

6. Organizational and Social Divisions among Street-Level Workers

Story 6.1. Midwestern Vocational Rehabilitation “Going Out on a Limb”

There is a young woman that I have been working with for about a year now. She is really severely physically disabled—average cognitive ability, but has minimal use of her body. The family have very little money, and her parents have been unemployed off and on all the time.

I do transition work. The situation with this student is the family was having some really severe problems. She was sixteen, which means she is old enough for transition services but not normally within the age where I would open an adult case. And there is no money that goes to transition services. It is mostly referral and information and things like that.

For adults, hypothetically they need to be old enough that I can document that what I am doing will have an employment outcome. So usually I don't do it until junior year or senior year [of high school], when they are really planning to go to college or get a job.

She was a sophomore, she was young, but the family was really in crisis. They didn't have very much money. They had a van but no lift and really no way to transport this student, their child. She is very overweight, which means they couldn't even comfortably pick her up and put her in the vehicle.

So for the most part, except for when the school bus came and got her, she couldn't go anywhere and do anything. We talked about that at the IEP [individual education plan] review, and I said we would table that and look for resources.

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I found out that there was a repo [repossession] list. We have a list of equipment here that if for some reason somebody dies or hasn't followed through on a plan or whatever and doesn't need a piece of equipment, it gets taken back into the agency and stored someplace, and a memo goes out to all of the counselors listing all those things. There is a van lift on the repo list, and it turned out it would fit their van. So actually I got a lot of support. I talked to [my supervisor], and she ended up having to go to her boss, but I got them to agree that since the lift was there and all I would have to do was pay for installation, I would open an adult case for the student and pay for the lift. This is an incredible amount of flexibility in the agency. I was real impressed because there was no way that I could document this was related to employment, that this was going to do what it was supposed to do. The agency was willing to go out on a limb.

After we put in the repo lift, the old van pretty much disintegrated. They had to buy a new van. . . . They had enough money for the payments on a new van, and they found one that the lift was compatible for, but they couldn't afford to install it. It was going to cost \$500 to have it transferred. . . .

We looked everyplace, and there is no money. So I am going to just pay for it. . . . I'll just document her need for it, and I'll pay for the \$500 to transfer it. . . . Yeah, so I'm going to do it again, but I probably will not go through [the supervisor] this time. I'll just go ahead and do it.

Story 6.2. Midwestern Police Department "Remembering My First Arrest"

I have a nine-year-old daughter who on occasion asks me to tell her something about police work, or she'll be watching a story like last week—a civil rights story of a black girl who wasn't able to attend school with white children—and she was asking if I had any experience or knowledge of people being treated disparately because of race. And I tried to go back into my mind and remember when I was an officer and the very first arrest I was involved in.

And we were riding on patrol. And my field training officer was helping show me the people in the neighborhoods and the business owners and also the areas where we have potential of street problems. And we were driving down a main boulevard in

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the northeast area, and there was a guy walking along drinking a Miller beer, which was a city ordinance violation of open possession of beverages. So [the field training officer] said, “Why don’t you get out and initiate contact and write him the citation, or if necessary you can take him to jail. It’s discretionary to the officer.”

So I get out and, of course the individual suspect, who is an African-American male, says to my officer—knows him by name and calls him by last name and says, “You’re just out here screwing with me because I’m black.” And my field training officer says, “That’s right. I’m just picking on you because you’re black.” I think he was being facetious, and I don’t think that it was serious, but we ended up making an arrest, and [the suspect] tried to run, and we had to chase and to take him into custody and took him down to arrest him for possession of an open beverage.

But the ride down there, the dialogue was that there was verbal exchanges between the two. And obviously it was initiated by the suspect, but the response of my training officer was very troubling to me and used words and language that hurt. And I’ve been raised not to think that way, . . . and if something like that happens by the training officer you work with every month and every day—

And I determined at that point that it was . . . something the officers, who unfortunately [worked] in the late 1970s and early 1980s that I think the language barriers existed were very true. That there was a lot of profanity in the streets that was still a violation of city ordinance to use inappropriate language, but the officers would digress when challenged. And if verbally assaulted, they would respond with racial slurs back to the people who was using them against them. They would immediately digress to the lowest common denominator and get right in the gutter with them verbally and other kinds of assaults.

I think it was a decision that I was raised in a Christian home and an environment where that wasn’t common language or thoughts. Educationally, I was there in [this city’s] school system, where I had many friends who were Spanish- or African-American and still maintain those contacts. I was affronted by the fact that people—especially people in the law enforcement system—would use that language.

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The state-agent narrative puts workers in a bureaucratic setting struggling against management to retain their discretionary powers and preserve their self-interests. Many stories pit workers against managers in bureaucratic settings.¹ Workers themselves are struggling with management in an attempt to provide quality services targeted to individual citizen-clients, whereas management is interested in engaging in surveillance of workers and in processing cases relying on categorical imperatives.

But the stories suggest that the bureaucratic imperative metaphor, which groups and divides public employees by rank, fails to capture fully the environment of police departments, schools, and vocational rehabilitation agencies. Reflective of the territory where they are located, work sites appear to be more like diverse urban neighborhoods, some in flux and others relatively stable. Managers and supervisors symbolize the formal authority structure with which citizens must deal if they want something or when they step out of line. Authorities and citizens sometimes work together to make things happen and sometimes conflict over who should get what. The same is true for managers and workers operating in public agencies.

Like urban neighborhoods, the work sites depicted in the stories and our fieldwork are occupied by street-level workers who draw significantly on their generational, religious, class, physical, ethnic, racial, sexual, and gender identities to form bonds and declare differences in their daily interactions with one another. These sources of identification as particularized citizens are as defining of relationships as the bureaucratic identifiers of worker, supervisor, and manager or the occupational identifiers of cop, teacher, and counselor.

In "Going Out on a Limb," a vocational rehabilitation worker gains the full support of her supervisor, who was able to get her boss to go along with the bureaucratic function of transforming the official categorization of a sixteen-year-old "severely physically disabled" female with no capacity for work into an adult with employment potential. Ironically, however, when the van falls apart and the repo lift needs to be reinstalled in a new van, the worker decides to do it without asking her supervisor. The worker knows the limits of cooperation. All of the employees referenced in the story are women, but the narrator gives no particular weight to their gender identity as significant to the story. The ranks of employees are salient to the story, but the moral of the story is the achievement of a unification of purpose across ranks to meet the very particularized need of an individual client and her family. The

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worker used her persuasive powers to get her supervisor to agree and, in turn, to get her boss to go along. The worker lauds the “incredible amount of flexibility in the agency,” suggesting that this kind of cooperation across ranks happens with some frequency. Realizing that she would have been unable to generate paperwork that could document her client as an “adult case” that was “related to employment,” the worker concludes that “the agency was willing to go out on a limb.” It wasn’t her go-it-alone, discretionary behavior that enabled initial acquisition of the lift but cooperation cutting through the strata of the organization that made the difference. But the conclusion suggests that this worker was not opposed to acting without her supervisor’s permission when doing so seemed necessary. Indeed, the worker’s decision of when to conform to rules and procedures and when to break them and when to cooperate with authority and when to act independently is the essence of street-level judgment.

“Remembering My First Arrest” reveals some of the complexity of identities at play in contemporary public agencies. The officer recalls his rookie year and his training officer’s efforts to teach the new cop how to deal with African-Americans when working the streets. When a black man is walking with an open bottle of beer, the training officer tells the rookie to “initiate contact and write . . . the citation or if necessary . . . take him to jail.” The citizen knows the officer and hails him as a bigot: “You’re just out here screwing me because I’m black.” The rookie discovers the truth of this allegation and, although pointing out that the citizen initiated the verbal exchange, focuses on how the officer’s use of “words and language that hurt” was troubling.

The cop reveals a tension between his occupational and social identities as he digresses from the incident to a characterization of officers who dominated the occupation in the 1970s and early 1980s. He offers a justification for the racist talk and actions of these officers by pointing out that they routinely faced verbal assaults from black citizens who were violating the law with their street profanity. But the narrator returns to his concern about how the officers of this generation typically responded: “they would immediately digress to that lowest common denominator and get right into the gutter with them verbally and other kinds of assaults.” Distancing himself from those officers, the narrator draws on markers of his social identity: “I was raised in a Christian home and an environment where that wasn’t common language or common thoughts. Educationally, I was there in [this city’s] school system, where I had many friends who were Spanish- or African-American and still maintain those contacts.”

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In an interview, the narrator stresses qualities of his social identity and how they distinguish him from this earlier generation of officers. Like a number of officers in the western police department, he references class: “I think of myself as a working-class, blue-collar person.” He claims he is well educated and, as a result, professional in his orientation toward policing. But he contrasts his professionalism with the profession of policing, which is not “as modern as we would like it to be.” He sees himself as a white male because he looks “quite white and male,” but he is part Cherokee and sees himself as a minority as well. These attributes in combination with his growing up in the city where he works enables him to “see the plight of the minority issues and do as much as I can.”

Generational and racial divisions appear to be significant in both of the police work sites. In a story told by a veteran midwestern police officer who had to decide disciplinary action, a more senior motorcycle cop confronts a bicycle cop while they are both drinking at a police lodge. According to the narrator,

The more aggressive officer was assigned to the motorcycle unit as a motorcycle officer, and he verbally challenged the other officer, who was a community policing officer, to get off the bicycle that the community policing officer rode and get on a motorcycle—a real bike. And basically he imputed the viability of the community policing officer’s unit, of his job, of his political responsibilities—hammered it pretty hard.

A fight broke out between the officers, with one of them sustaining a serious injury. The narrator reported that the police union was split “in terms of which side to support.” Stories and field observations from the work site of the western police agency revealed a split between senior patrol officers, the “old guard,” and more recently hired officers over the commitment to community policing.² While the administrations of both agencies embrace this reform strategy, it is one source of the generational tensions between more senior officers, who resist because it pushes cops in the direction of becoming “social workers,” and more recent hires, who like the gadgets and the communication that community policing encourages between police and citizens.

A senior African-American officer in the western police agency told a story that parallels closely “Remembering My First Arrest.” The dramatic tension of this story revolves around differences between the narrator and a white officer who had beat assignments that frequently

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placed them together on calls. They often differed over how to handle calls, and the narrator began to see patterns that he found disturbing:

On calls we went on, we would go to, say, a Hispanic household, in which it was a low-income family. The house was not clean and pretty much a pigsty. Well, when this officer would show up, he would make comments about the family, and this disturbed me, because I could see that he felt they were low-class people, beneath him, and didn't respect them. And I began to see that on other calls where we had to go to black families, he would come out with the same comments. So I felt that he was racist, prejudiced against minorities. I could see it in the way he talked to people from Hispanic and black families. And it was really bothering me.

The narrator hesitated to approach a supervisor about the officer's racism because the storyteller was "brand-new" and "didn't know how the department would handle such incidents." Later, when the narrator and this same officer were at a squad baseball game, the officer, who was drinking, walked up beside the narrator and said in a loud voice, "How much money do you have, nigger?" The narrator reported the incident to the supervisor and a senior agency manager. To the narrator's dissatisfaction, the manager decided to separate the officers' assignments and to take no disciplinary action. The narrator recounts this story of disappointment to indicate the point at which he became an activist who pushes from the inside for more hiring of African-American and Hispanic officers. These divisions demarcate identity enclaves within agencies.

Story 6.3. Western Police Department "Bending the Rule for a Lesbian Couple"

An employee approached me and asked me about the possibility of taking family emergency leave. This city has benefits that you're allowed three family emergency days within a year's period of time for emergencies that relate to your immediate family.

This employee approached me and said, "I have a problem." I said, "Okay, what?" she said, "I want family emergency leave." I said, "That's it?"

"Well," she said, "It's for my significant other."

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“Okay, so what? What’s happening?”

“Well, my partner has to undergo some surgery, and I want to take the day off, so I guess what I’m saying to you is I think it’s the right thing for us to do is that I should be afforded the same opportunities toward emergency leave for a family situation as others in this agency are allowed to do. But if I can’t, what should I do about it?”

I said, “Hmmm, let me think about this for a minute.”

She says, “Hmm, hmmm, hmm,” and as I was mulling it over in my head for a minute, this person reminded me by way of example. A sergeant had just recently married, maybe four or five years ago. She said, “Here we have a sergeant who’s been married for four or five years and he recently took family emergency leave or something. Who knows what it is? Well, I’m here to tell you that me and my partner have been together for over nine years, so I have been involved in a domestic relationship for longer than even this guy, and he gets the pay benefits. Why shouldn’t I?” I said, “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.”

If you’re the happy family with two kids, you get every benefit the city has, really. If you’re not, you get cut out of nine-tenths of the benefits that they offer. That’s not right, and I believe that. So, I decided it was my call for the right reasons. Really, under my current supervision, I am certain that if I have to defend that I will have an issue in front of me, but support, too.

I bent the rule. If someone wants to ask, I bent the rule appropriately. The rule sucks. I probably shouldn’t have said that out loud, but given the circumstances, the comment fits. As an agency, we say we’re diverse and we want to encourage them to step up and be role models—I mean, this is what they teach us to say. If you want to do that, that then has to come with all the benefits and perks that everyone else gets. That doesn’t mean that we invite them here and show them what others get when it comes to benefits. I know it’s being reviewed, so it’s not a big deal right now—I mean, it’s a big deal, but I think it has a good chance of being amended.

The command staff gathered on this once. I was at a meeting where they were talking about diversity, saying, “We think there probably are, you know, gay people here. I don’t know who they are. [Laughing.] We think that there are some. And we think if there are, they’re going to tell us. They should be able to

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step up and say, 'I am and treat me like everybody else. If you do, I'll give you everything I have.'" They've become pretty good role models for other people. We don't want to have an atmosphere that makes it look like it's a bad thing to be gay. The reason is we are a reflection of our community. We have to be a reflection of our community. We don't have a lot of minority representation, either. We need to bolster that.

We probably do have a lot of gays working in this department. You know, somebody asked me not long ago about representation of the community. The national average is supposed to be maybe 10 percent of the population is gay. Someone asked me, "Do you think that's what it is here?"

I said, "Minimally, at a minimum, 10 percent." [Laughing.] Just like that. But there hasn't been anyone who's gone out and said, "Ooh! Ooh! I am!" I mean, has anyone ever asked you if you were a heterosexual? I don't think so. If we're really treating them all the same, there's no point in asking. That would be inappropriate.

Officers' social identities are a point of tension and division. In other stories, identity enclaves, or recognized social networks of shared identity, are a source of bonding that cuts through the ranks of the agency, producing comfort zones and power bases for group members.³ "Old boy networks" and "the old guard" reference white male enclaves and their power within work sites. "Bending the Rule for a Lesbian Couple" shows a newer enclave, one that was referenced by many officers in the western police agency. A lesbian officer approaches a lesbian supervisor, the narrator of the story, asking for family emergency leave to be with her partner. (Both the officer and supervisor revealed their gay identities during the entry interviews.) The officer points out the unfairness of the current policy, which favors traditional families, by comparing her nine-year nontraditional relationship with the family status of a relatively recently married male heterosexual who received family leave.

The narrator supervisor immediately recognizes the unfairness, noting during the interview that the "example alone was enough for me," and grants the officer the leave on the spot. The supervisor realizes that if she has to defend her decision, others will back her up: "I will have an issue in front of me, but support, too." She digresses to a meeting of police supervisors where they lend legitimacy to the gay enclave that exists in the agency, although the supervisors think that gay officers

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should come out, apparently to serve as role models for the jurisdiction's substantial gay community. The narrator supervisor goes on to tell of another event in which she was asked if the percentage of gay officers comes close to the presumed national average of 10 percent. She affirms that percentage but makes clear that she does not support the idea of their coming out: "There hasn't been anyone who's gone out and said, 'Ooh! Ooh! I am!' I mean, has anyone ever asked [the researcher] if you were a heterosexual? I don't think so. If we're really treating them all the same, there's no point in asking."

For most workers, the issue of whether lesbians should come out is moot. The lesbian officers' power is widely recognized within the department, power which is a source of resentment for some. In "Bending the Rule for a Lesbian Couple," the narrator supervisor mentions in passing that the agency fails to mirror the community in its representation of sworn minority police officers: "We have to be a reflection of our community. We don't have a lot of minority representation, either. We need to bolster that." This is not a passing concern for some officers: the western police department's African-American and Hispanic male officers compare their low numbers with the force's substantial white female and lesbian presence. One African-American cop, very active in pushing for more officers of color, sees a hierarchy of social identity groups in the agency that is ill matched with the groups in the community: "The department is off kilter. It is predominantly white male. Then your next group would be white female, then lesbian female, Hispanic males, black males, and then Hispanic females." He, like others, sees recruitment efforts favoring white females and white lesbians over people of color. Some heterosexual males with children resent lesbian officers, viewing them as having more time to devote to career advancement. These male officers see the movement of lesbian officers into the supervisory ranks as a reflection of their "lifestyle advantage." At the same time, most of the male workers respect their lesbian supervisors as hardworking, accessible, and fair in exercising authority.

Social bonds and difference are less pronounced among the vocational rehabilitation workers and teachers. Few of their stories reveal social identities as salient to work relations. Still, generational and gender differences appear meaningful in interviews. For example, in the western vocational rehabilitation office, longtime employees distinguish themselves as a group, as do the new hires. Each generational group is a source of support, with its members turning to one another to cope with stress, to have lunch together, and to socialize after work.

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All of the newer hires are women, and all work with the mentally disabled. Shop talk, particularly related to cases, is a part of the everyday interaction among network members, a grouping that is both generationally and occupationally defined.

Occupational identities provide the grist for strong peer relations among workers. Workers sometimes unite to devise legal strategies to press grievances against management. At other times, workers close ranks to protect a fellow worker in trouble. These actions appear to be as much intended to protect the occupation's good name as to help workers under fire.

Each occupational identity is marked by a unique set of attributes that its members take for granted. Cops live in relative social isolation in part as a result of the coercive powers they possess whether on or off duty. They live with a sense of danger, and some remain on the lookout for it even when eating out or walking across a college campus after a class. Others work hard to discard their occupational identities when they leave the job, favoring strongly their social identities. Like many other people, these citizen-workers find themselves getting nervous when they see a patrol car behind them as they accelerate while driving to a local shopping mall.

Urban teachers want to spend their time stimulating young people's intellectual growth and teaching values that lead to success in mainstream American culture but also face students whose behaviors challenge teachers' authority and beliefs. Educators distinguish themselves based on whether they tend to be oriented toward disciplining students or toward imparting learning. For those who try to do both, their stories reveal emotional distress and a drift toward alienation from work. In urban schools, especially those serving low-income neighborhoods, teachers share the common goal of imparting the middle-class values of discipline, postponed gratification, responsibility, and hard work. Those who conform to these ideals are rewarded and helped regardless of their academic success, and those rejecting these values are labeled as troublemakers and are punished and isolated.⁴

Vocational rehabilitation counselors draw their identities from the clients they serve. They see themselves as advocates, not bureaucrats, requiring persuasive powers to get clients what they need. VR counselors also use their powers as state agents to convince clients what their needs are and what jobs they are best suited to pursue. Such workers are often patriarchal in their orientation toward clients and proud of being so. How they fill in their notions of advocacy, organize

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their persuasive powers, and define needs are contingent on the type of disability their clients possess. Many voc rehab workers are themselves persons with disabilities, a shared identity with their clients that is the source of both connection with clients who make efforts to succeed and heightened disdain for clients who are satisfied with dependence.

Differences in the ways workers take on their occupations generate tensions within the work sites we observed. Moreover, conflicts are evident between workers and managers, though the points of contention revealed in the worker stories depart from the more conventional portrayals of management-worker rifts. But the work environments we glean from the stories appear to reflect more the conditions of diverse urban neighborhoods than those of bureaucratic organizations. Some of the work environments are in flux, while others are relatively stable.

Supervisors and workers, like municipal authorities and neighborhood activists, engage in conflict and in cooperation. Like the relations across generations of residents in an urban neighborhood in flux, more seasoned and newer workers see things differently and draw on their generational enclaves for support. Tensions are evident in relations across distinct identity enclaves as brought to life by the same social signifiers that provide the grist for conflict in urban neighborhoods: race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, and sexuality. No more the exclusive bastions of white males, the work sites—particularly the police precincts we studied—are infused with identity politics. Workers take up membership in one or more of the identity enclaves and find in them sources of comfort and sites for accumulating power.

Workers occupying the space of identity enclaves also hold onto their occupational identities and are keenly aware of their place in the organizational ranks. In street-level stories and the citizen-agent narrative, rank, a hallmark of bureaucracy, is more a marker of identity and less a definition of authority and accountability relationships as emphasized in the state-agent narrative. In addition to the stabilizing influences of occupational identities and worker roles, the work sites regain stability as newer identity enclaves acquire recognition and carve out space within the cultures of the work sites. In the western vocational rehabilitation site, workers openly display banners and symbols of gay culture, and gay and lesbian cultures are integral to work site culture. These work sites, like some urban neighborhoods, have local cultures that are relatively stable amid difference.

Other work sites, particularly the police settings, are in a state of flux as newer enclaves are gaining legitimacy while other social groupings have vocal members but have yet to achieve full recognition and

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strength in numbers. These work sites are afloat in a sea of difference and are getting a taste of the politics of difference after decades of unchallenged white male dominance.⁵ The western police agency's command staff, still under the control of white male managers, openly discusses the presence of a lesbian worker enclave and sees strategic advantage in its existence. Gay and lesbian power is evident in the communities the department polices; therefore, having an identifiable presence on the force may serve the agency's interests. Nonetheless, the growing power of one identity enclave underscores tensions with others, such as the underrepresented Hispanics.

In work sites that are in flux, those who occupy an identity enclave must win their coworkers' acceptance. One route for achieving such support was revealed to us in our fieldwork with the western police agency. A couple of workers associated with the lesbian enclave are viewed as superior performers in their work roles, and one has demonstrated the most valued attributes of her occupation. In her first years as a street cop, the supervisor narrator of "Bending the Rule for a Lesbian Couple" was confronted by a deranged citizen who had killed another person and was wielding knives against the officer. After trying all possible means to disarm the man, she shot and killed him. Appropriately using lethal force, especially to protect fellow officers, is central to cop identity and transcends the other identity enclaves. This act secured her status as a "good cop," even among the old guard.

The officer offered a story about this incident; more significantly, however, a number of other officers, including several males, told us stories about this officer's actions. All the many versions of the story offer information about her ability to face ultimate danger and her courage in effectively and responsibly using lethal force, something that few officers face but most contemplate every day. Her shooting the "the crazy man wielding knives" has become part of the folklore of the work site, which helps to explain white lesbian officers' substantial presence and power on the force. Despite profound differences among them, street-level workers share core occupation identities, and these occupational identities shape their interactions with citizen-clients.