direction and outcomes of the encounter.

Studying talk is also vital because encounters include collaboration and negotiation by *both* the street-level bureaucrat and citizen where social skills such as persuasion, subversion, cooperation, and submission are employed based on each party's understanding of the situation at hand (Bartels 2013; Moulton and Sandfort 2017; Prior and Barnes 2011; Wagenaar 2004). Bruhn and Ekström (2017) found that these dynamics exist even in highly rule-bound situations, where rules are "dynamically applied and negotiated in real-time interactions" (196) even when negotiation might not be otherwise expected. This is the heart of Bartels' (2013) description of the in-between. It is not just the decisions that are made or which rules are enforced or broken, but rather, it is the meaning that is communicated and understood, the identities that are performed and responded to, and the interactional dynamics that are employed by both parties. The in-between is an observable process through which the encounter is accomplished and has potentially significant near- and long-term effects; however, it is otherwise invisible except to the people involved.

Fully understanding the relational, situated, processual nature of the in-between and its associated outcomes requires a methodological perspective and associated analytical methods that are attuned to investigating the relational dynamics of the encounters accomplished through talk. Public encounters have primarily been studied using qualitative methods (Tummers et al. 2015), although there are some instances of quantitative approaches such as Scott's (1997) experimental design or mixed methods such as Riccucci's (2005) combination of observations, interviews, and surveys. Semi-structured interviews and collections of narratives have been staples of the field (see Durose 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Raaphorst and Groeneveld 2018; Wagenaar 2004). They have illuminated street-level bureaucrats' perceptions of encounters and their decision-making processes. However, interviews and narratives are ultimately a report filtered through memory and reflection that cannot capture the relational, evolving dynamics of the encounter and tend to ignore the citizens' experiences and perceptions (Bruhn and Ekström 2017; ten Have 2004). Studies taking an ethnographic approach incorporate observations, and provide a broader account of public encounters that includes accounts of citizens' experiences (see Dubois 1999/2010; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018; Sandfort

2000). But while ethnographic data collection includes citizen experiences, it does not tend to be focused on the micro-interactional processes within the encounter. These qualitative studies use interpretive qualitative data analysis and have produced valuable insights related to *what* happens within public encounters and street-level bureaucrats' perceptions of *why* they act in particular ways. However, these data collection and analytical methods are limited in the ways they can account for *how* interactional dynamics affect actions and decisions. In other words, what conditions drive the process of the encounter and make some actions, decisions, and outcomes more appropriate than others for addressing the situation at hand?

A review of other literatures interested in service delivery and behaviors by street-level bureaucrats and citizens does not help to fill this gap. The most promising prospect is the coproduction literature, which also focuses on service delivery but envisions the citizen as active and able to participate in the production of public goods and services (Bovaird and Loeffler 2012; Brudney and England 1983; Whitaker 1980). Coproduction ranges from citizens providing public services in lieu of the state, for example, a volunteer fire department, to citizens changing their individual behavior to meet program objectives that, in the aggregate, produce broader social benefits (Alford 1998, 2009; Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017). Coproductive situations vary in their degree of reliance on citizen interactions with street-level bureaucrats, but in those with regular interactions, street-level bureaucrats are expected to play a facilitative role to encourage, assist, and negotiate citizens' coproductive behaviors (Hand 2018; Ryan 2012; Whitaker 1980).

However, like the street-level bureaucracy literature, work on coproduction has been primarily one-sided, investigating factors that influence whether or not a citizen engages in relevant coproductive activities, such as ability and motivation, and whether the desired result is produced (Alford 2002; Brandsen and Honingh 2016; Van Eijk and Steen 2016). Discussions of encounters between the state and citizens are most often used to illuminate theoretical examples of different types of coproduction (see Brandsen and Honingh 2016) or stages within the coproduction process (see Nabatchi, Sancino, and Sicilia 2017) rather than systematically investigating the process through which coproduction is accomplished.

The primary way in which encounters are accomplished is through talk, yet this element has been mostly missing in the public administration research. This has created a blind spot in our understanding, especially related to citizen contributions to the process of the encounter, conditions of the evolving situation at hand that prompt certain improvisational actions or decisions over others, and the associated outcomes. Without a tradition of investigating talk in the field, where should researchers turn? In the next section, we present ethnomethodology, a methodology from sociology, and argue it is the appropriate approach to continue the evolution of the public encounters literature.

Ethnomethodology: Background and Related Literature

The relevance of ethnomethodology for public administration and policy studies has been explored theoretically (Jun 2006; Kelly 2004; Marshall and White 1990; McSwite 2006; Silverman 1997; White 1999). However, ethnomethodology has rarely been the methodological basis for empirical analysis in these fields (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000), though it has generated a considerable empirical literature in sociology (Atkinson 1988; Francis and Hester 2004; Linstead 2006). Given the limited exposure of public administration and policy studies to the unique methodological nuances and directives of ethnomethodology, in this section we review its history, assumptions, and aims.

Ethnomethodology was developed by sociologist Harold Garfinkel and several colleagues in the 1960s. Inspired by the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schutz and Aron Gurwitz as well the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, ethnomethodology belongs to the general interpretivist (Joas, Knöbl, and Skinner 2009) and micro-interactionist (Collins 1994) traditions in American sociology. At the center of ethnomethodology's project is the question of social order and investigation of how the meaningful, patterned, and orderly quality of everyday life is accomplished (Garfinkel 1984/1967; Rawls 2002). In emphasizing the accomplishment of social order, Garfinkel rejected theoretical explanations that the best way to study this order was through testing theories related to the internalization of values, the individualistic pursuit of self-interest, or the effect of demographic or structural variables. Instead, he, contended that the people within a particular setting, context, or in ethnomethodology's parlance, "social scene," *generate* the orderly and predictable nature of everyday life on an ongoing basis through the use of mutually understood communicative methods, constructing social reality by those present (Garfinkel 1984/1967; Rawls 2002). In this sense, ethnomethodology affords a high level of spontaneity and contingency to social interactions in which people respond to and participate in the ongoing production of the situation. Broadly speaking, people opt to respond in ways that seem to be appropriate or "fit" the specific situation at hand. Thus, ethnomethodology is concerned with "identifying and delineating fundamental practices involved in the production and recognition of actions and sequences of actions" (Heritage and Robinson 2011, 31).

Ethnomethodologists see social life as relational and procedural. This directs researchers to give "the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events," considering them "as phenomena in their own right" by examining the ordinary, real-time, situated practices that people employ as they interact and construct an intelligible scene with one another (Garfinkel 1984/1967, 1). Ethnomethodology is the study of those shared methods by which people construct and "maintain a sense of order and intelligibility" in a particular social context so they are understandable to the other members (ten Have 2004, 16). This is primarily accomplished through talk, or in ethnomethodological parlance, "language-in-use" (Francis and Hester 2004, 9). The ways the parties make themselves intelligible to the other are by definition, observable. The form and direction of interactions are based on this mutual, evolving understanding that relies on interpretation and sensemaking by both parties. While misunderstandings can and do occur, interpretation of the other party's meaning is considered mostly straightforward and routine (Francis and Hester 2004).

An illustrative example is Lee's (2007) ethnomethodological analysis examining teachers' patterned, yet improvisational actions employed when responding to students' verbal answers to questions during classroom discussions. Teachers did not just respond to whether the student's answer was "correct, adequate or relevant but also to how they are produced: accurately, convincingly, or reluctantly. Even for correct answers, teachers often ask students to elaborate, reformulate or defend their answers" (181). Teachers' responses incorporated an analysis of students' depth of understanding, strategies to elicit, correct, or elaborate on answers, allocating speaking rights (asking the same student to elaborate, indicating another student should answer), and directing the next phase of the discussion. Lee demonstrates that these situated practices are patterned but not fixed, improvisational but not haphazard, and are contingent on "what becomes available within the sequence of interaction" (191).

Ethnomethodology's methodological priors are important for understanding the scope and aims of this type of research (Moses and Knutsen 2007). Although it is similar to other qualitative interpretive approaches in its concern with localized situations and practices in context, ethnomethodology is primarily concerned with procedure and process: the observable methods and mechanisms that constitute the interaction (ten Have 2004). It is "*not* interested in anything that goes on 'in the mind' or 'internal processes', 'intentions', 'emotions' and other so-called psychological phenomena" (ten Have 2004, 27 emphasis in original). This is a nuanced but important difference from other methodologies concerned with context and observable behaviors. Ethnomethodology assumes that the observable meaning in a social scene reflects only *that person's understanding of the situation at hand, in that context, at that moment*, and is not necessarily reflective of a general disposition, identity, or method of interpretation. Ethnomethodology does not attempt to study observable behaviors in order to unlock what is going on in the mind, for example whether someone is using "intuitive and automatic," or "reflective and rational" thinking (Thaler and Sunstein 2009, 19). It is interested in what meaning is being communicated through observable actions, how the actions drive and constitute the interaction, and what is accomplished. The question is not *why* a person engages in a particular action within the interaction, but rather, what actions exist, how and when they are employed, and to what effect? A priori organizational and individual factors are not of interest to ethnomethodological analysis unless they are used as part of the interaction (Francis and Hester 2004). Thus, while not all ethnomethodological studies eschew interviews, narratives, or other ethnographic data (Maynard and Clayman 1991; Nelson 1994), close examination of exact language-in-use from participant observation (e.g., transcripts of interactions) allows for analysis of the process, methods, mechanisms, and outcomes in accomplishing a scene (ten Have 2004).

Overview of WIC and Observational Data

The public encounters explored here were accomplished within the context of Arizona's WIC program, a federal program administered by the states that provides supplemental nutrition to low-income pregnant and post-partum women, and children from birth to age five. WIC is the third largest federal nutrition assistance program serving 53% of all infants born in the United States. WIC is primarily known for providing vouchers for healthy food and infant formula to qualifying families (U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service 2012). However, another fundamental benefit of the program is its provision of nutrition education. States are allowed wide leeway to implement nutrition education as long as it is provided at least every six months at no cost to the participant, is culturally sensitive, and includes breastfeeding support. In addition, food benefits cannot be withheld from WIC participants if they decline to participate in the offered nutrition education (Agriculture 2013).

In Arizona during the observation period, nutrition education was delivered as an integrated part of the food voucher distribution process. Each time participants received their vouchers they met one-on-one with a WIC staff member, most often, a Community Nutrition Educator (CNE) who determined initial or continuing eligibility, explained benefits, provided vouchers, recorded anthropometric measurements, and most importantly for this research, engaged in a detailed interaction concerning the family's nutrition-related behaviors. The primary purpose of the nutrition education portion of the interaction is to reveal problematic nutrition-related behaviors, assess the scope and severity of the problem, and provide targeted, practical solutions.

The extended excerpt used here is one of 28 observations that took place at two WIC clinics in the metropolitan Phoenix area from March 2013 through June 2013 as part of a larger research project. The clinics were administered by a local non-profit community health service and shared some personnel who "floated" between the two locations. These locations were selected based on their willingness to work with an outside researcher and the high volume of clients served. While the two clinics were in different physical settings, they had very similar atmospheres with friendly employees, colorful posters on the walls, and individual offices decorated with family pictures and other personal effects.

WIC staff members met with clients individually in small offices. Depending on the length of time since the client had last been certified (deemed eligible), weight, height, and hemoglobin (iron) measures might be taken of the mother or participating children. All participants had discussions with the WIC counselors about their family's nutrition-related habits. These interactions lasted anywhere from 15 min to over an hour, but the vast majority ran about 40 min. With the participants' permission, the interactions were audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

The analysis provided with the excerpt was built off of a previously completed analysis of the entire dataset. One of the authors transcribed and then coded the full dataset using a grounded theory coding strategy (Charmaz 2006). Thus, there were no *a priori* codes, categories, or theoretical framework (Birks and Mills 2011). Rather, the coding remained close to the data, describing actions observable in the language of both parties such as "demonstrating knowledge," "revealing preferences," and "indicating willingness to change behavior." Codes did not assign feelings, meaning, or intentions. Coding employed the constant comparison method, consisting of reading and re-reading the transcripts to iteratively compare previous codes to new ones, refine codes, and identify patterns and relationships between codes. Analytic memos systematically documented the cognitive analytical process of pattern identification and investigation, confirming, refining, or discarding identified patterns based on empirical analysis of the data (Charmaz 2006; Corbin and Strauss 2008).

The initial analysis of the full dataset resulted in a finding of a paradoxical relationship between the surveillance inherent to the interactions, which focused on asking mothers to reveal their nutrition-related behaviors at a detailed level, coupled with communicative practices encouraging and supporting mothers' autonomy and self-efficacy (Hand 2018). This was the motivation to investigate language-in-use more closely to examine the roles of authority and expertise in this paradox. We did this by focusing our analysis on two central ethnomethodological analytical concepts: the consideration of conversational sequences (turn taking), and the allocation of conversational rights (Francis and Hester 2004; Heritage 2005). We selected these two concepts because they are inter-related: how turn taking happens can illuminate how conversational rights are allocated. Close examination of turn-taking sequences examines how topics of discussion are opened or closed, how possible responses are bounded by the previous sequence, and what each speaker responds to from the other's speech. Responses to the other party's turn "embody and display the speaker's analysis of prior talk, insofar as its content is taken up," and is important for determining how the interaction will proceed and the meaning derived by each speaker (Francis and Hester 2004, 29).

Conversational rights are concerned with rights-to-speak within a conversational pair and pay particular attention to unequal distribution of those rights to one party (Francis and Hester 2004). This kind of asymmetry is common in many interactions and conversations. Parents' rights, for example, typically exceed children's rights; teachers' rights exceed students' rights. Conversational rights are also fundamental to understanding public encounters where authority is usually distributed unequally by virtue of differences in knowledge, expertise, and status where, "the official has authority and is vested with legal powers; the citizen is a private individual standing alone before the sovereign state" (Goodsell 1981, 5; Lens et al. 2013). Examples of conversational rights include rights to terminate the others' topic of conversation (or their speaking rights altogether), demand deference or politeness, speak uninterrupted, or intervene in the action or conversation (Francis and Hester 2004).

We theorized that the ways authority and expertise were used would likely be observable at turn-taking points where conversational rights changed in some way. Conversational rights were loosely defined as who had the right to direct the conversation. We primarily relied on "social competencies that any member of society can be presumed to possess" to identify the points of change (Francis and Hester 2004, 23–24). To this end, both authors examined the full dataset, focusing on points where conversational rights seemed to be given or claimed, and coded observable actions before and after the change, asking, "what produced this change in conversational rights and what was the result?" Codes were assigned at these points in the same manner as the initial analysis of the full dataset: iteratively and focused on actions. Both authors reviewed all codes and any points of disagreement were discussed, analyzed, and recoded or refined as necessary.

Accomplishing a WIC Encounter

Because the purpose of this manuscript is to demonstrate the value of an ethnomethodological perspective for investigating encounters, we deviate from the norm at this point by presenting one extended excerpt from one encounter with ongoing, parallel analysis. This is not meant as a how-to guide for conducting ethnomethodological research, but as an attempt to demystify ethnomethodology through illuminating specific examples of the abstract concepts presented earlier. The excerpt was selected primarily because of the atypical nature of one of the problems revealed by the mother, which we thought would clearly demonstrate the paradoxical nature of the encounters and the ways that paradox is constituted through language-in-use. It is also long enough to clearly illuminate patterns of action, yet brief enough that we can present the bulk of the encounter. The excerpt excludes the beginning and end of the encounter, which included gathering eligibility information, height, weight, and iron measurements of the mother and one of her children, and printing the food vouchers at the reception desk.

The encounter is between a CNE and a mother who is with two children: a two-year old and an infant who was born prematurely. To begin the nutrition education portion of the encounter, the CNE lays out 8–10 cards, each with a picture of a woman making different facial expressions conveying emotions such as happiness, sadness, frustration, ambivalence, satisfaction, etc. This was part of a package of strategies CNEs were trained to use to open the discussion of the family's nutrition-related behaviors.

C WIC CNE: *Alright so I'm just going to lay out some pictures of different faces here and what you'll want to do is look through the faces and pick one that best represents how you feel about how baby's eating, and then one about how <boy's name> is eating at home.*

P Participant: *Ok, um, <pause> This is probably about how baby is eating, and let's see...<pause> It's tough <laughs> Probably this one about how <boy's name> is eating.*

C: *Ok. I love how baby is looking at you. You can tell he loves his mama. Alright so let's start with this face, tell me why you chose this one for baby.*

P: *Because I don't have any problems with him eating. He eats very good. He wakes up to eat when he's supposed to.*

C: *Yay!*

P: *Yeah!*

The use of the cards is an example of an opening: the CNE gives a directive to the mother to pick the cards that represent the mother's feelings about how her children are eating. The directive is clearly recognized as intelligible by the mother, who proceeds to select two cards. Note, too, how the opening grants conversational rights to the mother, applying a boundary by focusing on a specific topic, but at the same time, allowing the mother to direct the conversation towards a broad (but not infinite) range of possible answers. It signals that it is equally legitimate to disclose positive or negative emotions related to the question at hand. It also does not require any specialized knowledge or a "right" answer. It allows the mother to at least partially determine how the next part of the interaction will proceed. The CNE engages in what initially appears to be tangential side talk, commenting on the baby's affection for "his mama." However, this is not accidental: positive, affirmative talk is central to these encounters, a primary finding from the analysis of the full dataset (see Hand 2018). In this short section, feelings are the focus in multiple ways: the mother is specifically asked about her feelings related to her children's eating, the CNE expresses her feelings about how the baby is looking at the mother and her assessment of the baby's feelings about the mother. However, the topic of feelings is then closed when the CNE moves to a related but more focused sequence of questions:

C: *And how do you know when baby's hungry?*

P: *When he wakes up <laughing> Right now when he wakes up...actually when he starts sucking on his hand or he starts finding something to suck on.*

C: *Yeah! And then, what kind of formula is baby using?*

The conversation shifts quickly from feelings to questions about expertise. We use the term "expertise" here purposely based on the analysis of the full dataset. The purpose of these types of questions, which make up the bulk of the interactions, is to diagnose the degree to which the mother's (and her family's) behaviors match WIC's technical nutrition recommendations, determining whether educational intervention (in the form of advice) is necessary. The question about feelings reveals a topic important to the mother that the CNE can pursue with these technical questions, identifying and assessing any potential problems. The mother recognized and answered the CNE's question by demonstrating her knowledge and expertise regarding her baby. The baby is acting like he is "supposed to," indicating she knows what the "correct" feeding interval is. We know that this is the "correct" response since the counselor again recognizes the response with, "Yeah!" and moves on to the next question. A slight change in conversational rights is also evident here. Although both parties are speaking more or less equally in terms of time, the CNE is directing the conversation with questions to which the mother is expected to respond.

P: *Neosure.*

C: *And the Neosure, is it the ready to feed that you're using? Or the one where you add water?*

P: *The powder.*

C: *The powder? Ok. And then how do you prepare the formula?*

P: *One scoop per two ounces.*

C: *And how often does baby get a bottle?*

P: *Every three to four hours.*

C: *And then how big are the bottle sizes?*

P: *I usually make them about three ounces. Sometimes he'll eat three, sometimes he'll eat two.*

C: *Ok. And then does, any problems with him spitting up, or diarrhea, constipation?*

P: *He spits up a little bit every once in a while, but I don't think it's a problem. And no, he seems to be doing ok with using the bathroom.*

The demonstration of expertise continues, with the CNE asking for evidence of the mother's expertise related to feeding her infant, which has the potential to identify a problem if not answered correctly. Here, the mother clears another hurdle: her behavior matches WIC's recommendations regarding the amount of formula to prepare. The mother also shows her expert judgment determining that the infant's spitting up "every once in a while" is not a problem, which is not challenged by the CNE.

C: *Ok. Good! And then I know baby was born prematurely, and they usually do the Neosure because it has the extra calories. And then sometimes they'll, with our policy, we can provide the concentrate formula because with the powder formula, it's more of a chance for babies to get sick from a bacteria that's in it. And premature babies they just don't have the immune system built up ready yet, but if you want the powder since you've been using the powder, when the doctor, your pediatrician writes out the prescription for the formula, if they put powder is fine, then we can provide the powder. But I'll call the dietitian as well for that. And then tell me a little bit about why you chose this [face] for <other child's name>*

P: *Well, he's a pretty good eater, but sometimes just, sometimes it's, like if his sisters are done eating, then he won't anymore. His sisters are older, and if they're done eating then he doesn't want to finish eating. He's a pretty good eater it's just sometimes I have a little bit of problems with him.*

This is the longest exposition by the CNE in the interaction and the only time she discusses WIC policy during the encounter. We can see that the mother has so far "passed the test"; she has demonstrated that her behaviors meet WIC's recommendations for her infant, so that line of discussion is closed and a new one is opened about her two-year old. The CNE refers back to the cards with the faces on them to open the new topic, repeating the process from the beginning of the encounter: a focus on feelings that allocates conversational rights to the mother within a broad boundary. This part of the excerpt also demonstrates the mother's participation in accomplishing the encounter: she could have responded that there were no problems, the same as her infant. But, while she indicates that she does not think the problem is serious, she opens the opportunity to accept assistance with this problem. The CNE complies, turning again to questions identifying the nature of the issue.

C: *Ok. Is it problems where like, keeping him at the table long enough to eat?*

P: *Yeah. That's it.*

C: Or eating certain foods?
P: No. Keeping him at the table long enough . . .

The mother has identified the problem: it's hard to keep the child at the table.

C: Ok. Yeah and that's very common at this age especially kids that are very active like him. They'd rather play and observe and look around than eat. But does he come to you when he's hungry like for snacks?
P: Oh yeah.
C: Ok, that's great! When I entered in his weight, he's at a healthy percentile. He's at the 24th percentile for weight to height and 41st percentile for height to age. So anything less than 10 would be considered underweight and above 90 would be considered overweight. So he's doing really good.
P: Ok great.

This part of the encounter is actually doing a lot of work. Now that a possible problem is identified, the CNE's communication moves from interested questioning to a judgment of the severity of the problem. In just two responses, the CNE communicates three pieces of evidence indicating that the problem raised by the mother is not a concern: (1) the child is acting in a way that is common for that child's age, (2) the child does not go hungry if he leaves the table early, and (3) the child is "healthy" and "doing really good" based on his weight and height measurements taken earlier in the encounter. The communication of this evidence indicates the problem is not a concern for the CNE and not something for the mother to be worried about, communicated in a positive, affirming way. With this judgment, this particular concern is closed and the CNE, repeating the process observed earlier, takes over the conversational rights to attempt to identify additional problems with the child's eating.

C: And then is there anything that you wish he ate more of?
P: No.
C: Does he like his fruits and vegetables?
P: Yeah.

The process visible at the beginning of the interaction is evident again: an open-ended question about feelings directs the conversation back to a problem-solving focus. The questioning continues in the same pattern as before.

C: Ok that's good. And then what does he usually drink throughout the day?
P: He likes a lot of juice. All my kids drink a lot of juice. All my kids have to get their top teeth pulled out as you can see.
C: Really? Oh wow.
P: But mostly juice.

But, now a problem is revealed, although the mother does *not* reveal it as a problem herself. Rather, the information is communicated as a preference that happens to have consequences for her children.

C: Ok. How much, like how big are his cup sizes? <gets out a cup> This is 8 ounces. Is it less or more?
P: Probably a little bit bigger than that.
C: Ok. And then how many times a day does he get the juice?
P: <pause> Ummm, at least five.
C: Ok. And then does he like water?
P: Yeah he likes water and he likes milk.
C: Ok, how often does he drink milk?
P: I usually try to give him milk in the night time because I know the juice messes up their teeth in there with it in their mouth, I know the milk does too. He drinks the milk, he drinks probably about three glasses throughout the night.
C: Ok, and does he use a bottle or a sippy cup?
P: He uses both. He uses the bottle at night.
C: And then you said he's been seeing a dentist though?
P: Yes. He has a dentist appointment tomorrow actually.
C: When was his last dentist appointment? Did they...
P: He actually has never been to the dentist.
C: Oh so it'll his first one!
P: This is going to be his first time.
C: Ok good! That's good that he's going to be going then!
P: Yeah definitely <laughs>
C: And then, so that's good that you're already aware about the, leaving, with using the bottle the liquid will stay in the mouth.
P: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Even though the nature of the CNE's questions has not changed (they are remarkably similar to the questions asked about formula earlier), it is clear that a problem has been identified. It is also clear that the mother is not describing the issue as problematic. Juice consumption is a recurring concern for WIC staff and the topic came up in most encounters. WIC's recommendation for juice is no more than four ounces per day for children of this age, so it is obvious to the CNE that the child's juice consumption is well above recommended amounts. However, the problem as described by the mother is with her children's preferences (liking a lot of juice), not necessarily with the amount she is providing.

The mother also demonstrates her knowledge related to the effect juice and milk has on her children's teeth.

> **C:** *And about the sugar in the juice. How do you feel about decreasing how much juice he's getting per day?*
> **P:** *I usually water it down.*
> **C:** *Oh that's good. Is it like half and half?*
> **P:** *Yeah. It's about half and half, maybe a little bit more juice.*
> **C:** *Ok. Another suggestion I hear from moms is they'll fill up the cup with water and they'll use the juice that we provide to make ice cubes so they freeze it . . .*
> **P:** *Oh really? Hmmm . . .*
> **C:** *And then they put those frozen juice cubes in the water and it's kind of fun for the kids to do . . .*
> **P:** *Yeah that's interesting I've never heard of that before.*
> **C:** *Yeah and then that way it limits how much juice they're actually getting.*
> **P:** *Ok. That's an idea.*

Notably, the CNE does not shift into any kind of negative, judgmental, or accusatory talk, an unmistakable hallmark of these encounters (for an in-depth discussion of this characteristic of the full dataset, see Hand 2018). The now-familiar format of opening with a question about feelings also opens a new focus of the conversation we have not observed to this point: probing whether the mother is ready to change her behavior, while at the same time, granting the right to refuse. The CNE negotiates the issue, offering suggestions to reduce juice consumption, while still meeting the child's preference for juice. It is easy to imagine a scenario where the CNE invokes her authority and expertise to try to convince the mother to follow the recommendations or to point out that the food vouchers only provide the recommended amount of juice (U.S. Department of Agriculture 2015). Instead, the provided "solution" is attached to what we could call "mom legitimacy." It is not a suggestion that comes from an official expert but draws from the authority of other mothers. The mother seems lukewarm to it, though, and the CNE does not cajole or press the issue, but instead closes this line of conversation, defers to the mother's authority and autonomy to reject the proposed solution, and opens another topic, the mother's low iron levels.

> **C:** *<working on computer> And then also when I checked your iron level, it came up . . .*
> **P:** *<interrupting> Low?*
> **C:** *Yeah it was a little low. Do you have a history of anemia?*
> **P:** *Yeah. Um, well I always have low iron. It was really low when I was pregnant.*
> **C:** *Oh ok.*
> **P:** *But nothing that they, I have iron pills at home that I was taking when I was pregnant but he didn't tell me to continue after I had the baby or anything.*
> **C:** *Ok. Yeah we usually wait a month after your pregnancy to check iron level, so that way it gives your body time to replenish those nutrients. So if you have the prenatals or multivitamins you want to definitely take those.*
> **P:** *Ok.*
> **C:** *With the iron pills you can follow up with the doctor if they still want you to take those. It was a little low though, it was 9.3. And we want it 11.1 or higher.*
> **P:** *Ok.*
> **C:** *If you're interested, are you aware of what foods are high in iron?*
> **P:** *Umm, no. You guys have probably told me before but I don't remember. <laughs>*
> **C:** *<laughs> That's ok! If you want I can give you a list.*
> **P:** *Ok.*
> **C:** *But it's like meats, fortified cereals, spinach, eggs, peanut butter...and then also when you eat those foods with a food that's high in Vitamin C at the same meal, it helps your body absorb it even better. So I'll give you that.*

In this case, the familiar pattern of opening does not hold. Rather, the CNE surfaces the problem of iron-deficiency based, not on a report of the mother's feelings, but on measurements taken earlier in the encounter. The right to refuse continues to be offered, invoking a doctor's authority (rather than having to comply with the CNE's advice related to continuing to take the vitamins) and probing the mother's interest in learning about foods high in iron. Unlike when discussing the children's eating, the mother expresses a *lack* of expertise related to her own health. The meeting concludes with scheduling a follow-up visit, noting the other child's iron levels, and one last positive expression from the CNE to the mother: "You've got two cuties!"

The goal of providing this excerpt and analysis was to demonstrate an under-utilized approach that is uniquely suited to understanding public encounters and to show the type of information and evidence that can be gained. We provided the word-for-word excerpt to show what can be observed within interactions and demonstrate how the analysis is grounded in observable action. We will continue to deviate a bit from the norm by moving the discussion away from the specific findings of the analysis. Instead, we discuss how insights gained from an ethnomethodological perspective can inform future research and potentially expand our understanding of the interactional, collaborative, and relational nature of public encounters.

An Ethnomethodological Perspective for Public Administration

As a close reading of the excerpt shows, the encounter between this WIC staff member and the mother—lasting some 23 min—is rich, subtle, and complex. It is not simply a one-way exchange from an expert CNE distributing public goods and services to a passive mother consuming those goods and services. Rather, the excerpt elucidates Bartels' (2013) concept of the in-between: the encounter is a collaborative interaction where *both* parties are actively engaged, negotiating meaning, expertise, and authority. The ways both parties improvise, react, and direct the conversation are visible, a perspective rarely seen in the literature. An ethnomethodological perspective positions public encounters like the one examined here as collaborative, negotiated processes (Bartels 2013, 2018). Collaboration implies a relationship where the parties work towards a common goal, something relevant to the current form of governance that encourages behavior changes through incentives, provision of information, or nudges rather than by bureaucratic fiat (Prior and Barnes 2011; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018). Negotiation is the give-and-take communicative process which constitutes the collaborative relationship and common goal; it is not necessarily an adversarial situation where the two parties have divergent interests or opposing demands, with each attempting to maximize their self-interest at the expense of the other (Evans 2007; Pruitt 1981). Collaboration and negotiation are the processes by which the two parties understand, acquire, and cede authority, expertise, meaning, and identities (Moulton and Sandfort 2017; Raaphorst and Loyens 2018).

Understanding encounters as collaborative, negotiated processes invites examination of skills such as listening, responsiveness, and facilitation that advance and support calls for a responsive, caring public administration built on "relationships of trust" (Burnier 2009; J. V. Denhardt and R. B. Denhardt 2007, 42; Stivers 1994). For example, it is clear from the excerpt that both the CNE and mother have a common goal of a healthy infant and child, but they diverge on the details, negotiating the importance of following WIC's juice recommendations in order to achieve that goal. The CNE performs the role of a facilitator: she uses her authority to accept the mother's assessment of the problem, proposes a solution that incorporates WIC's goal of reducing juice with the mother's goal of satisfying her children's preferences, and negotiates the mother's willingness to implement the proposed solution. An ethnomethodological perspective can contribute to understanding the range of practices that exist, the meaning they convey, and what they achieve.

Focusing on collaboration and negotiation interrogates the relational nature of public encounters, identifying how sequences of actions lead to subsequent actions, accomplishments, and outcomes (Heritage 2005; Prior and Barnes 2011; Wagenaar 2004; Wagenaar and Noam Cook 2003). Ethnomethodology is particularly focused on identifying patterns of mechanisms that seem to direct the interaction in a particular way, make certain accomplishments possible or improbable, and contribute to outcomes. For example, what is accomplished by allowing the mother's assessment of her child's juice consumption to remain relatively undisputed? What meaning does that convey to the mother and how does that open or close options for her response? Systematically investigating patterns of mechanisms and their related accomplishments and outcomes illuminates what Brodkin (2013) calls the "missing middle": the processes and practices that contribute to individual and program outcomes. Because our dataset does not include outcomes, we cannot discern whether the mother changed her behavior related to juice in response to the CNE's communicative practice of respecting her autonomy and calling on the authority of other mothers. The analysis presented here demonstrates how ethnomethodology can identify nuanced patterns of action that may be connected to future outcomes in a way that is not otherwise visible.

Attending to the in-between through an ethnomethodological perspective has several additional implications for the public administration literature. The first is an enhanced understanding of citizen experiences at the hands of the state, for example, the paradoxical experience of being subject to surveillance of personal behaviors while at the same time being treated as an autonomous decision maker. We can see how the mother deals with the surveillance by being amenable to some questions and advice, and resisting others. Seeing that paradox generates additional questions such as how that experience, especially over multiple visits to the WIC office affects mothers' identities and behaviors. Citizens are not invisible when using an ethnomethodological approach because the way they collaborate, negotiate, and create mechanisms that influence the direction of the interaction process, even in highly rule-bound situations is of particular interest (Bruhn and Ekström 2017; Prior and Barnes 2011). It allows citizens' voices to be heard more broadly to better understand their goals, preferences, and understanding of the situation at hand. Seeing citizens as active participants is key to understanding their experiences with the state, whether in traditional public encounters or other situations such as coproduction. Citizen voices are not prevalent in the street-level bureaucracy literature, but an ethnomethodological perspective incorporates them by default.

Ethnomethodology can also enhance our understanding of street-level bureaucrats' behaviors and the degree to which they are coping mechanisms, or simply responses to the situation at hand. Systematically investigating the encounter as a relational process can provide additional insight into street-level bureaucrat behaviors. For example, are there citizen behaviors that tend to act as mechanisms leading to street-level bureaucrats "moving toward," "moving away from," or "moving against" clients? (Tummers et al. 2015). Are there sequences of actions that are more likely to lead to the application or removal of administrative burdens? Do certain strategies, such as leaving citizens' autonomy unchallenged, have patterned associations with particular program outcomes? It can also help to build knowledge related to facilitation or other skills that have practical use in many types of public encounters. Understanding action within encounters on a broader scale can open the black box, connect process to outcomes, and inform practice.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have attempted to convince the reader that investigating routine encounters by attending to language-in-use can provide practical insight into the collaborative, negotiated relationship between the state and its citizens. We argued that an ethnomethodological approach is an appropriate way to systematically study the processes, mechanisms, and accomplishments of public encounters. We provided a detailed example of the subtle, complex dynamics of a public encounter to make the "work" of an ethnomethodological analysis visible and to support our claims of ethnomethodology's relevance and practical usefulness. We suggest that an ethnomethodological perspective makes the participants' active role intelligible, something that has been mostly invisible except to the people directly involved in the myriad of daily, routine public encounters. We also suggest that understanding what happens during encounters provides a foundation for understanding outcomes.

Systematically investigating *how* public officials and citizens talk with and interact with one another has direct implications for other related literatures such as coproduction, administrative burden, and collaborative networks. From this vantage point, street-level bureaucrats' behavior is not reducible to coping, but incorporates social, interpersonal, and collaborative characteristics. The work of policy implementation and administration through public encounters is much more than rules, procedures, and the exchange of public goods and services. Talk is the primary method for delivering program objectives such as the nutrition education component of WIC that encourage and assist citizens in governing their own behaviors in accordance with recommendations and best practices well past their participation in the program. An ethnomethodological approach allows for nuanced understanding of the range of experiences and how they are constituted through language in the process of governing through face-to-face encounters. As such, it is a relevant and appropriate addition to public administration's methodological toolbox.

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