Discretion, Cognition and Embodiment in Process: Days and Nights With 911 Dispatchers

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Discretion, Cognition and Embodiment in Process:

Days and Nights with 911 Dispatchers

A dissertation presented by

Chi Wang

to

The Department of Sociology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Discretion, Cognition and Embodiment in Process:

Days and Nights with 911 Dispatchers

Abstract

This doctoral dissertation re-conceptualizes discretion, cognition and culture in action as well as body and embodiment, investigating them through an empirical analysis of data from three years of field work in a 911 communication center. This project employs a renewed concept of discretion, as well as notions such as “the desired state of mind,” “controlled empathy,” “foregrounding” and “visualization.” It considers the nuances, dynamics and requirements in the bureaucratic classification process through the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system, the division of labor within and without the communication center, the status inequality and power dynamics in the network of public safety professions, as well as the broader organizational and policy settings. Merging literature on discretion, street-level bureaucracy, culture and cognition, emotional labor, body and embodiment as well as conversation analysis, and analyzing ethnographic data, this dissertation provides novel insights into modern-day organizations and criminal justice system, as well as an in-depth and contextualized look into the process and consequence of the work of the 911 communication system.
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For Richun Wang and Daihong Wang
Chapter 1
Discretion, Cognition and Embodiment: Classification in Process

This dissertation re-conceptualizes and investigates discretion, embodiment and culture in action through the daily work processes and experiences of street-level bureaucrats within the structural, cultural and organizational context of 911 emergency response system. This research builds conversations with dominant approaches to cognition in action, street-level bureaucracy, and body and embodiment in the discipline, and seeks to contribute to respective literatures with grounded empirical investigations as well as renewed theoretical re-formulations. Based on ethnographic data from three years of fieldwork in the emergency communication center of a metropolitan police department, this dissertation proposes an interactive and contextualized perspective on the mechanisms through which discretion is practiced, cognition is acted upon and bodily actions are communicated and interpreted by individuals taking distinct structural, organizational and geographical positions. These individuals are conceptualized as simultaneously inter-connected and divided through a network of information technology and classification scheme. This research also highlights how both said network and classification scheme are provided by bureaucratic agencies imbued with power struggles and status inequalities.

Call interpretation and coding in the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system is the key process of the work of 911 emergency communication. CAD codes constitute the state’s classification system for the handling of emergency situations and the coding process. The work of 911 dispatchers is the work of connecting discretion with policy, cognition and emotion with organizational mandate, as well as remote bodily situations with visualized scenarios and expectations. In these various ways social reality and official systems of
classification are bridged by humans and their constant hard work, specifically in my case, emergency calls are understood and converted to codes in CAD. Research has shown how social reality “on the ground” tends to be complex, fluid, ambiguous, inconsistent, multi-dimensional, while its reconstruction as official representation is simplified, static, clear-cut and uniform (Bourdieu 1998; Brubaker, Loveman and Stamatov 2004: Kluegel and Smith 1981; Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; Fantasia 1995; Lamont 2000; Zerubavel 1997).

During this process of translation of “messy” reality into official categories, a timeless and absolute character is ascribed—through both human agents and technology—to information determined situationally, temporally and relationally; and fundamentally ambiguous and complex reality is transformed into clear-cut categories recognized and legitimized by an existing classification system. The overarching themes of classification and representation process, as well as the common structural, organizational and cultural context surrounding them underlie the three chapters that follow. Each chapter has a distinct theoretical angle and empirical focus in dealing with discretion, cognition in action, and embodiment, respectively.

Viewing the bureaucratic classification system as a set of organizationally-prescribed alternatives for street-level employees who interact with citizens during front-line service encounters and make decision based on individual situations on the ground, in Chapter 2 I re-conceptualize the notion of discretion as street-level bureaucrats’ relative freedom to choose among said alternatives. Formulated this way, discretion finds its roots in the character of a given organizational environment, rather than in the cracks in rules and regulations (Baldwin 1998; Bergen and While 2005; Dworkin 1977; Galligan 1996; Hill 2003; Hawkins 2003; Lacey 1992), or in the idiosyncrasies of values and beliefs (Kelly
With my empirical analysis of different levels of discretion found in 911 call-processing and their relationship with the status inequality and organizational structure of emergency response agencies, I provide a new interpretation of discretion and how it varies by call type in the 911 response process and what it can tell us about the structural characteristics of status inequality and power dynamics in street-level bureaucracies.

At the same time, I treat the bureaucratic classification process—coding 911 incidents—as a fundamentally human process in practice; thus, after a close look at the classification system itself as the bedrock of discretion, in Chapter 3, I move on to investigate the detailed coding process in practice with a focus on individuals’ cognitive and emotional experiences at work in. With the concept of “desired state of mind” I seek to theorize cognition as a joint product of intentional individual behaviors and organizational expectations and demands, with emotion as its indispensible part. Through my ethnographic data and findings, I show what the “desired state of mind” is in the context of 911 emergency communication and call classification, where it comes from, what its relationship with emotion is, how it is accomplished by individual 911 dispatchers, and how the ways in which they accomplish it are affected by the cultural and structural environment of emergency communication system and public safety professions filled with status disparities and power imbalances.

After examining the cognitive and emotional experience of street-level bureaucrats, I then turn in Chapter 4 to the role of the body in the classification process. Here, I focus on the mechanisms through which physically and spatially separate individuals with shared goals inter-subjectively communicate and interpret bodily situations to justify and initiate actions
as they carry out their jobs of responding to emergencies. I demonstrate the process in which deeply embodied experiences of being in an emergency situation are spoken about and understood across social actors who are not co-present (victims, callers and dispatchers), and ultimately converted into actionable categories in the official classification scheme that first aids responders or police officers will interpret in responding to calls. Through my empirical findings, I explicate two distinct processes—foregrounding and visualization—in order to show how emergency situations physically inaccessible to 911 dispatchers and their frontline colleagues are verbally described and interpreted, overcoming the spatial and sensory boundaries among the callers, 911 employees and front-line responders and accomplishing emergency response actions.

Though all examined through the process of classification of situations and incidents, these three topics—discretion, cognition in action and embodiment—are studied within distinct theoretical frameworks in connection with different scholarly traditions and schools of thought. Chapter 2 proposes an approach that diverges from two primary approaches to discretion, which I call legalistic and individualistic perspectives (Baldwin 1998; Bergen and While 2005; Dworkin 1977; Galligan 1996; Hill 2003; Hawkins 2003; Kelly 1994; Lacey 1992; Maynard-Moody, Williams and Musheno 2003; Sobol 2010; Weissert 1994). Replacing them with my own conceptual alternative—situated realism—I situate discretion in the organizational environment which street-level bureaucrats inhabit, defining discretion as the freedom to choose among organizationally-prescribed options. Reviewing literature on public administration, criminology and street-level bureaucracy, I establish my theoretical framework though critiques of three major problems that I identify in previous studies: straw-man counterfactuals, assumed causality and partial context.
First, I highlight the relative and comparative nature of the concept of discretion, and how it is manifest in both legalistic and individualistic approaches. I argue that both perspectives construe theoretically misleading and empirically unrealistic “counterfactuals” in their definition of discretion: while the legalist perspective conceptualizes discretion from a legal ideal in which implementation in practice perfectly matches rules on paper, the individualistic perspective oftentimes compares bureaucratic rules with individual values and beliefs. Such straw-man counterfactuals are directly applied or indirectly measured in empirical research as actual alternatives in street-level behaviors without much sufficient substantiation or clear mechanisms. Second, I argue that both approaches make implicit causal assumptions in their very conceptualization of discretion. The legalist perspective tacitly attributes injustice and abuse of power to the lack of rules and the opening of opportunities for individual biases and oversight. The individualistic approach makes simplistic connections between mind and behaviors with their comparison of beliefs and actions, implicitly attributing patterns and problems in street-level bureaucracy to street-level bureaucrats’ individual characteristics. Third, I point out that both approaches tend to overlook the organizational and structural context of street-level bureaucratic agencies outside the immediate front-line interactions but also directly impact their daily service encounters and decision-making processes, and instead focus a lot more on the environment where street-level bureaucrats are in direct contact with citizens or broader, ecological characteristics, contrary to earlier works on discretion which call for attention paid to the intricacies and complexity of the organizations (Lipsky 1980, 2010; Lundman 1979). Building on these three critiques, I call for the study of discretion that not only takes into consideration its relative and comparative nature but also is based on a more
nuanced and comprehensive approach to bureaucratic agencies, street-level bureaucrats and front-line service encounters. This reconceptualization of discretion highlights the organizational context of 911 communication through CAD system as the source of discretion, interactive processes as that locus where discretion is exercised and realized, as well as status disparities as both a cause and consequence of discretion.

In chapter 3 I borrow from the toolkit and cognitive model in the theory of culture and cognition in action. I take issue, however, with the toolkit and cognitive approaches’ partial break from the Parsonian value-action chain. While the toolkit theory views actors as active agents making choices and frees them from internalized cultural beliefs that guide actors’ behaviors, it makes them reliant on the outside cultural environment. And while cognitive theory zeroes in on the cognitive processes within individuals’ bodies and minds, it resorts to a trigger-response model of cognition with an emphasis on the unconsciousness inaccessible to explicit individual awareness and inter-subjective empirical observation. Instead of seeing culture in action as a toolkit with strategies for practice from outside cultural institutions, or autonomous yet interconnected systems of cognitive faculty with distinct functions, I treat cognition as a result of intentional human efforts directed towards cognition itself, which I term “the desired state of mind”; and more importantly, in my framework both the “desired state of mind” and efforts made to accomplish it are fashioned by the social, organizational and structural context that social actors find themselves in. To that end, I review and borrow from the rich literature on emotional labor and emotion management which treats individuals’ emotional state as an outcome of conscious work and socialization in a given organizational context, ties such work to broader stratifying forces and highlights its self and other-directedness, in order to
connect it with the scholarship on culture and cognition. Through this theoretical hybrid, I maintain that emotional labor and emotion management is intentional and conscious self and/or other-directed altering of cognition and meaning-making process, with both individual and structural level consequences.

In Chapter 4 I borrow from both the phenomenological tradition on the body and embodiment, and the insights on time and space from conversation analysis. I argue that while most research of the body and embodiment seeks to transcend the Cartesian body-mind dualism, most research still focuses on the non-discursive facets of the body and ignores the importance of verbal communication of the body experiences and techniques. Then I call attention to the importance of organizational context in the research of the body and embodiment. At last, I bring in the insights from conversation analysis to connect the verbal communication of the body and the organizational roles of specific bodies in a given institutional context, calling for a more integrative approach to the topic that attends to both the verbal representation of body techniques and bodily experiences and the organizational structures and identities.

This dissertation informs public understanding as well as policy-making regarding an important profession in a significant way. First of all, the findings of this research has helped set up an independent mental-health support program for 911 dispatchers that provides post-traumatic incident counseling service and stress-relief strategies. Some of the insights generated by this study will also appear in the first handbook available to national 911 community. Secondly, it will also contribute to the push for retirement equity of 911 dispatchers with other criminal justice employees on administrative as well as legislative levels—an issue of contest and debate since 1968 in the state of Massachusetts. Thirdly, it
helps bring dispatchers’ lived experience at work into the discussion—besides technological and financial concerns—during the upcoming national upgrade of 911 communication system, which enables videos, pictures, text messages and images from body cameras carried by police officers. The new system designed to incorporate common mobile phone features will certainly change the ways in which dispatchers process information and interact with citizens; and new sources of trauma and emotional stress will ensue. Last but not the least, this study demonstrates how the 911 system operates, what helps dispatchers decide on the nature of the situation and what kind of information is most important for an effective 911 response. In other words, it familiarizes citizens with the knowledge of the organization and operation of one of the most important and immediate sources of aid in the face of serious crises and emergencies in the United States—an organization that has been a black box for most citizens since the invention of the 911 number.

Site and Methods

The analysis is based on data from three years’ ethnographic fieldwork in an urban police department’s emergency communication center in the city of Parkton. There are thirty-five dispatchers divided into five groups with one supervisor in each group; there is also one director, one training supervisor and five trainees. I followed all groups, and observed and interviewed dispatchers, trainees and supervisors about their work process during day (7am to 3pm), evening (3pm to 11pm) and overnight shifts (11pm to 7am next day). In addition to access to the communication center’s work space and one-year shift schedule, I also had log-in account in their Computer-Aided Dispatch (CAD) system, my own dispatch station
with the same set-up with the dispatchers’—nine monitors and fourteen radio channels—plus a hear-only 911 line through which I listened to both the callers and call-takers during ongoing phone calls. I also obtained permission to follow their in-house training classes and on-site training process with copies of all training materials, as well as to listen to phone records of past calls of my choice. And because the dispatching and call-taking alternate within one shift and the same individuals can be a call-taker for half of a shift, and a police or fire dispatcher of the other half, in this chapter and the whole dissertation, I use dispatcher and call-taker interchangeably, unless I need to specify the division of labor within the communication center or highlight the specific dispatch line (fire channel 1, police channel 2, for example) or call-taking position.

In this project I focus on 911 calls. Calls through business or other non-emergency lines are not included. My data come from multiple sources: day-to-day actions in the center, interviews with dispatchers, supervisors and trainees, records of past calls, incoming calls, information from CAD (more details below), casual interactions in the operation room and dining area, use of training manuals and books, as well as other relevant documents and files from the media, the city, state court, and the state police. All names and addresses are altered for anonymity.

In the emergency communication center where I did my fieldwork, there are three separate sections in charge of different tasks. The fire side consists of two consoles which seat two fire dispatchers, who talk to the fire department if a fire dispatch command pops up on their screen. The police side has two consoles and two police dispatchers who dispatch and assist police officers. In the middle there are six consoles: four call-takers are sitting by the 911 line to answer incoming calls, and a supervisor oversees the whole room,
and a tactic position is provided for an additional person in case of unusual emergencies. I was placed at the tactic position.

The roughly three hundred CAD codes constitute the state’s classification scheme for the response of emergency situations and the coding process—assigning a category to the reported situation based on the understanding of the call—structures the center’s operation and largely determines the official actions. Codes are essential to the 911 response system. When a call comes in, the call-taker determines the nature and type of the reported incident and then selects a code (incident type) in the CAD system; this code determines the information flow both inside and outside of the communication center as well as the response plan—the kind of help that is sent to the citizens. A police matter coded will automatically show up on the police side of the room where the police channels and police dispatchers are, a fire call will go to the fire side of the room with fire channels and fire dispatchers. A medical might appear on both sides, and although medical calls through 911 lines are processed by the call-takers in the emergency communication center, their dispatching take place outside of center (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 911 Communication System and CAD
A response plan is a code-based official action to citizens that varies greatly in number, size and kind of vehicles and personnel in police, fire and medical departments separately or jointly out of hundreds of possibilities; for most incidents types, response plans consist of certain combination of forces among six types of police vehicles, police officers of three different ranks, eight types of fire vehicles, firefighters of two ranks and two general levels of medical life support (see table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAD Code</th>
<th>Police Units</th>
<th>Fire Units</th>
<th>Ambulance</th>
<th>Priority</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Vehicle Officer</td>
<td>Engine Squad Ladder Rescue Division</td>
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<td>DOMESTIC</td>
<td>R 2 S 2 PS P SGT LT</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>DISTURBANCE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHEST PAIN DI</td>
<td>1 1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>STRUCTURE FIRE</td>
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<td>3 1 2 1 1 1</td>
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<tr>
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Table 1. The Correspondence Between Incident Type and Unit Response Plan

It is a non-exhaustive but illustrative table of the correspondence between codes and their response plans. The cells with darker shades contain incidents of higher priority while the lighter ones are lower in the priority level. For vehicles, R means report car, S for sector car, PS for patrol supervisor’s car and on officers, P stands for regular police offer, SGT means sergeant, and LT is lieutenant. Take the first row for example, if an incident is
coded as “Domestic” CAD automatically designates two report cars, two officers and sometimes an ambulance as the overall response to the scene. No fire units will be needed. And if it’s coded as “Chest Pain D1”, then one engine truck and one squad will be dispatched. Codes and response plans carry life-and-death consequences and directly constitute official records and statistics on crime rates, police actions, fire incidents, medical emergencies that configure the city’s public safety history and profile.

During the fieldwork, I followed the incident information updates on CAD screens while listening to the phone calls, and I conducted interviews after the calls to learn why certain incidents are understood and coded in certain way. If I could not take notes of the whole conversation I later accessed the corresponding phone records. If there were any ambiguous or in-progress calls on which type changes are made, I traced the changes and asked the dispatchers for an explanation. I focused on the ways in which the dispatchers question, probe, and comprehend the callers during 911 calls and capture the nature of the situations reported. I asked them what clues they rely on to make judgments about the incidents and what makes them change their mind during the conversation, paying special attention to details that result in changes in the categories coded. I also studied the emergency communication center’s training manuals, textbooks, slides, trainee reviews, paper and on-line exams, and certification procedures to further investigate the skills and expertise required of 911 dispatchers.

For each call, I collected data as follows. I first listened to that call while the call-taker and caller were talking, and took note of both sides of the conversation. The caller would start to interpret the call, select a code he or she saw most fit and type into the CAD system if there was additional updates or information. I paid attention to the content, voice and
tone of both parties, and I also observed the verbal and non-verbal exchanges in the room among colleagues including what they said when the caller was on hold or the call-taker’s side was temporarily muted. After the call was over, there would be a new incident entry in CAD with complete information on the call, including the code or what’s called “incident type” in the system, the time and length of the call, the location of the incident, the response plan and units to be dispatched (automatically generated in CAD based on the code and location), the dispatched units’ location and status, the name of the caller (reporting person, RP), the name of the victim or suspect (suspect, SP), the name of the call-taker and the dispatchers who provided updates or background information, the file number, the notes of the call with additional information or updates that the call-taker believed necessary to put in and typed manually, and with a few automated messages containing the units change, firearm/license to carry and hazardous material information of the address entered, as well as the police reference number if a report was generated. I would type in all except identifying information into my computer and later would type in the ethnographic information on call communication and in-house interaction that I took by hand with its corresponding CAD messages.

In Chapter 2, I approach the operation as well as the variation of discretion in following ways: first, I provide detail information on the process through which fire, medical and police calls are processed. I show what type of technology is used, how the room is set up, what the division labor is and how the work with collaborating agencies is structured, what role the dispatchers and call-takers play in the emergency response process, what type of skills is needed for these different incidents and how such skills are trained. Second, I look at how standardized and scripted the input is for different calls—namely, during process of
converting different calls to codes, how much of the work can be automated and pre-determined by the CAD system and how much has to rely on staff’s interpretation, understanding and decision-making. Third, I show in detail discretion in fire, medical and police call-taking processes and focus on the interaction between call-takers and callers, and between staff in the communication center and responders on scene. To look at the relations of call-takers with the callers and their front-line colleagues, I focus on how such interactions mirror the tension and uncertainty over the selection on coding alternatives and ask, what is the dynamics between these parties? What is their communication like? What role do different parties involved play and how are the manifest in call communication? What is the respective relationship between the call-takers, dispatchers and the corresponding police, fire and medical units? Secondly, I analyze the training processes on different types of calls, and through my interviews and observations of 911 dispatchers, I asked dispatchers what is required of call-takers and dispatchers as well as where their confusion and difficulty comes from, and what it says about the source of discretion. I also traced the type changes in CAD system and show in the findings section how much they are subject to incident progress and circumstances and why and by whom changes are made.

In Chapter 2, I use ethnographic data from the observation of 911 dispatchers’ daily work, the training process, and training officers’ meetings, as well as interviews with dispatchers, supervisors, training supervisors, and trainees to examine how citizens’ calls are translated into CAD codes and how and to what extent discretion is mobilized during the process.

In Chapter 3, I approach “the desired state of mind,” emotional labor and emotion management as follows. I first employ data on the daily workings of 911 system, the
characteristics and challenges of 911 emergency response and the data on typical calls to show why a particular state of mind is indispensible for the job. Second, I draw on training session and in-house guided practice data to establish what is “the desired state of mind” for the job, and how the instructors and training officers impart and supervise the trainees’ performance so that the latter adhere to the said emotional state, which I call “controlled empathy.” Through observation on call-taking, I analyze how the call-taking process requires both attachment and detachment, how controlled empathy plays out in practice, and how dispatchers interpret and estimate the callers’ emotional state as well as their intentions through the calls. I show how “controlled empathy” plays a key role in cognition and decision-making during a process that may have life-and-death consequences. I pay attention to both call-takers’ personal experiences and their empathetic understanding of the situations of the callers. Third, I investigate how the dispatchers control the feelings of the callers as well as their own to obtain informative details that allow them to make fast and accurate coding decisions, how they evaluate the callers’ emotional state during the calls and how that affects their coding choices, as well as how they detect and adjust to the callers’ true intentions behind the calls. With my data on interviews and observations both at work and off duty, I identify two emotional issues: relatable incidents and traumatic visualization. I also identify two strategies of emotion management: distancing and bad humor. Last but not the least, through court documents, historical archives and media data, I show how the broader structural inequality and organizational culture impacts the specific ways in which the emotion is managed (or not managed) by 911 communication staff.

In Chapter 4, I demonstrate foregrounding and visualization with my data and analyze how dispatchers reconstitute and verbalize implicitly embodied information, transforming
it to transferrable and workable languages across space and organizations. I show how olfactory, auditory, visual and tactile experiences are articulated by the callers and interpreted and visualized by the dispatchers. I first use data on the call-taking and dispatching processes to show how callers communicate different bodily experiences and how call-takers understand them. Then I use interviews on dispatchers’ career paths, opinions about other departments and experiences working with them to show how the use of the body as a key instrument in the criminal justice system is tied to their organizational roles. I also employ information from court-documents, legal papers, budget proposals, media coverage to obtain information on dispatchers’ wage, retirement, union status as well as other forms of organizational recognition and support. In addition I analyze their radio communication with front-line law enforcement agents on fourteen active channels, their face-to-face interaction with them and dispatchers’ conversations about their front-line colleagues. I focus on how dispatchers’ work interacts with and is informally and formally perceived by others as well as themselves. I seek to answer following questions: how do dispatchers help the front-line responders to make timely and effective emergency response? How do dispatchers send the right help to the right place in the right way? Most importantly, how does the fact that the dispatchers are separated from both the callers and their front-line colleagues affect their experiences at work? I look at the foregrounding of embodied messages in relation to collaborating agencies—fire, police and emergency medical departments—as well as in a broader criminal justice system, to reveal how power and status are reflected and contested in 911 dispatchers’ daily work life.

In what follows, I first re-define discretion in Chapter 1 and explore its variation through a detailed analysis of the differences between medical, fire and police matter responses,
then I move onto the topic of cognition and culture in action in Chapter 2, conceptualizing “the desired state of mind” and “controlled empathy” to introduce an alternative model of culture and cognition, and to shed light on the ways in which structural context affects what “the desired state of mind” is in a given setting and the ways in which it is achieved; then I explain how the necessary information regarding the body and bodily experiences is communicated across individuals beyond spatial boundaries, and how is it used to bring physically separate parties to the same space in the context of three-way disembodiment between the callers, the 911 staff and the front-line law-enforcement agents. Concluding remarks will be made at the end of the dissertation.
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Chapter 2

Re-conceptualizing Discretion: Context, Status and Interactive Processes

The topic of discretion as employed by street-level bureaucrats has been widely examined and debated for decades. Research in this area can be categorized along the lines of two primary approaches. In this chapter, I review and critique these two dominant perspectives, which I call the legalist and individualistic approaches. I propose a concept of discretion that attends more to the organizational context, in which it occurs, as well as to status inequality, and social processes. Conceptualizing street-level bureaucrats’ discretion as their relative freedom to choose among organizationally-prescribed alternatives, I show through my empirical analysis how discretion is both a cause and consequence of the structure of the workplace, the organizational configuration of bureaucratic agencies, the specific interpretive and interactive work processes on the job, as well as status and power relations among individuals who hold different positions.

First, I shall discuss research on discretion and make three theoretical critiques on the legalist and individualist approaches. Secondly, I point out the relative and comparative character of the concept of discretion, and show how both approaches treat discretion by constructing “counterfactuals” which are theoretically misleading and empirically unrealistic. While the legalist perspective conceptualizes discretion around highly hypothetical match between laws and behaviors, the individualistic perspective tends to contrast bureaucratic mandates with individual values and beliefs. Such straw-man counterfactuals are often directly applied or problematically operationalized in empirical research as actual alternatives in day-to-day street-level actions without any sound proof or specific mechanism. Second, I argue that the underlying causal assumptions found in both
approaches are counter-productive to generating new findings and making theoretical advancements. The legalist perspective—in its conceptualization of discretion—already attributes biases, injustice and abuse of power to a vacuum of rules and the presence of opportunities for individual prejudice and negligence. The individualistic approach—by contrasting individual beliefs with policies—draws simplistic links between mind and behaviors and thus tends to connect problems in street-level bureaucracy to workers’ individual characteristics such as identity, preferences and biases. Third, I revisit valuable theoretical legacies from earlier research on street-level bureaucracy and show how their important insight on the nuances and complexity of structural and organizational context and processes is missing in more recent literature, and thus should be brought back to the center of our scholarly attention. Recent research focuses on the “street-level” part—the immediate front-line interactions, places like neighborhoods, classrooms and welfare offices where such interactions take place, and the people present in these settings—while the “bureaucracy” part is yet to be fully explored. I argue that while discretion is practiced, it does not emerge at the moment of service interaction. Rather, one needs to look deeper and further into the structure and rules of the bureaucratic agencies, and their daily work processes to understand what discretion is and what shapes it. Based on my critiques, I propose a reconceptualization of discretion that maintains its relative and comparative nature but allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced look at bureaucratic agencies, their personnel and client-worker interactions. This conceptualization of discretion attends to organizational context, interactive processes as well as status disparities. After laying out my theoretical framework, I demonstrate the meaning and process of discretion through my analysis of the daily work of 911 dispatchers’ at the front-line of emergency
response. I show how the character of and variation in the levels of discretion—as evidenced in distinct modes of work responding to police, fire and medical incidents—is shaped by and reproduces the organizational context, service interactions and status structure in emergency communication system.

**Current Theories of Discretion and Street-Level Bureaucracy**

Discretion is commonly viewed as entailing the autonomy to make decisions and to act under given circumstances. For many, it has become equivalent with either the lack of constraints (Baldwin 1998; Bergen and While 2004; Dworkin 1977; Galligan 1996; Hill 2003; Hawkins 2003; Lacey 1992), or a conflict between rules and individual values and preferences (Kelly 1994; Maynard-Moody, Williams and Musheno 2003; Sobol 2010; Weissert 1994). The majority of the research on this topic examines discretion through the work of street-level bureaucrats—employees hired to implement laws and policies who interact directly with everyday citizens (Lipsky 1980, 2010; Schram, Soss, Fording and Houser 2009; Soss et al 2001; Pavetti, Derr, and Hesketh 2003; Riccucci 2004; Riccucci and Meyers 2004). Focusing on the crucial moment of service encounter that has direct and consequential impacts on the individual citizens’ lives, interested scholars have approached discretion in street-level bureaucracy from two primary perspectives, which I call “legalist” and “individualistic”. The former follows the tradition of legal scholarship on discretion and problematizes the gap between rules and practices, which is deemed as the source of injustice, inefficiency and innovation (Davis 1969; Hawkins 2003; Maynard-Moody, Musheno and Palumbo 1990). Studies in the field of public administration often take this approach, using terms like “compliance” and “enforcement” to examine how rules
and standard procedures are carried out by staff on the ground, with comparisons made between policies and implementation (Braithwaite 2006; Brown and Duguid 1991; Goodrick and Salancik 1996; Axelrad and Kagan 2000; Orr 1996; Schneiberg and Bartley 2008). The individualistic perspective focuses on how values and characteristics of street-level bureaucrats’ affect their decisions and behaviors on the front line, a popular theme in criminal justice literature. Seeking to draw links between individual characteristics and broader patterns in decisions-making and actions, scholars’ attention has focused on to how demographic factors such as gender (Rabe-Hemp 2008; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty 2006), age (Brown, Novak and Frank 2009) as well as cultural factors such as beliefs and values (Bergen and While 2004; Kelly 1994; Sobol 2010; Weissert 1994) influence decision-making and behaviors of street-level bureaucrats such as arrests, reports and punishments.

Despite their distinct foci, both approaches treat the notion of discretion in a relative and comparative way—that is, there is an underlying null-hypothesis of “how things could have been” or “how the work should be done ideally”—from a legalist perspective, it is the compliance of rules and laws by street-level bureaucrats who implement the former exactly the way they were intended, and from an individualistic perspective, it is the decisions and actions untainted by individuals’ idiosyncrasies. While I sympathize with the concerns of social justice and public accountability that commonly motivate these lines of research, I take issues with the way in which discretion is conceptualized. Many have pointed out that there is always a gap between laws on paper and laws in practice which is open for individual interpretation and judgment (Bittner 1973, 1990; Silbey 2005; Silbey and Bittner 1982; Suchman 1997; Trubek 1984; Valverde 2003), and that there are always
numerous constraints on behaviors besides stated rules and policies (Campbell 1999; Lacey 1992). More importantly, I argue, because discretion is theorized against such “straw-man” counterfactuals which can hardly be found in reality, it is difficult to examine empirically how, when and whether it varies, is lacking or absent; and that is why in current scholarship, decision making and actions and the lack thereof, as well as compliance and non-compliance, can all be instances of “discretion” (Nickels 2007). A concept that can be operationalized as one thing as well as its opposite is perhaps confusing. While an alternative conceptualization of discretion should still maintain its relative and comparative nature, the viable counterfactuals and alternatives that constitute discretion should arguably be derived from specific, actual social situations.

Moreover, both approaches—because of where they place their theoretical and empirical focuses—already have drawn tacit causal links that explain street-level bureaucrats’ behaviors at the very beginning. By looking at the constraints on behaviors, or individuals’ characteristics and beliefs, the attribution of problems in street-level bureaucracy such as injustice, inefficiency, or abuse of power is inevitably made to either the lack of organizational control on people, or people’s own flaws and misjudgment, only a matter of who, when and how. However, as has been reviewed and acknowledged by many, the results of studies that attempt to explain behaviors through individuals’ characteristics are contradictory and inconclusive at best (Brown et al. 2009; Rabe-Hemp 2008; Varano et al. 2009). What is more, scholars have to yet to pinpoint exactly which values and beliefs contribute to more or less compliance and enforcement, not to mention that such a value-action model of the relationship between mind and action is questionable in the first place. In fact, it has been proved since decades ago, that institutional environment should be
given at least as much weight as individual characteristics when looking at discretionary behaviors, and that the priorities and intensities of different factors shaping discretion are shaped by the structural and cultural context of specific organizations (Lundman 1979). In his research on police behaviors on traffic violations, Lundman found that individual officers actually tend to be less biased against minorities responding to traffic law violations when there is less organizational constraint. And while concluding that the gender of officers does affect the patterns found in policing, and women’s “ethics of care” might be the explanation for female officers’ lower likelihood in the use of extreme controlling behaviors such as search and arrest, Rabe-Hemp (2008) also acknowledges that female officers are also more likely to be assigned to certain tasks, which have an impact on the observed gender differences in police responses.

Although many of the abovementioned studies attend to the broader context that street-level bureaucrats are embedded in, such context tends to be where street-level bureaucrats interact with their clients—offices, streets, neighborhoods, hospitals, schools and so forth, but not the agencies and organizations that the former inhabit. The insufficient attention paid to the organizational context is an unfortunate development of Lipsky’s (1980, 2010) legacy, whose powerful analysis of the intricacies of the structure of street-level bureaucracy could yield important insights to policy implementation and front-line public service. Discretion does not emerge or is produced during the service interactions, rather, it comes from the organizational structure and context independent from specific individuals, but is practiced and brought to life at the moment service counter by said individuals during interactive work processes on the street-level. The organizational structure and context not only include the ways in which work is assigned and organized, but also the
social relations, status and power dynamics among different personnel taking different positions in a network. Halliday et al.’s (2009) research on pre-sentence social inquiry reporting in Scotland has shown, for example, how the reports were written as an instrument for the social workers hired to assist judges to obtain recognition and status, as a result of the former’s uncertainty over professionalism and credibility. And such a motive undermines the objective of said reports in social inquiry. And Dubois’ (2016) important work on French welfare system brings in the organizational dimension. It demonstrates how broader socio-economic inequalities such as class, race and gender as well as difficulties in citizens’ most private and personal lives such as divorce and childcare are translated into administrative terms, which are presented and evaluated at the moment of specific service encounter by individuals bearing different identities and transforming both public sphere and private spheres. The relationship and exchange between collaborating agencies or hierarchical ones should also be considered for a fuller understanding of the discretion of street-level bureaucrats. For example, in reviewing Pepinsky’s (1984) research on police discretion, Nikels’ (2007) pointed out that one key finding from Pepinsky is that police officers’ sense of autonomy is an “illusion” because “the ‘decision’ to file a report or not was overwhelmingly determined by whether or not the dispatcher named an offense in their call to the officer, one that could be corroborated on the scene.” (Nickels 2007, p.574) Therefore, police officers’ discretion is constrained by the “structuring force introduced by their reliance on the dispatcher’s choice of wording in selecting to file a report.”(Nickels 2007, p.575) Building on my critiques and borrowing similar insights on constraints and alternatives specific to an organizational context and a set of social relations, I will further elaborate on my conceptualization of discretion and lay
out my theoretical framework more fully in the next section.

**Context, Status and Interactive Processes: Towards a Cultural Sociology of Discretion**

In their important work on sentencing reform in the war on drugs, Engen and Steen (2000) take an approach to discretion similar to that which is employed in the abovementioned discussion on how police officers’ choices are limited by information from the dispatchers. Interested in the impacts of the changes in the sentencing guidelines on convictions and sentencing practices on drug offenders in Washington state, Engen and Steen focus on whether and how the organizational processes shape the link between the changes in sentencing guidelines brought about by the reform and the sentencing outcomes. They found that the reform brought significant changes in the sentencing process through discretion. Discretion, in their case, is the pool of options judges and prosecutors have in making their sentencing decisions. The reform limited the available alternatives for sentences in various ways, and as a result, the sentences have become much more predictable by the type and severity of charges that the prosecutors have filed or pled to.

The authors raised two important points, the first is that in their case discretion comes from legally and organizationally available options, and that changes in the kind and number of said options affect discretion; and second, discretion is relative and comparative in a sense that it is tied to status and power structures in a given network and can be empirically observed. In their case, the reform has greatly increased the prosecutors’ discretion because of how charges can predict subsequent sentences, and simultaneously reduced the judges’ discretion because of the now highly limited room for them to choose between possible sentencing options. The authors further examined structured sentencing options with other
empirical cases unwarranted sentencing disparity, treating them as “windows of discretion” (Bradley-Engen et al., 2003, p.99).

Building on my critiques and borrowing from the alternative view of discretion conceptualized in relation to options available and organizational context, here I propose what I call a “situated realism” approach as an alternative to the “legalist” and the “individualistic” ones to make the presence, absence as well as its variation empirically observation, consistently operationalized and situated in actual realistic scenarios instead of theoretical ideals. In order to do so, I re-conceptualize street-level bureaucrats’ discretion as their relative freedom to choose among organizationally-prescribed alternatives, which allows for empirical investigations of its presence, absence and variation in relation to the daily work process within the context of the bureaucratic organization imbued with power and status shifts and struggles. My approach focuses on the social processes through which street-level bureaucrats navigate and choose among organizationally available options, and how the organization with structurally unequal status positions and categorically different tasks shapes the ways in which said bureaucrats’ discretion is practiced in the dynamic, interactive and ongoing encounters with average citizens and clients.

Having established my theoretical framework with the concept of discretion at its center, I shall analyze my findings in the next section. Through the data from fieldwork in a 911 emergency response center at an urban police department, I show what discretion means in this context, how it varies by the broad type of incidents from little to plenty — medical, fire and police — due to the organizational structure and the specific work processes, and how it is affected by the existing power and status dynamics within and without the
organization—the high level of discretion in police dispatch is faced with clashes with police officers on the street who possess higher position and authority in the organizational system, while the interactions with fire and medical departments are less contentious.

Findings

In this section, I identity three distinct levels of discretion as defined by the dispatchers’ free and improvised choices among available codes. For each, I will first describe the technical and organizational setup in place, then I will detail the specific call-taking practices within said setting, focusing on the role of the human staff, their interactions with the callers, as well as the formers’ leeway in making the crucial coding decisions. Then I will look at the broader relations in the organization and show how distinct levels of discretion allowed for the dispatchers are intertwined with the status struggles and power plays with their front-line colleagues in collaborating agencies.

Discretion: Codes, Coding, and the Work Processes

“30 years ago we had a typewriter, pen and paper. No computers, no 911…I kinda grew with it,” remarked dispatcher Baily O’Hara. Nowadays, each console in the station is connected to fourteen radio channels displayed on one of the seven monitors in front of the dispatchers in their headsets who sit on police or fire channels, or call-takers who respond to 911 calls for the shift, both working in a crossfire of quick and shifting conversations. What connects them all is the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system. In response to a call, the dispatcher on 911 line talks to the caller, determines the nature and type of the reported incident, then codes it in CAD. The code is an “incident type” in CAD, based on
which CAD sends the information to either of both of the police and fire side. According to that code, the fire and/or dispatchers dispatch police units and/or fire units over the radio based on the recommended units in the response plan corresponding to that code. Each code has a pre-determined response plan with the number, kind and size of units to be dispatched, and a priority level indicating the urgency and seriousness of the reported matter. Incidents of higher priority are responded to with units in greater number and variety. Units vary by the number and rank of front-line police, medical and fire staff, as well as the type and number of vehicles. CAD live-updates each unit’s dispatch status and location information.

Unlike police or fire matters, all medicals calls are processed through an add-on software called PROQA, which is activated manually once the call-taker knows the call is regarding a medical situation. PROQA pops up sequenced questions for call-takers to ask, with answers for them to click based on the caller’s report. After all answers are recorded, it provides the dispatchers with a diagnosis that corresponds to a life support response plan. To dispatchers who had the same job when EMD cards were used to help callers seeking medical assistance, PROQA is a computerized substitute for both card-flipping and call-takers’ own decision-making. The call-taker side of the conversation is highly scripted, so is the input into the CAD system.

After spending some time in the field, I could memorize a lot of standard questions from PROQA as well. “Breathing, alert, clammy,” these words started to come to mind when I heard medical calls. These are the terms and flows of information describing the caller or the patient’s physical state and bodily experience. In medical call-processing, with the old card-flipping practice, its modern counterpart PROQA and the highly scripted call
communication, technology substitutes the subjective interpretation and decision-making on the part of the classifiers, more importantly, the inter-subjective social relations are mostly replaced by the simple question-answer exchange prescribed by the technology involved. Once the questions are asked and answers are answered, there is no need or room for the dispatchers’ to make their own coding decisions. Precisely because very few questions they need to ask are spontaneous or improvised and there is little room for discretion, dispatchers try to avoid sounding like a machine during the calls.

During down time, dispatcher Sadie Walker commented with respect to the problem of sounding like a machine, “That’s my pet peeve with EMD. Because there are ways to not sound like you are reading a script. I prefer not sounding like that.” It was an uneventful weekday morning shift. “But Simon, you can just tell he’s reading the script. It’s so fast.

“It appears in every review that he has.” Supervisor Victor Wolf rested his elbows on the panel surrounding Sadie’s console. “I told him: if you can just slow down…” With PROQA, the speech tends to sound more scripted, according to Victor: “If using EMD cards, you are the one who selects the codes and there’s a deeper understanding of the situation. If using computers, they only take yes/no answers.” Below is a typical medical call, taken by Dispatcher Sasha Brown.

Sasha: 911 this call is recorded what’s the exact location of your emergency?
Caller: 66 River Road.
Sasha: Where in the building?
Caller: 1st floor, room 112.
Sasha: What’s the number you are calling from?
Caller: (Phone number).
Sasha: What’s the problem? Tell me exactly what happened.
Caller: Umm he’s a 67 year old complaining about chest pain.
Sasha: OK, I’m just gonna ask you a few more questions OK?
Caller: Um hum.
Sasha: Are you with him now?
Caller: Um, the doctor is with him now. I’m in another room doing the call.
Sasha: So he is 67 years old?
Caller: Um hum.
Sasha: Is he awake?
Caller: Awake and alert.
Sasha: He has chest pain?
Caller: Chest pain.
Sasha: Is he completely alert, breathing normally?
Caller: Yeah, breathing normally.
Sasha: Is he changing color at all?
Caller: Nope.
Sasha: Is he clammy or having cold sweats?
Caller: No, he’s not.
Sasha: Do you know if he had a heart attack before?
Caller: No, I don’t know.
Sasha: Do you know if he took any drugs or medication in the past 12 hours?
Caller: I just gave him an Aspirin.
Sasha: OK, I’m sending an ambulance there to help him now.
Caller: OK, thank you.

There is no medical dispatch in the emergency communication center. The information in CAD regarding the incident will be automatically sent to a contracted private ambulance company located elsewhere in the city which medical units belong to. A medical dispatcher working at a console in that company will see it and communicate verbally with the paramedics. There can be, however, a fire dispatch command generated by CAD system depending on the nature of the medical situation—the code—because fire units like ladder trucks or squads carry advanced medical equipment, ladders and tools for possible break-ins and fire staff are also trained to perform medical duties. In that case, once the call was coded that whole CAD entry with incident and response plan details will pop up on the screen in front of dispatchers sitting at the fire side of the room, he or she will speak to a fire dispatch channel connected to the local fire house’s speakers, for example: “Engine 8, Squad 4 respond to Room 112, 66 River Road for a 67-year-old male with chest pain. Operate on channel 5.”
Because the medical call-taking protocol is highly codified and the paramedics sent to the scene are not in direct contact with dispatchers during their response, the latter rarely need to rely on their own knowledge or judgment to make any diagnosis or coding decision, nor do they take heavy responsibilities for the well-being of their front-line colleagues or the patients—it keeps the dispatchers from both the thrill of discretion and the negative consequences. It makes the job easier, but at the same time, it allows for less growth and knowledge on the part of the dispatchers. One night during dinner in the kitchen, Sasha said she actually wanted to learn more about medical assistance:

We have a contract with PROQA company and they protect us from legal liabilities. So if we do what PROQA tells us to do we are safe. And you have to go through all the questions: “Is she conscious? Is she breathing? Is she alert?” You can hear the patient talking but you still have to ask. I hope there is more training on medicals so we have more knowledge…you know we are not doctors but I think we need more knowledge… PROQA has the questions and instructions but you don’t know why lying on your back, or having nothing to eat or drink helps….why they should to this and that… Last time there was a guy calling, about an old man in the bathroom. He said he was on the floor and couldn’t talk. And he just pointed to his stomach. It sounds like a stroke to me. But the caller didn’t say it. I asked and he said it wasn’t like a stroke. I could only put “abdominal pain” in. Abdominal pain gets a slower response: you only get an ambulance. But stroke gets an ambulance and a squad. Another time an old man was on the floor and the caller couldn’t tell if it was a stroke. I asked Archie, the supervisor: “What if somebody is on the floor, and you think it is a stroke but the caller says it isn’t?” He said: “Man down.” I said: “What if he says I think his face is crooked?” He said: “If he says his face is slided, you can say it’s a stroke.” I think there should be more training…like what a stroke looks like.

In sum, medical call-processing is a highly automated process in which little discretion is exercised. Because of the way their medical-response work is structure—with PROQA as an add-on program to run during medical calls—dispatchers have little choice and need few judgment calls to pick among organizationally prescribed alternatives—the codes, with asking scripted questions and typing in answers as the key part of the job.
High Discretion, Notes, and Liabilities: Responding to Police Calls

Dispatcher Luz Lopez told her trainee during the in-house practice: “…Medicals, it’s more about getting the help there as soon as possible and the right help. Police is more about figuring out what’s going on, figuring out what they have to say; questioning people over the phone helps prosecute criminals.” Indeed, there is no computerized script to follow for police calls, and call-takers improvise and probe based on what’s coming from the line. Whatever the incident sounds like—from scam to kidnap to robbery—the call takers take charge in what questions to ask, what information to follow up and what categories to put into the CAD system. By contrast with medical call responses, is no add-on software or standardize scripts for police calls or fire calls. Moreover, police dispatching takes places in the same room with call-taking, and police dispatchers with incident information or updates available talk directly to police officers on the street through police channels with no third-party intermediaries. Police calls demand intensive decision-making and interrogation, with dispatchers’ background, experience and knowledge of “the street” being crucial to the call-taking and coding process. Almost in opposition with medicals, for polices calls technology is an information recording and transmission device which by no means substitutes or dictates the interactions between the callers and call-takers, not to mention the discretionary and decision-making work of the latter. Police call coding and processing is highly contingent and improvised, with dispatchers’ constant use of discretion to decide on a most appropriate code.

For example, below is a call about vandalism in public. Dispatcher Sheila Escovedo responded. During the call, she probed about the situation of the incident, the current location of the suspect and tried to secure the scene based on background conversations so
no evidence went compromised. She also reassured the caller that the help was on the way, as he sounded quite disturbed by the incident he was seeing and reporting. Compared to medical calls, the conversation was more interactive and much less standardized.

Sheila: 911 this line is recorded…(interrupted by caller)
Caller: Hello, I don’t know how this works, but this lady was in McDonald’s and she didn’t like the service, and she vandalized the side by putting um…racist…niggers… slurs here…on the side of our building.
Sheila: She just put that in what, spray?
Caller: Yeah, in marker, a sharpie marker, and they tried to stop her and she walked out. And there’s guy going to take picture of her, so should I just…what should I do?
Sheila: Yeah, don’t let anybody near it…I’m gonna send a police officer, what does she look like?
Caller: She has umm… (interrupted by Sheila)
Sheila: She’s white, black, Hispanic?
Caller: Yeah, she’s white, she looks like 30, 35, 36,and um…she has everything on her backpack, you know those hiker-bags?
Sheila: Yeah. She has a hiker-bag, there’s a bunch of stuff attached to it.
Caller: And there’s this black boot…this is how you could, you could, tell her apart, there’s a black boot, with duct tape on the toe, and it’s on her bag.
Sheila: Ok, a backpack and a black boot, right?
Caller: Yeah, there’s a black boot, and she has duct tape on the front of her toe, of the boot, and that’s how you know that it’s her. And there’s a guy down the street taking a picture of her. Now there’s security.
(Background, someone is saying: “I’m gonna clean up this now.”)
Sheila (heard the background conversation and intervened): DON’T clean it up or the police officer can’t see it.
Caller: Oh oh oh, I got the police right now. She’ walking down there. I got the police right now.
Sheila: Alright so you are with the police officer right now?
Caller: No no no, I was with the guy, cleaning up the street of Parkton.
Sheila: DON’T erase it until the officer gets there…
Caller: Oh oh they know, I told them already.
Sheila: OK. I’m staying right here. What’s your name?
Caller: Steve.
Sheila: Alright, Steve, we already have an officer on the way.
Caller: Oh good.
Sheila: Oh tell me which way she is going to.
Caller: She’s going towards the Union Way, so um..
Sheila: Toward the park?
Caller: Yeah.
Sheila: On the same side of the street?
Caller: Yeah.
Sheila: Alright, we are on the way, OK?
Caller: OK.

Sheila coded the incident as Graffiti in CAD and updated the information in the “notes” section of the incident entry in CAD. Part of it read:

17:33:53pm Incident Type GRAFFITTI Priority 3
17:35 CALL-TKR w/f (white female) looking 36 yrs or so, blue backpack with a black boot with duct tape on the toe on the bag
17:35 CALL-TKR she used marker to put racial slurs on the building
17:36 CALL-TKR the female is walking toward the park
17:36 CALL-TKR on the same side of the street

The notes section is where call-takers type in updates and additional information regarding the incident after the initial coding is completed. For medical calls, this section is automated as the call-taker clicks on the menu based on caller’s answers to the scripted questions, and the automated updates regard the units to be dispatched, for example, if the condition of the patient is not serious, the CAD will automatically decide that a squad unit is not needed for the response and that will show in the notes. By contrast, notes section carries a variety of additional information from the conversation during police calls, which was manually entered by call-takers and helps officers on the job better understand the situation and identify the suspects. The call-takers communicating on the 911 line decide on the questions to ask and the notes to be typed in and relayed to the police dispatchers. Once the code is generated, the police side of the room will see it as a new entry and whether the notes are still being updated or not, a police dispatcher will immediately speak to the officers through a police channel and send them to where the incident is: “Control to car 5, (car 5 answering), car 5 respond to 18 Park Drive for a Graffiti, stand by for further, (car 5 copies).” While more information is available in the notes section, the dispatcher
will relay it to the officers, for example: “36 year-old white female, carrying a blue backpack with a black boot with duct tape on the toe and on the bag. She used a marker to put racial slurs on the building. She’s now walking towards the park on the same side of the street.”

Not all police calls permit enough time for call-takers to type in the notes. For police calls, there is a unique status called “in progress” with no counterpart in fire or medicals. A police call is “in progress” when it’s still ongoing, unfolding and unresolved. A criminal act in progress indicates more possible victims, greater danger facing front-line officers, and often lower communication quality of calls. During in-progress calls, no detail should go unnoticed, as any information—however minor and trivial it first seems—might become key to understanding the situation and finding the suspect. Therefore, at every second, call-takers need to make their own—and most of the time, swift and independent—decisions on questioning, relaying and intervention. In the classroom, supervisor instructed to the trainees:

In progress: anything that’s within 5 minutes’ of happening. With in-progress crimes, you want to stay on the line with the caller, especially when they’re injured. The most important thing is to get into the CAD as soon a possible, get the address, and you get information, (hit) update and continue (button). Everything you have, you have to relate to the officer on the radio. Always, always, always. Even the most minute detail…You want to get as much info as you can, get it as fast as you can. That’s the best way to get the suspect. You gotta be careful when you select from the drop-down list. ……A buy had a heart attack at Bank of America, you need to really pay attention, there are many BOAs…one in East Parkton, one in Northville. Bad addresses are really bad.

Indeed, urgent and unpredictable nature of emergency response and law enforcement is readily apparent and visible during in-progress police incidents. And the relationship with the callers can be intense and contentious. Dispatcher James Gordon handled an in-
progress call from a girl assaulted by her boyfriend. The suspect punched her in the face, stole her keys and threw the keys into the woods. She was on the way to catch him herself while talking on the 911 line. And James said: “Your boyfriend’s running away from you at T station? (Raised his voice) Mam, do you hear me? I need you to stop chasing. Do you hear me? Hey mam, stop interacting with him! Listen to me! Listen to me!! Listen to me!! I’m gonna stay on the line until the officer gets to you. Mam listen to me, I’m gonna help you OK? I know, I know you are upset. Where are you? What can you see?” Then he turned around and shouted out to dispatcher Brooke Marie, who was passing information to the police officers through police channel: “She’s in front of the Shake Shack!” “He’s in front of Shake Shack.” She talked into the speaker on her headset. James corrected her: “She! Not he! He is in the station!”

As is shown by the example above, during police call communication the callers and call-takers are less restricted and more spontaneous. With constant probing, intervention and interpretation, the call-takers exert high level of discretion and rely on their own judgment and knowledge. Thus, the interactions between callers and call-takers are contentious and interactive with both parties engaged in reading and responding to one another’s intentions and speeches in real time. The CAD’s notes section and the in-progress updates not only serve to contain and manage the complexity and unpredictability of police calls, they also keep the callers (and sometimes the suspects), the call-takers, the police dispatchers and police officers on scene in the same communicative and cooperative loop, with ever-changing information and outlook on the incidents being reported.

Not only do call-takers improvise during conversations in order to secure key information and callers’ cooperation, and provide updates as incidents progress, they also depart from
protocols to make their own choices between possible coding options based on their judgment of the incidents. For example, dispatcher Ted Hargis decided to use a code that brings local police force to the scene instead of the state, despite the fact that the incident took place on state jurisdiction—water and bridge. He believed the urgency of the call needed more immediate response. Below is the conversation.

Caller: I’m on River Lake and I can see kids jumping off the bridge.
Ted: How many kids?
Caller: About 10.
Ted: Do they look like they can swim?
Caller: Yes, but if the boat hits them... It doesn’t look like they’re drowning.

Ted hung up, coded and said: “Kids jumping off the bridge. That’s why I didn’t put ‘notify’ because by the time they get there it might be too late. But we’re so close, so we can just send people to check it out while we wait. We still notify them (state police).” He chose a code “investigate” that he decided as a more timely solution to the problem, and at the same time still followed the protocols to notify the state agency.

Precisely because the high degree to which call-takers’ own understanding and discretion is involved, when any mistake occurs, there is a fair amount to blaming and justification. In contrast with their relationship with paramedics, which is mostly indirect and intermediated, 911 staff have cooperative yet sometimes conflicting relations with police personnel, for at least two reasons. The first one is obvious, which is that the police calls allow for more discretion, and that more discretion means more responsibility. And the second one is that, despite the police calls permitting the highest level of discretion within the 911 communication center, the ultimate (although only partly) discretion of deciding between the alternatives of the kinds of crimes and responses belongs to the police officers on the scene, who have higher status in terms of institutional recognition, organizational
support, public awareness and substantive pay and benefits. Therefore, the police officers are simultaneously reliant on the information provided by the dispatchers and limited by it as a result, while resistant to and skeptical of it to a degree because of their perceived status and actual involvement in the solution. Sometime the officers might refuse to do what the police dispatchers tell them to, might ignore the dispatchers’ advice entirely and initiate a police response on their own, or question and critique call-takers or dispatchers’ judgments. James received a call with inconsistent information from the caller, and days after the police reaction was made, he was sent to a meeting with the police to explain his “miscommunication” to the police officers. He replayed that call to them, which I also listened to. The caller said her boyfriend took her car and their baby, but four and a half minutes into the call, she changed the narrative and said the baby was with her. But at that point of the call it was already too late to correct the information as the officers were already sent as if it had been a kidnap. Believing the baby was with the suspect, the police officers had chased down his vehicle and made a felony stop on a driveway. The response would have been quite different if they had learned the baby had not been there in the car the first place. “That call drove me out of my mind.” James said, “A storm of non-sense.” Dispatcher Bree Gallo nodded: “No matter how long you’re here, you’re always amazed.” James told her: “The officers made a felony stop. In the officer’s report, he said there is ‘miscommunication between 911 and the caller’. They might want to justify why they had him at the gunpoint.” “Don’t point fingers here.” Bree gave him a knowing look.

Middle-Level Discretion, Observations and Reports—Responding to Fire Calls
On our way to the firehouse visit, dispatcher David Edwards told the trainees and me that “On the police side, some knucklehead is beating his girlfriend every single day…Fire, there is still protocol.” Unlike police calls, fire calls are more straightforward and demand a lot less questioning. Questions on fire incidents across different calls are quite similar: whether the caller is at the fire scene, where the fire exactly is, what caused the fire and what they smell and see. And unlike medical calls, the input of fire incidents is not scripted—there is still leeway for the call-takers to ask their own questions and make their own judgment. The notes section is neither automated nor frequently used; there is neither a liabilities shield, nor frequent liabilities. The fire call processing lies in the middle on a spectrum with police and medical calls as its two ends. Technology neither substitutes for interactions or decision-making, nor do human agents need to engage in constant questioning and improvisation. The callers make guided observations and become partly reliable sources of information; the call-takers on the other side, direct the callers to make assessment of their physical environment and try to estimate the fire situations from the callers’ reported experience. Dispatchers have less discretion in fire calls than in the police calls because of the small pool of possibilities and questions, and more than in medicals because there is no automated decision-making component. This process shows middle-level discretion, in which a decision or outcome is produced through shared judgment and cooperation between both the street-level bureaucrats and the citizens interacting with them. While the call-takers are guided by a limited set of questions to be asked, the callers as an extension of the observation follow the call-takers’ instructions and questions, both of whom contribute partly to determining the change and situation of the latter’s material surroundings and the subsequent coding possibility. Below is a fire call. It was short and
simple. The key information regards the location, smell, smoke and flame. Dispatcher Sasha Brown took it.

Sasha: 911 this line is recorded, what’s the exact location of your emergency?
Caller: No. 11, Huntington Road.
Sasha: Is there an apartment number?
Caller: No.
Sasha: What’s the number you are calling from?
Caller: (Phone number).
Sasha: What’s the problem, tell me exactly what happened.
Caller: Umm, I smell smoke down in the basement, it smells like…you know the electrical kind of smell. We unplugged everything but it’s getting worse. So I just want somebody to come and check it out.
Sasha: Is there any smoke?
Caller: I don’t see smoke, I don't see any flames, but the smell is getting stronger.
Sasha: So it’s an electrical odor?
Caller: Yeah.
Sasha: Ok, will you be able to let the fire department in when they get there?
Caller: Yeah.
Sasha: Great, they are on the way. Thank you.

And on CAD the incident was recorded as “Electrical Odor” an incident type with level 1 priority. This incident would pop up on the fire side and a fire dispatcher would dispatch fire units: “Engine 2, Ladder 4, Squad 1, respond to an electric odor at No. 11, Huntington Road, operate on channel 8. ”. During this call, the call-taker decided on the code immediately because the information provided by caller fits that category really well. In other cases the call-takers need to think about different options and make their own choices.

For example, during in-house training, dispatcher Sadie Walker took a fire call, and both her trainee and I listened in.

Caller: “My oven seems to be on fire. I don’t know, there’s a flame in there. I don’t know why, there’s nothing in it.”
Sadie: “Were you cooking something?”
Caller: “No I turned it on to heat it, but I didn’t put anything in it.”
Sadie: “Do you see flames now?”
Caller [speaking to someone around her]: “Do you flames? [turning back to Sadie] Yes.”

Upon hearing this, Sadie manually changed the code from “Food on Stove” which she put in originally, to “Structure Fire” in the CAD system. And she explained to the trainee after she hung up:

At first she said there’s smoke in the oven, so you have a choice: food on stove. Then she said: ‘there’s flame in it, and I weren’t cooking’. So it’s a red flag. So you have a choice of ‘Food on Stove’ if they say they’re cooking something and it’s burning; a structure fire is a fire in a house, in a building; if they say they just smell smoke in the building, it is ‘Odor/Smoke Inside’, you can type smoke and see it; and there is also ‘Odor/Smoke Out’, if they say, like, ‘I am on Palm Street near Park Drive and I smell smoke coming out of the building.’

Generally speaking, medicals require the least amount of discretion, and police calls the most; fire calls, as I mentioned, are in the middle. For individual 911 employees, these distinct levels of discretion are observable and palpable in their daily work. Their accounts attest to my findings, as Supervisor Archie Cooper summarized:

Medicals are the easiest, everything is scripted. Fires are the next. Police calls, you need to question, question and question. The coding, disturbance vs. domestic, if a woman and man are fighting at the corner, people will code it disturbance, but some might say it is domestic cuz it is a man and a woman. But we don’t know what there relation is. I just think lots of dispatchers have more difficulty coding police incidents. Medicals are no-brainer. You follow the scripts you get the results. Fire calls require a very limited number of questions. Police calls require high level of questions.

Supervisor Charles Morales made very similar comments:

For medical calls, the computer selects it. The computer makes the decisions based on the answers you put in. But for police calls, we have to select the category. We have to make the decision. Yesterday we had a call, a guy at a yoga class passed by the desk and said, hey I’m Brad and I need to go to the locker room. But nobody knows him. Then he passed by the class, and they were like, do you know this guy? No, nobody knows who he is. So they went to check what he was doing---he was prying open the lockers and stealing people’s wallets and credit cards. So what is it? Is it disturbance? Is it larceny in progress? Is it unwanted person, or is it B&E,
break in and entrance? Cuz it straddled so many different categories, you have to make the decision. The call taker—cuz she’s a new girl—decided it’s a robbery. But, the police’s perception is, if it’s a robbery, there’s someone holding a gun: “Give me your money!” But it wasn’t like a robbery, cuz people left their things in the locker room. It’s not like I push you on the ground and grab it from you. Medical is next to nothing. Fire can be complicated, you have different categories, like odor/smoke outside, odor/smoke inside. You have hazard materials, spills, gas or oil.

In sum, I have demonstrated with my empirical data what discretion is and how it varies by the type of incidents in my case of 911 emergency communication. With coding in CAD system as the key part of the job, dispatchers have three distinct levels of discretion as defined by their freedom to choose among organizationally prescribed alternative—the codes in the CAD system: low in medical call responses, high in police call response, and middle in fire call responses. Such a variation is a direct result of how the work process is structured within the organizational context of 911 communication organization, and it shapes and reinforces the structural positions of dispatchers in relation to both their front-line colleagues and the general public, evidenced in their interactions with the law-enforcement agents on scene and their varying degrees liabilities assumed, respectively. The dispatchers’ relations with the police officers are particularly contentious because of their high level of discretion in police calls and their direct contact with the callers as the first responders, combined with a lower status compared to the police officers who claim knowledge over situations on scene.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

In this chapter, I have re-conceptualized the notion of discretion as the freedom of choice among organizationally prescribed alternatives as an attempt to retain the relative and comparative character of this concept while allowing empirical investigation of its absence,
presence and variation. Building on critiques of two dominant approaches, which I term “legalist” and “individualist” perspectives, I attempt to locate possible options and comparisons in specific organizational contexts and streamline the theoretical framework for concrete empirical analysis. Focusing on the work processes within a given organization with various structural positions tied to different levels of status, I contextualize the notion of discretion with a more nuanced and broader picture which includes not only the service encounters between street-level bureaucrats and citizens, but also dynamics between different agents within and without given street-level bureaucracy connected by the work process. Through my findings, I have shown how medical, fire and police response possesses are characterized by distinct levels of discretion, which also carry implications for status and power struggles with other public safety personnel.

To apply the concept of discretion that I have developed with respect to street-level bureaucracy, public administration, and criminal justice, one can examine the ways in which discretion varies in terms of degree and kind. In this chapter, I focus more on the practice of choosing among different pre-determined alternatives, rather than the number of said alternatives. But research reviewed (Engen and Steen, 2000) has also considered and compared the number of options available as an indicator of discretion. Whether to prioritize the practice of making choices, or the number of said choices, depends on the general research questions and the specific case studies. One possible theoretical extension of this chapter is to incorporate the divergence from all options and/or the participation in the production of alternatives as part of discretion. How to theorize, observe and measure “diversion” or “participation” is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Going back to the conversation with the “legalist” and “individualist” approaches, I think
it is important to clarify that I do not intend to exclude or dismiss the importance of control, supervision, personal values, or characteristics. In fact, I believe that attending to these different factors helps us fully comprehend difficult topics such as discretion and street-level bureaucracy. However, I also believe that this fuller and more nuanced picture cannot be drawn without the missing strokes, one of which being a more contextualized and empirically viable definition of discretion. For example, future research can look at how to enhance or reduce control by expanding, loosening, redefining or changing existing alternatives, how to empower street-level bureaucrats through joint participation in the production of options, how different social groups are given, and perceive and respond to alternatives that vary in kind and number, and how different social groups interpret the boundaries, practical possibilities and reasonable extensions of the overall pool and every single one of the alternatives being provided.

To connect this notion of discretion with power and status, future research can investigate whether groups with certain level of power or take certain status positions are likely to be more or less capable of generating, altering, re-defining or ignoring the organizationally-prescribed options, and whether their perceived pool of options is the same with their actual options given by street-level bureaucracy and many other types of organizations. To study efficiency, justice and the exercise of power, comparisons can be empirically made between the number and nature of alternatives given to the street-level bureaucrats based on different scenarios, and the number and nature of the alternatives they interpret as possible, reasonable and fair, and then give to the citizens and their clients.

One limitation of this chapter is that it does not, and probably cannot, account for inaction and negligence, which to some, could be an important aspect or consequence of
discretion that carries theoretical, empirical and policy significance. My definition of
discretion, in this sense, is an active or responsible one, because even when there is high
constraint and low discretion there is assumed willingness and responsibility to act and
choose (with not acting not being an option). An innovative, comprehensive theory of
discretion that takes these factors into account would be very welcome.
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Chapter 3


Dispatcher and Certified Training Officer (CTO) James Gordon once told me that “my dad is a cop”. One afternoon, I asked him to take a picture of me working at my dispatch console and listening to 911 calls. He grabbed my phone and said: “You wanna look like a real dispatcher? Just put your feet on the desk like you don’t care about anything they say.” Sometimes after he hung up, he would say: “I don’t give a shit. I don't wanna know what’s going on,” pick up on the random, irrelevant topic he had been discussing with his colleagues before the call, or simply start a new one. When he lectured the trainees, he told them to not get too emotionally involved, to “have a shell”. But other times, long after he hung up he would click the police department’s blue icon in the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system, search a particular incident whose result he wanted to know and read its police report. During the very same training period, the same audience—the trainees and I—listened to a past call played by training supervisor Sally Grossman for pedagogical purposes: it is a medical call answered by James Gordon himself: “Where is the baby?! Where is the baby?! How old is he? He fell from the tree?! Do you need an ambulance? …..A baby squirrel? OK…” In fact, the caller said clearly from the beginning that it was about a baby squirrel, but James—apparently very nervous and alarmed judging from his raised voice—immediately took it as a call about a human baby, and after longer than a minute, realized it was about an animal and had to cancel the ambulance already on the way. After the class, we told James jokingly that we had the opportunity to hear his signature “squirrel call”. He laughed at himself about it. He was called a “high-charger”—
he talks about his calls, gets excited about his calls, and remembers in detail many of his calls.

This is an instance of what I call “controlled empathy” common in the daily work process of 911 dispatchers—the practice of detached attachment with a constant battle between emotional connection and emotion management. How do different approaches to culture in action explain this? In the widely criticized Parsonian model which is also similar to Weber’s framework (Swidler 1986), the focus will be placed on the values he has internalized, maybe through training or other kinds of socialization into “controlled empathy”. Two other approaches to culture in action have been adopted as reactions to the simplistic Parsonian value-action formulation. One is the toolkit approach; the other is what I call in this chapter the “cognitive approach”. Instead of focusing on internalization and socialization, toolkit theorists will interpret “controlled empathy” outside cultural environment, where institutionalized and conflicting cultural codes are available for him to utilize as strategies for action. The analysis could go like this: there are two sets of cultural tools in the cultural environment of 911 emergency communication, one contains what is needed for the detached dispatchers who don’t “give a shit”, while the other provides them with what it takes to be high-chargers. The cognitive approach, quite differently, would search for the answers to my questions within individuals’ mind rather than from the outside. Cognitive scholars will point out that there are two systems in 911 dispatchers’ mind, one that is in charge of the discursive, deliberate and explicit part of their cognition which produced the speeches and conversations that I gathered about the dispatchers’ seemingly indifference; the other system is where the non-discursive, in-the-moment, implicit part of their cognition takes place, which escapes both their awareness and my
observation but explains cases like “squirrel call”, following up with the outcome of the incidents and talking about the past incidents. As apposed to toolkit approach which casts serious doubts on internalization and motivation, cognitive perspective makes room for it and argues that the motivation to respond animatedly and empathetically during the calls come from their past experiences and memories, and they might have already been stored in the second system below the conscious level, but given certain context, they are activated to impact responses and actions.

These are all reasonable explanations and provide important insights. And what I have described might be caricatures that do not do justice to the fruitful progress the each school of thought has respectively made. But their merits and contributions aside, in this chapter I propose an alternative framework to analyze cognition and culture in action. In my model, cognition in practice is neither a toolkit from the external cultural institution nor individual cognitive systems playing distinct psychological roles, rather, it is an outcome of conscious human efforts directed towards cognition itself. Further, I pose that such efforts are patterned by the social, organizational and technical context that actors inhabit.

More specifically, I argue that emotional labor and emotion management is intentional, conscious, self and/or other-directed altering of cognition and meaning-making process, with both individual and structural level consequences. Connecting the scholarship on emotional labor and management with the work on culture and cognition, I develop a theoretical framework of cognition and culture in practice that leaves room for individual internalization and socialization on the micro level, as well as the stratifying forces on the meso- and macro- level. I challenge the dichotomies borrowed from psychology as such as
“external” and “internal”, “arguing that replacing the toolkit model with a “trigger-response” model does not adequately move the “duality” agenda forward.

I first review the literature on toolkit and cognitive approaches and critique their incomplete break from the Parsonian value-action chain. On the one hand, the toolkit theory views actors as active agents making choices and frees them from internalized cultural beliefs that guide actors’ behaviors and, while leaving them reliant on the external cultural environment. On the other hand, cognitive theory’s effort to bring the focus down to cognitive processes within individuals’ bodies and minds is compromised by its trigger-response model of cognition and its emphasis on the unconsciousness that escapes explicit individual awareness and fruitful empirical observation. I need to clarify that it is by no means my objective to defend an outdated theory of culture; rather, my purpose is to demonstrate some of the prevalent theoretical weaknesses in the refutation of that model and move the scholarship forward with a more nuanced and comprehensive framework. To do so, I introduce the scholarship on emotional labor and emotion management, and explain how such work fills the theoretical gaps in current research through its approach to cognition as a product of socially patterned, intentional meaning-making practices that allow for both value internalization and mind-practice contradiction. Through the notion of “desired state of mind,” and the case of emergency communication and 911 call-processing, I show how emotion is simultaneously the basis for swift decision-making, the source of occupational intuition, and the direct object of intentional human management and manipulation, all of which are patterned by technical, structural and organizational contexts infused with status struggles and power imbalances. Specifically, I demonstrate how status inequality within the criminal justice system, the lack of recognition of and
outlet for dispatchers’ emotional stress, and the constant need for emotional engagement, shape the ways in which the 911 agents manage stress and trauma. I conclude that culture in action needs to be viewed as constant two-way negotiations and exchange between individuals and their outside environments, as well as the meaning-making interactions between selves, others and their shared organizational and structural environment that bears the imprints of broader status and power structure. Discussions will be made at the end.

**Emotional Labor and Emotion Management in the Workplace: A Middle Ground Between Two Approaches to Culture and Cognition in Action**

As a reaction to the once dominant Parsonian formulation of value-action model of culture, two approaches have been proposed to challenge the straightforward yet problematic value-action framework—the toolkit model and the practice theory (Lizardo and Strand 2010; Swidler 1986; DiMaggio 1997; Vaisey 2009). The toolkit theory moves away from the strong internalization and socialization the Parsonian model assumes, and explains patterns in culture and cognition through the notion of “strategies of action”. It argues that individuals do not necessarily internalize highly schematized cultural values and act towards them, instead, they draw from an “external” institutionalized and oftentimes conflicting pool of cultural symbols and codes available to them in order to make strategic and practical choices for real-time actions (Swidler 1986, 1992, 2008, 2013). This model allows for flexibility in the choices of action, as well as their change over time, because seeing actions as a result of strategies of selection from broader cultural institutions can account for the continuity of behaviors with shifting ideas or within distinct circumstances that Parsonian perspective fails to explain (Swidler 1986; DiMaggio 1997).
The cognitive approach borrows from insights in psychology and cognitive sciences, bringing attention to the “non-discursive” and “implicit” part of human mind outside of explicit awareness or control, but is informed and shaped by past repeated practices and experiences (D’Andrade 1995; Lizardo and Strand 2009). Such practices and experiences become information stored in memory and can be activated and acted upon without deliberate thinking or planning once there is a match between those bits of messages and the outside environment (Cerulo 1993; D’Andrade 1995). This model can provide explanations for contradictions between stated values and observed behaviors, such as moral choices in practice and stated moral beliefs (Haidt 2005; Vaisey 2009), as they might be the output of different cognitive systems.

Despite their theoretical and methodological merits as well as differences, both theories replace the value internalization assumptions with other equally problematic assumptions, firstly evident in their treatment of inconsistency and contradictions between ideas and behaviors. The toolkit approach is based on the expectation that if values motivate actions we should observe different behaviors when ideas or circumstances change (DiMaggio 1997; Swidler 1986; Vaisey 2009). The continuity of actions across time and contexts leads toolkit theorists to conclude that the relationship between values and actions is untenable at best, and that we need to look instead at the cultural environment outside of individuals for the stability of behaviors. The cognitive approach rests on the assumption that if values motivate actions we should observe consistency between verbalized ideas and actual un-articulated practices. The two-system separation comes in handy, because from this view such contradiction can come either from the distinct roles of the two systems, or from the non-reflexive system that stores contradictory cultural information. However, it is
entirely possible that individual actors are fully aware of the inconsistency and contradiction in their own mind and behaviors, that the same individual mind can contain discursive, reflexive yet conflicting ideas, and that the same ideas can produce the same outcomes across time and places. The key lies in the interaction and relationship between the mind and its outside environment, which not only includes the institutionalized cultural tools external to actors’ bodies, but also the other cognitive system external to the deliberate, reflexive one. Questions should be asked about how, why, when, and in what social contexts practices do or do not align with stated ideas, or the same beliefs do or do not motivate the same behaviors.

Secondly, as is hinted above, both approaches “externalize” cognition and avoid confronting the motivation-practice, or idea-behaviors link directly and shift their focus elsewhere, one from individuals’ bodies and minds into an outside cultural institution, the other within bodies but into a separate partition in human mind. In this sense, the “internal” and “external” dichotomy is rather relative, and in my view, both are “external” because they locate their analysis outside of individuals’ consciousness. In dealing with the contradictions between ideas and behaviors, or the un-sustainability between them across time and contexts, both approaches move away from the cognitive space available for individuals’ reflexive awareness and for inter-subjective interpretation of meaning-making processes, searching in an alternative place for both patterns of systemacity and arbitrariness (Clark, 1997; Swidler, 2003; Sewell, 2005). This, I argue, is the reason for the current lack of theoretical progress, the cause of which I take to be a thin conceptualization of agency. Without the awareness or control of some of the key driving forces behind their own behaviors, individuals’ role in the cognitive model is largely limited to acting out
intelligible cultural scripts, or verbally justifying actions or judgments that already took place. Hence, it is no surprise that under this framework, analogies are made between human mind and computers or artificial intelligence (AI) (Clark 1997; D’Andrade 1995), or between consciousness and the rider of an elephant who, for the most time, is not in charge (Haidt 2005). My argument is not that this formulation is entirely unreasonable, but that its translation into sociological theorizing has not gotten us very far (Vaisey 2009).

Similarly, without the motivation-practice relationship, the actors in toolkit model as active agents making choices enjoy quasi-freedom—not longer pulled by their deeply imbibed values, but now unavoidably limited by their outside cultural pool available. However, cognition can be the product of human actions, not just their guidelines. Individuals can—when circumstances allow, of course—consciously act towards what I call “a desired state of mind.” In formulating this notion, I have borrowed from both cognitive and tool-kit perspectives in order to arrive at a fuller agency of human actors, who aware of the intricacy of their own mind, how it is influenced by their own behaviors, and capable of acting in light of that awareness.

At the same time, the cognitive approach tends to lose sight of the broader stratifying structure in its theoretical move into actors’ minds as a result of the trigger-reaction view of cognition (Vaisey 2010), while the toolkit approach leaves little room for motivation and socialization shying away from the value-action link almost entirely (DiMaggio 1997; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Vaisey 2010). In place of the motivation-practice link, cognitive theorists somehow establish a trigger-reaction link. Although their takes on the role of body and emotions differ (Ignatow 2007, 2009), cognitive theorists adopt a similar view of cognitive processes as series of contextual responses to various kinds of events or
messages as triggers (Cerulo 1993; Ignatow 2007). However, not only the relationship between the triggers and the reception of triggers are socially contingent, but people in a social environment play active and direct roles in meaning-making processes. The key is the interplay between events and the conscious acts of perceiving them. For example, Meštrović (1985), in re-conceptualizing the notion of “trauma,” argues that a “traumatic event” is not necessarily a triggering factor for “trauma,” and that an “event” is far from the subjective experience of it. The same is true of the idea of “social support” for the distressed and traumatized. The availability of and contact with what is defined as social support might even produce negative outcomes. When, where, and how support brings desired results is subject to context and individual meaning-making efforts (Patterson 2003). The toolkit approach, while situating its analysis most in the cultural pool or repertoire as a toolbox for strategic action, omits the role of motivation and internalization. However, studies have found that motivations and internalization do play role, although not directly and solely contributing to behaviors (D’Andrade, 1995; Vaisey, 2010).

**Emotional Labor and Emotion Management as Cognitive Processes—The Desired State of Mind**

Here, I bring the scholarship on emotional labor, which concerns the manipulation of emotion for wage and money, as well as the scholarship on emotion management, which concerns the control of emotion for other purposes (Pugliesi 1999), to contribute to the debate on culture and cognition in action, for four reasons. First, in the emotional labor and emotional management literature, cognition—the perception of work (Palmer 1983; Sanders 2004a, 2004b; Stenross and Kleinman 1989), the definition of self (Bulan et al. 1997, Erickson and Ritter 2001, Paules 1991), the evaluation of worth and expertise
(Cahill 1999; England 1992, 2005; George 2008; Kilbourne et al. 1994; Pierce 1996; Smith and Kleinman 1989), the interpretation of social relations and interactions (Leidner 1993; Stenross and Kleinman 1989) and so forth—is the product of intentional, deliberate human control, management and socialization. Such control, management and socialization are conscious actions towards a socially, organizationally and/or individually desired state of mind, which not only apparently affects individuals’ psychological well-being (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002; Erickson and Ritter 2001; Morris and Feldman 1997; Pugliesi 1999), but also shapes social interactions and relations among actors. For example, Lois (2001) shows how the emotion work by managers of a search and rescue group was accomplished through the redefinition of selves, norms, roles and various situations, and how the social relationship between the volunteers and families of victims was shaped during the process contingent on the search results. Lopez (2006) shows that employers can self-consciously foster an environment for “emotional honesty” in the workplace. Through “organized emotional care” employers can help trusting relationships take form naturally, instead of instituting them as job expectations. In a word, actions toward a desired state of mind carry both individual and structural level consequences and implications.

Second, the research on emotional labor and emotion management allows and accounts for inconsistency and contradiction between mind and speech, and between ideas and actions, viewing it as a result of the tension between individuals and their work requirements and expectations in the context of status inequality and market economy (Hochschild 1983; Morris and Feldman 1997; Wharton 1993; Zapf and Holz 2006). The “desired state of mind” prescribed by the job on the part of the workers is often in conflict
with workers’ own expectation and experience on the job, and the “desired state of mind” the job anticipates the workers to create in their customers demands workers’ socialization during training as well as painstaking labor at the moment of service encounter (Dijk and Brown 2006; Hochschild 1983; Glomb and Tews 2004; Sherman 2007; Sutton 1991).

Simply put, from the perspective of emotional labor and emotion work, the inconsistency between behaviors and ideas comes from the fact that paid jobs involve consciously creating a mindset of the workers that better positions them as good service providers for their customers regardless of what takes place in their own mind. Consequently, workers experience psychological dissonance and burnout (Dijk and Brown 2006; Hochschild 1983; Morris and Feldman 1996; Schaible and Gecas 2010).

Third, related to the previous point, emotional labor and emotion work literature places the “desired state of mind” in conversation with the broader context of inequality, viewing it as simultaneously a cause and consequence of status disparity. A plethora of research has shown how women, racial minorities and lower-class members are disproportionately more likely to be recruited to perform emotional labor in service sector who are perceived as better fit for jobs that require agreeability and deference, and over-representation on such positions reinforce their status in the social spectrum (Hochschild 1983; Kang 2003; Macdonald and Merrill; Macdonald and Sirianni). The psychological stress and the subsequent emotional management methods of such jobs are also unequally distributed across status groups as some have access to what is called the “status shield” (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 2009) that comes from authority and a higher structural position, which not only eases the process of emotion management and recovery after work, but also alleviates the psychological stress carrying out emotional labor in the first place.
Last but not the least, the dimensionality of emotional labor and emotion work makes it possible to examine both self-oriented and other-oriented shaping of cognition. The dimensionality is manifest in the dual-directionality of emotional labor and emotion work—inward and outward, or self-focused and other-focused, as well as in the complexity of emotional labor and emotion management’s various facets that might have different impacts on actors (Pugliesi 1999; Wharton 2009). This enables the investigation of both the organizationally and socially patterned actions towards “the desired state of mind” within individuals, and the inter-subjective meaning-making space between individuals where some actors make intentional and organized efforts to impact others’ perceptions and feelings, such as employers’ control and socialization of workers’ mentality (Lopez 2006; Sherman 2008), workers’ management of their clients’ perceptions and emotions (Hochschild 1983; Flowers 1998, Lois 2001), as well as workers’ reciprocal management among themselves (Lively 2000).

In sum, in their attempt to break away from the motivation-practice chain, both toolkit and cognitive approaches fall short due to their thin theorizing of agency, the resulted view of behavioral and discursive inconsistency as evidence of the weakness of the overall theory and of the necessity to look elsewhere than individuals’ conscious mind or active bodies. Through scholarship on emotional labor and emotion work, I point out that cognition can be a desired output of purposeful actions fashioned by organizational and structural forces, that inconsistency and contradiction between ideas and behaviors demonstrates the conflicting demands on the desired state of mind, and that such conflicts have structural roots and bear both individual and supra-individual level fruits. In the following section, I will first show how the characteristics of the work of 911 emergency
communication—the need to bridge three gaps to decide on the nature of the reported incidents—requires dispatchers’ high level of emotional involvement, empathetic interpretation and management of callers’ emotions. This provides the context and reasons behind dispatcher’s use of emotion as expertise and basis for occupational intuition, as well as their need for outlet of their stress. Then I show how as a result of the job characteristics, the constantly difficult and inherently conflicted “controlled empathy” is the organizationally and socially demanded “desired state of mind” for the dispatcher in this context, and that the ways in which it is achieved or attempted by them—distancing and bad humor—are deeply influenced by their status within the broader structure of law enforcement and criminal justice system.

Findings

The Characteristics of the Work Process of 911 Dispatch

Making the connection between what callers say and its corresponding code in CAD is the key part of the work of 911 dispatchers’. They work to bridge the laymen’s world and categories in bureaucratic system in three ways. First, they try to fill the gap between folk languages and bureaucratic codes. Secondly, through the report of the incident they strive to capture the real situation of the incident. Thirdly, they seek to strike a balance between the complexity of the situation and the simplicity of official coding system. Bridging these gaps, they utilize their emotion-based occupational intuition to capture the nature of the reported situations and make life-and-death coding decisions.

There is a gap between callers’ lexicon and official codes in the system. Average citizens describe their situations in their own, everyday words, and it is dispatchers’ job to make
association between folk and bureaucratic languages, between a sequence of details and one official category. This gap is a result of the simple fact that folk and bureaucratic worlds of representation are built on different ways of expression. In fact, the difference between lay and official language is so great that it is suspicious when a caller uses words in the system. Sally played a call in the classroom during the in-house training about how “there is an officer assaulted” and she told the trainees that because the dispatcher did not pay attention to the caller’s unusual familiarity with the language in the system, he failed to prevent the bank robbery. She said: “That's weird. Because laymen say ‘a cop gets his ass knocked off or ‘somebody’s beating up a cop’. ‘Assault’ is a police jargon. So the cops went to help their colleague and it was a decoy, a diversion. The police went there, and a bank at Northville³ was robbed. And they got away for a while.” Therefore, Sally told the trainees, the first step towards capturing the nature of incident is to attend to the differences between the languages used by the callers and by workers in emergency response system. Dispatchers usually bridge this gap in two ways. First they communicate the category directly to the callers if the most possible code is straightforward: “Is it a seizure?” “Are you reporting a break-in?” or “Is there an electric fire?” The second way is to capture and confirm “boundary details”—the key information that distinguishes one possible category from another. Victor Woolf, the supervisor of group 5 summarized:

Most of the studying revolves around the codes, getting familiar with the options and translating down to the codes. For instance, if you are sitting in Green Park and somebody took your cellphone next to you on the bench, it is a larceny; and if he is running down the street, it is larceny in progress; if you say, ‘oh I just noticed it and it might happen have 20 minutes ago’, it is a past larceny; if you are listening to music on your iPod and someone took it from your hand, it is robbery. You can’t always go by what they tell you. People present information in strange ways, so you have to go extra steps to clarify what’s going on. “A guy in my store just won’t leave.” You take it at
face value, it’s unwanted person. Then “oh, he’s throwing things around.” It’s disturbance. They often don’t leave the most important thing, you gotta pry it out of them. The people that can’t make it, nine out of ten are those who don’t have the skill of it, not asking the right questions, or just completely miscode. They have all the information they need, they just don’t get it right…You have to have the confidence to make some intelligent jumps. You know, being able to extrapolate.

What did Victor mean when he said, “you take it at face value, it’s unwanted person”? Not only is there a gap between laymen’s words and bureaucratic categories, there is also remarkable variance between the report of the incident and the nature of said incident. So surface translation between folk description and codes in the system is only the first step of the job. Dispatchers also need to see through the narratives and bridge the gap between the report of a situation and the nature of the situation itself hidden on purpose or by accident. This is where most of the “intelligent jumps” are made. What callers see as the most relevant or urgent details oftentimes differ from the dispatchers; callers’ reactions during the call might make it difficult to convey key information needed for categorization, and they might even hide or distort the story for various reasons. For example, multiple dispatchers mentioned one call to me where the caller said someone just passed by her window. The call-taker started to ask whether it was a break-in. The caller denied and said that person was just “passing by”. Just when the call-taker was about to code it as a “suspicious person”, the caller added “ah…we are also on the 10th floor”, then the caller-taker realized she was reporting a suicide. My own experience attests to this second gap as well. As the only layman on the floor without any training or experience to make “intelligent jumps”, I pick up very different clues from the dispatchers, although we are listening to the same calls at the same time. I heard “He was just driving around. There’s
many people in the car…He just looks around. I saw him six times with six different people” and they shouted out “it’s a drug deal!” I heard “an accidental mix of ammonia and Clorox when I was cleaning the house” but they said, “they just messed up something and didn’t want to tell me about it…You clean the house with all the windows and doors shut? Ammonia and Clorox poisoned”, he sniffed, “they were so fucked with heroin.”

Below is a call that for the first twenty seconds sounded like a serious organized crime. Dispatcher Luz Lopez took it. During the call, she asked key questions regarding the group size, clothing and masks, all of which provided key information that helped to clarify whether the reported situation was a serious criminal act. Doing so, she bridged the gap between the caller’s report of the incident—which at first made it sound like a high-priority situation—and the bureaucratic definition of the actual situation.

Caller: Someone’s looking for a tenant! They are looking for a tenant! And the security wants him to leave. They’re in the lobby.
Luz: How many? How many people are there?
Caller: 10-15 people.
Luz: 10-15 people are looking for a tenant?
Caller: Yes, and they’re dressed in a funny way.
Luz: When you say they’re dressed in a funny way, what do you mean? I need to translate everything you say to the officer.
Caller: They’re wearing masks.
Luz (sounds alert and raises her voice): Masks? What kind of masks?
Caller: Flowers, bees! Honey bee bees? You know?
Luz (sounds relieved): So they’re wearing costumes and they dress like bees?
Caller: Yes. They’re activists.
Luz: So it’s a demonstration.
Caller: Yes, they’re having a demonstration. I don’t want them in my building. It’s illegal.

After the call, Luz shrugged to her trainee Kim Allston: “They could have just said there are ten to fifteen people dressed like bees and they’re having a demonstration.”
The ambiguous nature of some situations makes incident comprehension and coding process even more difficult. In such cases, dispatchers either resort to the “residuals” of the codes, such as “miscellaneous” and “unknown”, or balance between a few possible options. This is to cross the third gap, which rests between the complexity of social life itself and the simplicity of bureaucratic representation schemes. Below is part of the conversation of a medical emergency call. The caller is a registered nurse and his description of the patient provided all the useful information needed, he was calm, cooperative and his delivery succinct and clear, but at the end dispatcher Tom Brady had a hard time assigning a code to it. He made efforts to strike a balance between two possible codes with different levels of severity, finally making a link between an ambiguous incident and an actionable category in the system by reaching a middle ground.

Caller: I am a visiting nurse, I came to visit my patient. She started complaining about gastritis but escalated to a psychiatric crisis, having a pretty bad anxiety right now.
Tom: Well it’s an anxiety attack?
Caller: Well, yeah, she has a history of hurting herself so I can’t leave her alone.
Tom: Gotcha. Are you with her right now?
Caller: Yes I am.
Tom: Is she breathing?
Caller: She’s breathing. Pulse elevated about 110 to 120.
Tom: Is she violent?
Caller: No.
Tom: Does she have a weapon?
Caller: Yeah, walker.
Tom: Her walker?
Caller: That’s about it.
Tom: Is it a suicide attempt?
Caller: No, but she had suicide attempt in the past, that’s why I can’t leave her.
Tom: Is she thinking about committing suicide?
Caller: No, but when she gets anxious she starts to go toward suicide ideation.
Tom: So she’s not thinking about it.
Caller: No, no, but I’ve known her for a year now this is what she’s gonna
I looked at CAD’s display and saw that the incident description read, “Unknown status/other codes not applicable (Weapons)” So after Tom finished up the call I asked him about the “unknown” status. He told me that there is no available code that corresponds to that exact situation and he had to find a middle ground between two closest matches:

Of all the categories, no one fits, because she has a weapon, but [is] not threatening suicide. If she doesn’t have a weapon—which is the walker, she might use it to hit herself—I will go with PSYCH/SUICID A2 (SUICIDAL NO THREAT); but the caller explicitly said there is a weapon; if she has threatened, I will go with PSYCH/SUICD B3 (THREATENING SUICIDE). And the first one is level 3 priority; the second latter one is level 1 priority. Unknown status is level 2 priority. It just makes sense to choose something in between.

Because of the difference between laymen and bureaucratic languages, the disparity between the report and the nature of the situation, as well as the complexity and ambiguity of the incidents, dispatchers pay attention to every clue, making fast and accurate connections between the call and the codes in the system. During this process, they experience the callers’ situation vicariously and make the fullest use of the information coming from the other side of the line, as I will further demonstrate below.

Emotion as Expertise and Controlled Empathy as the Desired State of Mind

To bridge the three gaps and maintain the correspondence between incidents and codes in CAD, dispatchers utilize trained feelings and emotionally charged experiences. Controlled empathy is the desired state of mind—it plays its role in two ways: first, it affects the quality of communication over the phone, which is important for the dispatchers to sustain the callers’ cooperation and obtain helpful details to identify the problem. Second, it builds connections between dispatchers and callers in a timely fashion, which allow dispatchers
access to callers’ feelings and capture the nature of the reported incidents. It is a state that
dispatchers acquire through occupational socialization, management of their perception of
calls and callers, I need to point out that “controlled empathy” is simultaneously an
emotional and cognitive state—it not only has to do with the desired and displayed
emotions in the context of 911 communication, but also the dispatchers’ perceptions of the
callers in relation to themselves, their interpretation of their needs and intensions, as well
as their perceptions of their role as dispatchers.

In the first training sessions, training officers emphasized two things: dispatchers need to
depend on their own feelings during the job and that they shouldn’t internalize these feelings.
Controlled empathy plays a key role in making fast and accurate coding decisions, while
its impacts outside of the work should be minimized. The immediate and emotional
connection established between dispatchers and callers secures both the speed and quality
of the work. Trainee Crystal Bryan asked supervisor Walter Jones: “During in-progress
calls, people do hang up, do you call back?” Walter said: “We call back.” Crystal followed
up:” When I call back, nothing’s happening but seems like there’s something fishy...”

Walter interrupted her:

It’s your decision, your perception. So it’s your feelings. You can come to
me, ‘Walter, can you hear that call?’ You wait for a minute, think for a
minute, come talk to me for a minute, and I listen to the call for a minute,
it’s 4 minutes, or 5 minutes. It’s your perception. You think outside of the
box, think ahead of what they think. There’s a lot of tasks, a lot of stress out
there, as long as you don’t take it home. I don’t take it home much.

Indeed, dispatchers need to simultaneously engage and disengage with callers’ emotions,
balancing between empathy and detachment, connection and control. It is both other-
focused and self-focused. Dispatchers try to influence the callers’ mind as well as their
own; at the same time, they vicariously experience callers’ emotional state that provides
unspoken yet important information regarding the nature of the situation being reported as the basis for their coding decisions. This emotion-based occupational intuition and expertise is important to their daily call-taking and coding practices.

During in-house training Kim was criticized by CTO Luz Lopez for “not knowing how to get the answers” in response to a medical call. The caller was panting in pain and trying to describe the problem in her spine in a weak, frightened voice. Since protocols of medical calls require the dispatchers to ask a few standard questions to diagnose the caller, Kim handled the call in a dispassionate way—only control, little empathy. She said: “Do you have difficulty breathing? Are you clammy, having cold sweats? OK the paramedics are on their way… Just lie in the most comfortable position till they come.”

After Kim hung up Luz said: “She’s in excruciating pain, and you said ‘just lie in the most comfortable position’”—she mimicked Kim in a cold, mechanic tone—“If I were her, I would be pissed. Just be more sympathetic: ‘Do you have problem breathing? How’s your breathing?’” Kim defended sheepishly: “I thought you were supposed to say the words.” Luz insisted: “You say the words. But once you’ve said the words, you can add words to get the answers you are looking for.” This is an episode that shows how newcomers are socialized into controlled empathy. Control and empathy are mutually reinforcing. Control keeps the callers communicative and informative so there is better chance to understand the emergency situation; empathy comforts the callers and makes them more calm and cooperative. Both secure the timeliness, effectiveness and quality of emergency communication and facilitate the coding process. It also marks the perceived social distance that dispatchers maintain in relation to their callers.
Luz practiced what she preached. She demonstrated her skill in controlled empathy responding to an intense suicide call. Luz tried to dissuade a caller from suicide by redefining her role in relation to the caller—not just someone from whom the caller sought for much-needed help, but a mother, a mother who shares the caller’s mother’s family name, as well as a colleague of the caller’s childhood neighbor, all of which greatly narrowed the social distance between them. At the same time, she reaffirmed the caller’s importance to his mother—not a “disappointment”, but the only possible help, and a strong person. The caller was walking on the street towards a river. He said he wanted to kill himself and was not being cooperative She kept him on the phone as long as she could, until the officers found him.

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Luz: What’s your name?
Caller: Blaine.
Luz: Alright, Blaine.
Caller: (Sobbing) These…these thoughts are coming back…I just….
Luz: I understand. Why don’t I get you some help and they can get you to a hospital and help you…How old are you?
Caller: I’m, I’m tired, I’m tired! I’m going crazy! Oh, oh.
Luz: Blaine, just stay on the phone with me, I’m gonna send you some help alright? Don’t hang up, alright, Blaine?
Caller: It’s done… it’s done. My mother…I love her. (Sobbing). Bye, bye, bye! Bye!
Luz: Blaine!
Caller: Yeah, nice talking to you. Tell my mother…
Luz: What's your mother’s name?
Caller: My mother’s name is Luz Stone. Tell her I called her. Tell her…well, you got the number.
Luz: My name is Luz too. Is her last name Stone?
Caller: Yeah.
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Caller: (Groaning) No. It's no matter. Nobody cares.
Luz: I do. That’s why you called me.
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Luz: Do you live in Parkton, Blaine?
Caller: Yes.
Luz: Where do you live?
Luz: I know some people who grew up on Washington Ave.
Caller: Lisa Keaton.
Luz: Yeah.
Caller: Yeah. I've known her for years.
Luz: I know her granddaughter; she worked for me. You know the grandparents? The father?
Caller: Yeah?
Luz: Yeah, they've been there for a while. The daughter, she worked with us. She was a 911 dispatcher… Blaine, what are you wearing?
Caller: Um?
Luz: What type of clothing are you wearing tonight?
Caller: No, no, no. Why don't you call my mother and tell her?
Luz: You think I want to call your mother and tell her that kind of thing? Nobody's mother wants to hear that. Don't do that to your mother. Don't do that to your mother. Keep talking about your mother. You wouldn't wanna do that to your mother, would you?
Caller: No, I don't wanna do that, but…
Luz: Blaine, I'm a mother. I don't ever wanna get that phone call. Don't do that to your mother.
(Caller is bawling)
Luz: You're strong enough to call me on the phone to get some help. Just stay on the phone with me, let me get some help to you. You called for me to help you.
Caller: I hate...thoughts...I’m going through these thoughts again! No!
Luz: There are people who can help you with that kind of thoughts, Blaine, that's why you called me. And I wanna help you, but you have to let me help you. I don't want to make that call to your mother. It's gonna break her heart.
Caller: I know.
Luz: It's gonna break her heart. Don't do that to her. Blaine, what are you wearing?
Caller: I'm walking towards the river.
Luz: Don't walk towards the river. You don't wanna go near there. Just stay where you are. I'm gonna send you some help.
Caller: I can't do this. Done.
Luz: Blaine, your mother. You don't want any one to call her on the phone, or to knock on her door and say something happened to her son. It will kill me if someone says something happened to one of my kids. Don't do that.
Caller: I'm tired. I'm tired.
Luz: I'm gonna send you somewhere to get some help, where you won't
have these feelings any more. Let me help you. Your mother’s gonna be so proud that you went and got help. I have an ambulance that’s looking for you. I have officers looking for you.

Caller: I’m done. I’m done. Thank you.

Luz: Blaine. Where does your mother live?

Caller: She’s in Lakeville.

Luz: She’s in Lakeville? You don’t want anybody to have to give her that news.

Caller: No, no.

Luz: You love your mother right?

Caller: Yes. I love her.

Luz: Do you want to break her heart?

Caller: No.

Luz: No, you don’t want to break her heart. You don’t. Why don’t you let me give you some help?

Caller: No… she’s better off without me!

Luz: Absolutely not! I’m a mother. There’s NO WAY I’m better off without any one of my kids. That’s awful for you to say. No mother is better off without any of their kids.

Caller: Why? Why, I’m fucking hating this.

Luz: Where are you now? Are you on Huntington Street?

Caller: Don’t worry about it. Alright.

Luz: I am worried about it! I don’t want to be the one to have to call your mother.

Caller: Alright. All you have to do is call my mother… Thank you, thank you.

Luz: Blaine? Blaine! Don’t hang up on me. Blaine, you have any other brothers and sisters?

Caller: Yeah, I got three sisters that are useless.

Luz: Exactly. Why would do you do that to your mother? She has one boy?

Caller: Yeah. I take care of her at home.

Luz: Exactly. Who’s gonna take care of her when you’re gone? Who’s gonna take care of her?

Caller: I don’t know. I don’t know.

Luz: How could you do that? If the other ones are useless and you’re the only one that takes care of her, what’s gonna happen to your mother?

Caller: I don’t know. No.

Luz: You gotta think about your mother. I know you’re having a hard time thinking about yourself but I want you to start thinking about your mother. Where are you right now?

Caller: I’m walking down towards the river.

Luz: Are you walking over towards Huntington Street?

Caller: No. No.

Luz: Or towards Central Ave?

Caller: No. Yes. Yes.
Luz: You are on Central Ave? What are you wearing?  
[Officers are shouting aloud, audible from caller’s cellphone still connected to Luz’s 911 line: “We got him! Hang up. We got him”]

Luz successfully prevented a suicide, and she probably saved the caller’s life. She simultaneously controlled and comforted the caller. She highlighted her role as a mother and a childhood connection, as well as the caller’s role as the only son who can take care of his mother. By verbalizing to the caller that his suicide would be a situation where his mother would be left alone, she carefully kept the caller engaged in the conversation, dissuaded him from suicide and captured important information from questions that he was not willing to respond to.

Callers’ emotions, such as fear, anxiety and helplessness, not only affect the quality and outcome of the citizen-dispatcher interactions, but they themselves provide key information that helps dispatchers make accurate assessment of the situation, and it is impossible without dispatchers’ being measuredly empathetic with callers. Through that connection with callers’ emotions, call-takers vicariously experience and visualize the nature of the incidents, in order to make the link made between calls and codes—the key link which sometimes carries life-and-death consequences. Supervisor Victor Woolf summarized:

A lot of experiences, a lot of comes back to, you know, you just listen if somebody says he’s fine, but the background sounds like a war zone. You know, what you are picking upon. Being smart to pick up on it when somebody’s giving you the information without sounding like they are giving you the information. And sometimes they can only answer yes/no questions. “Can you speak freely?” They are like “No.” And I was like “you need police right?” “Yes!”

James Gordon, worked with a trainee who once failed to associate the caller’s report with a deadly weapon. A driver called and said he was threatened at a parking lot then locked
himself in the bathroom of 7-11. While James could sense caller’s intense fear through the call, his trainee couldn’t: “She missed lots of stuff. She missed some key information. That’s the biggest thing for her. One time there’s a driver of a delivery company in front of a 7-11. 30 seconds into the call it was obvious there was a gun…. At the parking lot, somebody threatened to shoot someone, but she never made the connection between that, and a gun.” “How could you tell there was?” I asked. “Voice, the way they word it. You need to make the decisions. When a driver calls and says ‘I locked myself in a bathroom of 7-11,’ you know something’s wrong.” To associate the truck driver’s locking himself in the bathroom with fear, as well as probable use of weapons is an “intelligent” jump that supervisor Victor Woolf emphasized, it is also an motional one: to make such associations, dispatchers must be emotionally connected to caller’s feelings; when callers are too nervous, afraid or anxious to communicate their situations to the call-takers, it is in itself an important clue. Therefore, dispatchers are always alert, mining through the calls for traces of emotions that reveal the actual situations that callers are in—whether it’s a suicide attempt, a medical emergency, a threat with a weapon, or just an accidental misdial.

I discovered that dispatcher Jimmy Cooper always handles hang-up calls and “butt-dials” with extra caution. One time he answered a call from a man claiming that there was no emergency at all:

Jimmy: 911 this line is recorded what’s the exact location of your emergency?
Caller: It’s not an emergency, I hit it by accident.
Jimmy: Alright, so you are able to speak freely?
Caller: Pardon sir?
Jimmy: You are able to speak freely?
Caller: Yes, sir, I can speak freely. Yeah, yeah, there is no…no emergency, I just hit it by accident, it was a mistake. But I stayed on the line just so you guys don’t get nervous.
Jimmy: OK, thank you.
Caller: All right, thank you sir.
Jimmy: Bye bye.

Jimmy hung up, made a dispatch and said: “He said he hit it by accident. I’m still gonna send someone.”

Jimmy has thirteen years of experience on the job. Eating his pastrami in the kitchen, he explained why he is sensitive to hang-up calls. He can feel it when someone needs help but cannot speak freely. His measured yet compassionate approach comes partly from his memory of one call he took before, and partly from his personal experience.

One time I had a hang-up, I called back, she said, “everything’s fine” but for some reason, maybe her tone, maybe she stayed a bit longer on the line, I felt something’s wrong. And when the police officers went in, I heard them saying “God! Who did this to you?!” Turns out there had been many hang-up calls from there. She had an abusive boyfriend and she told me that it’s her fault. Or she shouldn’t have said or done something. My three sisters have all been in abusive relationships, and they blame themselves. So I know how it’s like: when you continue to be in an abusive relationship and you blame yourself for that.

Jimmy’s and James’ stories show how emotional investment in the coding process has reconstituted their expertise and informed their dispatch decisions. In response to the calls, they rely on their empathetic connection with the callers as key to accurate judgment of the situations and coding of the incidents. Controlled empathy as both an emotional and cognitive state is demanded in the work context that 911 dispatchers inhabit. It summarizes the emotion-based decision-making process that characterizes the work of 911 dispatch: it helps call takers insure the quality of the conversations, keep both parties on the line in effective communication, and collect information otherwise difficult to solicit. It assists dispatchers make coding decisions and translate situation described by average citizens into categories in the bureaucratic system that determine the official response to the citizens. It also sustains the connection between the codes already assigned and incidents.
in progress. Controlled empathy is how dispatchers manage callers’ emotions as well as
their own. It is the key link between the report of the incidents and the coding decisions
made. It is the “desired state of mind” in the context of emergency communication.

Bridging the three gaps between the situations on the ground and bureaucratic
representation, dispatchers experience the callers’ situations with their own emotions—
they visualize it and feel it, and it is where their emotion-based occupational intuition and
experience comes from. Controlled empathy heightens dispatchers’ stress and
psychological dissonance of the dispatchers, which is coped through emotional distancing
and bad humor. Their way of acting towards this desired state of mind is affected by their
status in the broader organizational structure, to which I now turn.

“Fruitcakes” and “Operators”: Disparity, Lack of Outlet and Status Shield

Compared to firefighters and police officers, 911 dispatchers have a lower status on
multiple levels. They are not in the same retirement group with fire or police (which makes
them retire five years later than police and fire); unlike police officers and firefighters, they
do not have their own union, but are grouped with other public workers. They are also
mostly civilians while people in fire and police are sworn officers. In sum, they are not
recognized by their peers, their organizations, the city and the state—as equals with those
who fight on the street, and their contribution as well as sacrifice is considered smaller and
less important than their front-line colleagues’. Therefore, while police officers and
firefighters benefit from organizational recognition and support to deal with stress and
trauma, dispatchers do not.
The emergency communication center has long been a less desirable workplace than police and fire. According to Sally: “There used to be many ‘fruitcakes’ in the dispatch. They put injured officers—police or firefighters—or those with drinking problems, or those who got in trouble on the street, in the dispatch. It’s a hiding place. There they got rid of ‘deadbeats’, if you will.” Some front-line law enforcement agents still treat dispatchers as people just answering phone calls and passing the information. “We always felt like second class citizens in a small environment. You know, cops can do no wrong, but we… in some major cities, there’re rough neighborhoods; you won’t say you are disrespected, but you never feel you are on equal grounds.” Dispatchers are shouted at over the radio, denied information and sometimes cooperation. James said:

The wacky ones, they’re cowboys. In the middle of the night, pull over, have eight kids in the car… might have guns with them. They need to tell me everything that they do…There’s one hard-core officer and I wanted to shake the life out of him. It was at night, he stopped three kids and there were two guns, didn’t tell me where he was.

Of course the lack of “equal” ground goes far beyond individual interactions and communication with front-line colleagues. Since 1960s, state legislators have been trying to push the state to move 911 dispatchers retirement group 1 to group 2—the same group that includes police, fire and other criminal justice employees. Legal documents show that in 1968 the governor objected to the bill to place dispatchers in the same retirement group with police and fire.

To the Honorable Senate and House of Representatives,

I am returning, herewith, without my approval, House Bill No. 395 entitled ‘An Act providing that fire and police signal operators and maintenance repairmen and licensed electricians in cities and towns be classified in Group 2 under the Retirement Law.’
I have been advised that fire and police signal operators…do not have positions as we’ve contemplated for special consideration on early retirement.

If we were to extend Group 2 under the Retirement Law to include these people, there is no doubt in my mind that there will be several other classes of employees…who have like positions, will also file legislation next year to be so classified.

The above-mentioned bill—the governor’s objections notwithstanding—was passed in July 1968 by the House of Representatives and the Senate. However, more than forty years later, there are still many towns and cities where dispatchers retire under Group 1. The fact sheet supporting the “Police, Fire and EMS Dispatcher’s Retirement Bill” from the state’s 911 department shows that, as of March 2006:

Unfortunately, many other police and fire dispatchers in other cities and towns...have not been recognized for Group 2 status because their local retirement boards have not yet ruled in their favor (or maybe they have not yet ruled on that matter at all)...Senate 1603 seeks to insure that all public safety dispatchers...throughout the state are classified as members of Group 2. The classification makes good public policy in that the majority of other Group 2 members are criminal justice employees; 911 dispatchers work in uniformed, 7-24, high-stress, fast-paced, critical roles central to the provision of emergency service in the state

Not only do fire and police provide better retirement benefits, they also have more powerful unions to support them. A few months into my fieldwork, I found that dispatcher Ben Schaffer stopped showing up to work and was replaced by someone else. Then I learned that he had left for a job in the fire department in a neighboring town. “Fire has a stronger union…we have the same union with public work.” Luz explained to me. “We are grouped with people that pick up trash. People have no idea what’s going on here,” Bree complained to me over lunch. For some dispatchers, emergency communication is a permanent job, but for other people like Ben and James—who took the police test last June to become an officer—it is a stepping-stone to fire or police department. In the next
section, I shall show how the status inequality described above influences the ways in which the dispatchers approach controlled empathy.

*Stress, the “Wall” and “The Wacko Sense of Humor”— Rugged Path Towards a Desired State of Mind*

As is shown above, controlled empathy is needed in order to understand the nature of the emergency situation and make a fast, accurate response that oftentimes carries life-and-death consequences, relating oneself vicariously to the situation reported through the call while trying not to be misled by them. Because the dispatchers have little “status shield”, they need to constantly rely on self-protection strategies to do their job well. Their emotional work involves both engaging and disengaging with the clients’ emotion. On a daily basis, dispatchers try to engage with emotions during the call and disengage afterwards, but emotions cannot be turned on and off like a switch, instead, they have enduring and profound impacts on dispatchers’ experience at work and well-being. I identify two emotional issues—relatable incidents and traumatic visualization as well as two emotion management strategies—distancing and bad humor. To deal with emotional problems they face daily, they try not to care, feel or remember—to control their empathy and the aftermath of empathetic connection. At the same time, to be good at what they do, they always care, feel and remember—it is how they develop their expertise and accumulate experience. The inherently conflicting demands from the job subjects them to constant battles between empathy and control, connection and detachment.

Dispatcher Bree Gallo took an in-progress call about a theft in a department store. Hearing the call, she was outraged, so she did everything possible to make sure the suspects were arrested. The caller had dropped her wallet in the fitting room; someone then
took it and spent her money. Bree identified the situation, updated the progress of the incident in CAD, instructed the caller to follow and describe the suspects, and kept the caller on the phone till the arrest was made. She looked extremely proud and excited after the call, then turned to her colleagues in the room and said:

That one really aggravated me. The girl’s buying clothes for her mother’s funeral and they stole her money and credit card! And the phone is breaking. She was in the dress room and it fell. It’s on video! I love it! It’s 12 minutes talking. They wouldn’t get her if I stopped talking to her, because she followed them to the garage. It’s absolutely horrendous. I would never do that to someone. The poor girl is buying clothes for her mother’s funeral! I want them arrested. I’m so mad. They went to McDonald’s and ate, with HER money! It’s holiday season and people don’t have much money. She said, “I can’t believe they just sit there and eat with my money!”

Bree was very compassionate with the caller and was determined to help because the incident was “absolutely horrendous” to her. Her reaction to that call is anything but unusual. Dispatchers are emotionally invested in their job: they think about their calls, talk about their calls and try to get over their calls. “Good” calls like Bree’s—in the sense that the problem reported is solved—make them excited, and bad ones can stay with them for months or even a lifetime.

One afternoon on our way to the fire department in his Kia Sorento, David told the trainees and me that, “Psychologically it beats on you.” Crystal asked him: “What’s the most challenging part of the job?” “Moving on from a bad call.” David said,

You go there and you blow it. You can’t sit there and sulk. Because next caller is not going to care about your last call. You learn the lessons and you move on. Don’t take shit home. I had nightmares the first four years I worked, because it’s a high-stress job. You’re with each other for so long, you grate on each other. Don’t get sucked in. Don’t go home and think what you should have done.

“You know, James is like what the marine calls a ‘high-charger,’” dispatcher David Edwards told me. He once took a fire call that he spent years to get over. For him, the best
way to deal with negative emotion is to distance himself from it. “He gets really excited about the calls—you walk it, you live it, you breathe it. He talks about his phone calls. “Those days are behind me now. I don’t talk about my phone calls. I can just go home and block it. Sometimes my wife has more information than me. Cuz she sees it on the news.” The call that David had been trying to forget was about a child who died in a fire. The victim was close in age to his own children. Such incidents are quite difficult for dispatchers to cope with. One morning during the break in the kitchen, Kim said: “Calls about kids…I just have a soft spot for them…I guess you just do what you can to help them.” Sally drew a circle in the air with her arms and said: “Yep, and you grew this wall” Kim nodded: “Yep, this wall.” Sally said: “And this wacko sense of humor.” James does look like a “high-charger”, in David’s words, He “breathes it, talks it and walks it.” After the units had been dispatched James sat back in his chair, kept silent for a minute, then he said in a somber and heavy voice: “I don’t think she’s gonna make it.” I was scared. Then he started recounting a call he took a few years ago about a man who committed suicide: “I got a phone call from his manager saying that he got an email on Monday...something like ‘I am dead when you see this. I had aspiration for this company and you laid me off.’ He put the email on a timer so it was sent three days after. He put himself in a bag with holes or something…and he had a sign at his door reading ‘dead body inside’ but nobody took it seriously because it was Halloween, you know. He was dead….so I have a bad feeling for this one… I think she hung herself.” I was surprised at the way he was talking about the girl’s situation—it was full of details as if he could see it—so I asked: “Why?” He explained with even more details, like he was talking to me from the girl’s room: “Just a feeling when I first heard the call. You know. Then they said
the music is playing and nobody is answering…maybe she took a bunch of anxiety pills, put herself into sleep, played her favorite music and hung herself in her room…I think she’s dead.” Such vivid and traumatic visualization causes emotional stress and is harmful to dispatchers’ psychological well-being. But it also helps them do their job well: it brings dispatchers to the scene with the victims and forges the most trying yet powerful emotional bond with them. For James, the bad call he visualized not only influenced the way he thought about other suicide calls, but the way he acted upon them. He once took over a suicide call from his trainee because he felt the way the caller felt, visualized what she saw and projected how her emotions were going to develop; he even skipped questions from the protocol to make sure that the caller would stay calm at least till his colleagues arrived on scene:

My trainee…the first call she answered was: “I got out today and my husband was hanging at the back porch. ” She (the trainee) was like. “Um…um.um.” I was like: “Hey!!! The paramedics are on the way. I want you to stay away from there.” I am not going to have this woman, who just found her husband dead, go up and play this heavy-duty role—to cut him down; she might already have lost control. Because he had been dead for a while, at that point he might have already lost his bladder and bowels, it would have been more traumatic to do. From my experiences from previous hangings…she was so calm, that I knew she was going to fall from that edge. There’s going to be an emotional outburst. So I was trying to delay it till the firefighters got there. It was the first call I had in my last training…part of the medical protocols is to ask: is he really dead? Can he move? But at that point, I didn’t want her to look at it. Cuz she’s going to freak out, to the point of hysterical.

Dispatchers visualize current callers’ situation through experiences from the past and develop intuitions of what it is progressing into. But the emotional toll from such visualization stays long after the call was answered and problem solved. It becomes both their expertise and nightmare. Jimmy Cooper told me that horrifying calls haunt him for years, because he cannot stop “seeing” them over and over again, although had never
actually seen anything. He took a murder call a few years ago and the victim’s body was kept in a duffle bag in a room with windows sealed with duct tapes. Sitting in the dispatch center, he learned everything from screaming conversations through the call. “But you visualize it, you know? You don’t know how bad it is. But you can never visualize what you can’t see.”

“26 years here…you kinda built up that strong protective shield,” supervisor Archie Arnstein told me during an uneventful evening shift, “People call here, the last thing they want is a dispatcher screaming…You gotta desensitize yourself from the situation. When somebody calls, their family is sick they are screaming and crying. If you can’t control them, what’s your good to them?” Hearing them talk so much about the “wall”, I came to appreciate their “wacko sense of humor”: their singing “shoplifter” to the melody of “Moon River,” their rapping “dinner, that’s for dinner” after a call reporting a fire with smoke. I laughed because a call-taker frustrated with a caller who refused information started singing “what’s your number” to the pop hit “Call Me Maybe,” Stevie Ray joked about me with other dispatchers in the room: “After a year here, people are cooked. See? She’s still giggling. I think she’s getting it.”

Because of the delicate dynamics resulting from status inequality with fire and police, dispatchers are either ignored by other agencies, or unwilling to participate when peer and organizational support is needed. For example, after traumatic incidents, police and fire will run a “critical incident relief” program so the law-enforcement agents can speak about their experience and feelings. Often dispatchers are not invited to such events. In cases when they are, they feel reluctant to join. In the classroom, James recommended the trainees to seek such support and admitted that most of them do not do so:
If you guys get stuck into the shitty calls—dead baby, failed fire, things like that—if you want to go to the post-incidence things…it’s been a pain in the ass for us to go to these. It’s definitely worth to get into the open. Being here…it really hits home and you can’t get away from it. The last thing you want to do is to get into a bar and get drunk…I you want to talk to somebody, just talk to me. Speak up, have a shell. Talk to me or text me.

When he was on the floor with other dispatchers, it was obvious that he and his colleagues on the floor had been doing exactly the opposite of what he had told the trainees: “I had a bad day, go home and have a beer and leave it behind me. You need to separate life from work. Neal has worked here for seven years. He always goes to this bar at Sunnydale.” Neal Nelson nodded and said: “You remember that what happened to the kids at Union Ave a few years ago? I handled that. Then I went to the bar he just mentioned, and a guy asked me, you heard what happened to the kids over Union? I was like, what happened? I don’t know…you know?”

For police officers or firefighters, between the relief program and the bar, there is a choice to speak to counselors who used to be or still are officers and know the job very well. But there is no such service provided to dispatchers. One day I suggested to dispatcher Stevie Ray that he should seek “professional help” if he is stressed and he responded: “Therapist? You think I need a therapist? I don’t…I’m fine. I go to a bar and get a drink.” Victor came over and explained: “The problem with going to a business, is you do a lot of explaining: what’s happening, and it turns generic: ‘oh I understand what happened’. If I talk to firefighters or cops, they understand what’s happening, but if you go a therapist, ‘oh, you work for 911? It must be stressful.’” Indeed, it is no secret that the emotional stress is high in the communication center but organizational support and recognition is quite still lacking compared to the resources and recognition that police and fire are provided for.
While distancing and bad humor have been found as coping mechanisms in other law-enforcement occupations (He, Zhao and Ren 2005; Long and Miller 1997; Sternross and Kleinman 1989) and not unique to 911 dispatch, they are noticeably both negative strategies—if bad humor is seen as a form of avoidance—that lead to even more distress, among a number of options available such as positive appraisal or problem-solving (Violenti 1993). This selection of negative strategies towards a desired state of mind prescribed by the context of 911 emergency communication is, as I have shown, attributable to their lack of status and organizational outlet.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

As we have seen, the work process of 911 emergency communication demands controlled empathy as the desired state of mind in this particular context. The structural features of this context—including the dispatchers’ low status within the criminal justice system, lack of recognition, and limited outlets for emotional stress—shape the particular ways in which dispatchers try to achieve controlled empathy and keep functioning on their job. From the angle of emotional labor and emotion work, this chapter contributes to the culture in action scholarship, as I have demonstrated how individuals within a certain organizational and social context intentionally act towards shaping their own cognition during the meaning-making processes embedded in the relationships between selves, others, and their environment, as influenced by broader stratifying forces.

I need to make two clarifying points. First is that although I pose my framework as an “alternative” theoretical formulation, I do not attempt to replace any of the extant frameworks that I reviewed, nor do I identify my approach as a “synthesis” of these two
distinct and respectively established schools of thoughts. Rather, I am trying to tackle the motivation-action link head-on. I specify a missing mechanism—in a dynamic, contested and probably circular causal loop—under which the inconsistency between data gathered from statements and behaviors reveals neither the non-existence of the connection between the two, nor the unawareness or the sub-consciousness of social actors, or the weakness in theoretical reasoning. Rather, this inconsistency suggests some telling characteristics of work, interactions, social relations and organizations, namely, the formative and strategic roles of emotion, imagination, and empathy in practical judgment. Secondly, I maintain that studying how social factors shape the ways in which individuals consciously evaluate and adjust their own habits of mind may help us to recover a fuller sense of the agency of social actors without the cost of losing sight of power and inequality.
Chapter 4  Contextualizing the Body: Three-Way Disembodiment, Foregrounding and Visualization

In this chapter I highlight what I call the “three-way-disembodiment” characteristic of 911 emergency communication. “Three-way disembodiment” refers to the fact that the three key groups of actors in 911 communication—callers, 911 personnel and front-line responders—are physically separated from one another. However, while the 911 dispatchers are physically isolated both from their coworkers and the callers, the 911 call communication process requires immediate and close attention to bodies and their configuration in time and space. How do physically separate individuals communicate and interpret distant bodily experiences as a basis for future actions? And how is this process implicated in time, space and the organizational context? To answer these question, in this chapter I draw on scholarship on embodiment and conversation analysis. These two bodies of scholarship—once brought together—can shed light on important social and cultural processes of communication and embodiment. I take an integrative approach to the body and seek to demonstrate the process through which bodily experiences are interpreted and transmitted across individuals and space, who are physically absent from one another and connected through technology to accomplish joint actions aimed at the protection and restoration of the physical body. In the context of cyber-communication in general, and 911 emergency response in particular, sensory information is partial and incomplete. This incompleteness notwithstanding, I attempt to demonstrate the ways in which bodily experiences are described and interpreted through its relation to time and space. I argue that this process is accomplished in two key steps—foregrounding and visualization. More importantly, the process is shaped by and shapes the power relations and status structure of the relevant organizational and cultural context.
In the following section, I first review scholarship on the body from the phenomenological tradition, making two critiques: first, while most research of the body and embodiment goes beyond the Cartesian body-mind dualism, it still tends to focus on the action aspect of the body and ignore the importance of verbal communication of “body techniques” (Mauss 1935, 1968) and bodily experiences (Crossley 1995b); second, the research that ties body and embodiment to broader social context tends to overlook the organizational context in which concrete speaking and living bodies possess different roles. I borrow from the insights in conversation analysis to connect verbal communication and organizational structure.

After laying out my theoretical framework, I move onto the analysis of my findings to detail the context of my case—featuring three-way disembodiment and the protection of bodily integrity of both the victims and front-line agents—to show how the remote bodily positioning that figures in incidents is communicated and understood through the processes of foregrounding and visualization. I show how such processes are mirrored and patterned by the organizational and cultural context in 911 emergency communication. Concluding remarks and discussions will be made at the end of the chapter.

**Speech, Roles and Organizations: The Body Re-contextualized**

Under the influence of Merleau-Ponty (1962), Schutz (1962) and Garfinkel (1967), contemporary research of body and embodiment following the phenomenological tradition views the body as an active agent of lived experience in everyday social situations with shared rules of action (Bendelow and Williams 1995; Crossley 1995b; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Watson 2000; Weinberg and Williams 2010). With a focus on everyday
social actions and active experience, key concepts such as “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984), “body techniques” (Mauss 1935, 1968) and “habitual body” (Merleau-Ponty, 2004 [1948]) have been developed to map the body and embodiment along spatial and temporal dimensions, among others. These traditions influence more recent scholarship on the topic. Some highlight how the cultivation, socialization and practice of the body is tied to specific makeups of time and space such as bullfighting, boxing and ballet dancing (Pink 2011; Shilling 1997; Wacquant 1992, 2004, 2014; Watson 2000); others pay close attention to the role of the body in interactive settings and emphasize the cultural context and symbolic interpretation of physical states and movements (Gardner and Gronfein 2006; Monaghan 2006; Stephens and Delamont 2006; Waskul and Vannini 2006). Still others see physical co-presence as a key component in the “interaction order” (Goffman 1983) and “interaction ritual chains” (Collins 2004) and provides crucial insights into micro level social actions as well as their translation into macro level patterns.

Despite scholars’ shared interests in bringing the body back to the center of sociological inquiry, and transcending the Cartesian body-mind explicit or implicit in contemporary scholarship, two key questions remain unresolved and contested. The first is the relationship between language and practice, between the “discursive” and the “active” aspects of the body. The second pertains to the contextualization of the body, namely, how actions and bodily experiences are connected to a broader social context tied not only to specific organizational roles, but also the broader institutional structure that individual bodies inhabit. I shall discuss each in turn.

In an effort to transcend the Cartesian body-mind dualism, scholars maintain that the “discursive” and the “active” are two sides of the same coin—that language is part of the
sense-making and meaning-making process of bodily experiences, while the body as the basis for action and practice is open to reflection and verbal representation (Bendelow and Williams 1995; Crossley 1995b; Frank 1991; Shilling 1997). However, research that focuses on everyday practices or experiences of the body still persistently highlights the “tacit,” “pre-discursive,” “non-discursive,” or “unspoken” rules or patterns of bodily experiences, which are deemed as irreducible to words. It is posited that these rules and patterns cannot be learned without actual physical participation (Brandt 2006; Pink 2011; Wacquant 2004, 2005, 2014, 2015). This “shift from discursive bias” has unfortunately resulted in the prioritizing of the “action” over “language” aspect of the body (Hunt and Miller 1997). While there are admittedly important rules of the body that are not captured by narrative, and researching such unstated rules brings key insights on the body and social life at large, I argue that more scholarly attention should be brought to the verbal representation of the body, namely, how bodily experiences are communicated and understood through exchanges in language.

Attention to the verbal representation of the body will allow us to bring the body back to sociological investigation without being subjected to the body-mind dualism implied in the action/language divide, for two primary reasons. First, building on Marcel Mauss’ “body techniques” (1935, 1968) tradition, studies that focus on the “unstated” nature of “body techniques”—defined as the way of using the human body—omit the fact that such information can and is transmitted and taken in through language. In fact, Mauss has specifically emphasized the importance of verbal communication to body techniques, stating that education is “dominant” in body techniques, and that “[this] above all is what distinguishes man from animals: the transmission of his techniques and very probably their
oral transmission.” (Mauss 1935, 1968: 73). Second, having to express and interpret bodily rules and experiences is part of everyday social life, because the body is both an agent and an object of language, “speaking and being spoken about” (Crossley, 1995b). The extent to and the ways by which the body is represented as language are patterned by cultural and institutional contexts. For example, Rendelow and Williams (1995) argue that a fuller understanding of individuals’ bodily experience of pain, needs to take into account the narratives and social patterning of the responses to pain, because the verbal account affects and becomes part of the experience and understanding of physical pain. Akrich and Pasveer (2004) investigate as an open question the presence of body in relation to self in women’s childbirth narratives, which they call embodiment contra disembodiment—when the body is present in the narrative versus when it is not. Similarly, a collective of works have examined the social contexts in which embodied and disembodied ways of producing and justifying knowledge obtain authority over another (Acord 2010; Fourcade 2010; Fridman 2010; Krause 2010; Marlor 2010; Whooley 2010).

Secondly, the body as it figures in current scholarship is yet to be fully contextualized and linked to specific organizational roles and environment. To be sure, concepts like “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984) and “body techniques” (Mauss 1935, 1968) connect body and embodiment to broader structural and cultural forces such as class positions and social norms, and research on body has focused on ascriptive characteristics such as race, gender and age with significant implications on social inequality (Pink 2011; Pitts-Taylor 2014; Wacquant 2004, 2005, 2014, 2015; Wainwright, Williams and Turner 2006). Yet much less attention is paid to the relationship between the body and the organizational context, and specifically, how body techniques and bodily experiences are shaped by structural
positions within certain organizational structure, with exceptions. For example, Stephens and Delamont (2006) in their analysis bodies in Capoeira—a Brazilian dance and martial art—distinguish the bodily skills and expressions of instructors and those of students. They demonstrate how the instructors vary in their performance and technique, and how the students vary in their adherence to clothing rules, their attitudes towards the class and their response to music. In short, rather than focusing on ascriptive bodily traits such as gender, race and age, they examine the body through the organizational roles of individuals in a given social context— instructors and students engaged in an organized class of a particular type of dance. Bendelow and Williams (1995) in their review of studies of pain, point out how studies of the differences by ethnicity and religion in the management of pain tend to be deterministic and reinforce stereotypes, while the research (Kotarba 1983) that looks at the occupational variation in the response to pain brings more insight to the cultural and structural factors that shape individuals’ interpretation and experience of pain.

In order to fill the gap between the body and the organizational context, we must examine within certain organizational contexts, whose bodies we are looking at, what their structural roles are, how their bodily state and experiences are shaped by their respective positions in a given organizational context, and how this process shapes the organization. At the same time, more efforts should be made to shed light on the verbal communication of body techniques and bodily experiences, and here, I bring in the scholarship on conversation analysis connecting speech, on the one hand, and institutional context, on the other.

Many a scholar has called attention to what is termed as “institutional talk” — talk oriented to institutional settings, which is viewed not only to mirror, but also to constitute
the structural characters of institutions—looking at the dynamics and nuances of speeches taking place in organizational settings distinct from every-day ordinary conversations, such as the newsrooms and hospitals (Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Have 1991; Heritage 2005; Greatbatch 1998; Maynard 1991; Sacks 1992). In such settings, conversations are patterned in relation to individuals’ institutional roles and identities with corresponding conversational devices, and individuals adjust and match their conversations according to the requirements in the context. In a series of research on emergency calls, Zimmerman and collaborators show that the patterns and form of conversations during emergency calls are distinct from ordinary daily conversations in their opening, sequencing and questioning (Boden and Zimmerman 1991; Zimmerman 1984; Whalen and Zimmerman 1987; Whalen, Zimmerman and Whalen 1988); more importantly, it is argued, that conversations during emergency calls are distinct compared to everyday conversations not only by what is otherwise present, but what is otherwise absent in ordinary settings (Boden and Zimmerman 1991). For example, Whalen and Zimmerman (1987) explain how the conversations during emergency calls are situated within the institutional context typical of such calls, and how through the reduction of sequential content of the openings characteristic of everyday phone conversations, both the identification and formulation of the emergency problems reported verbally are aligned with the organizational roles of the callers and the call-takers. In a word, “the structure of institutional talk minimally consists of the recurrent pattern of normatively oriented-to, situated identities along with the corresponding discourse identities and the conversational machinery through which the work allotted to participants assuming such identities is done.” (Boden and Zimmerman 1991,p 13).
Incorporating the literature on body and embodiment and conversation analysis, I develop a framework that enables the investigation of the relationship between the body and individuals’ roles in specific organizational contexts, and show how the remote bodily experiences are verbally communicated and inter-subjectively understood with no physical co-presence, and how this process mirrors and is influenced by the organizational and social context of my specific case. Here, I specify the context of my case of 911 emergency response as three-way disembodiment in which the all key groups of actors engaged in an emergency response—the callers/victims, the 911 call-takers and the front-line law-enforcement agents—are physically distant from one another. Within this context, I then ask how the absent body plays its role. How do individuals overcome physical distance and verbalize, communicate, and validate bodily experiences and situations inaccessible to those with whom they are connected remotely? Closing in on two key steps—foregrounding and visualization—I look in detail at how the process through which communications and actions are patterned by the organizational, structural and cultural forces surrounding the callers, the 911 employees and their front-line colleagues.

In what follows, I first lay out the features of three-way disembodiment and the protection of bodily integrity that figure in 911 calls. In this context, the body is both an object of observation, description and action, and a subject that feels, sees, acts and speaks. I show how information pertaining to the victims—identification, location, the nature of the incident, and so forth—is prioritized, highlighted, and communicated through spoken language during the call, and how the body of the caller is activated in this process to indicate the truthfulness of the callers’ claims, their involvement in the incident, and their willingness to cooperate. I also pay attention to how such information is solicited and
reinforced by the 911 call-takers on the other side of the line. Then I show how the 911 dispatchers supplement verbal messages with their visual imagination and translate them into embodied incident information that can be understood and acted upon by their front-line colleagues. Finally, I show how such communication is affected by the status structure, organizational setup and the cultural environment in which 911 communication takes place.

**Findings**

911 emergencies are emergencies that threaten the integrity of the body, whether it is exposed to danger, injuries, diseases or violence such as a fire, a stroke, a fall, or an armed robbery. Fire, medical, and police calls are reports whose purpose is to bring external help to restore or prevent human bodies from intentional or accidental harm. Three parties working together constitute a complete 911 incident response and interaction loop—the callers, the 911 staff and the fire, medical, and/or police agents dispatched to the incident. Usually fire, medical, and police units are stationed at their posts at different localities awaiting dispatch commands. Rarely are they present on scene or with the callers from the very outset of a 911 call and a dispatch command.

At the beginning of each call, then, all three are absent from one another. The aim is for the callers and the front-line agents to be physically brought together by the end of a successful response. The 911 employees, however, remain physically absent from both the callers and their front-line colleagues throughout the whole process. They are connected with the callers through the 911 line, and with the units to be dispatched through fire or police channels in the room, or the medical units indirectly through the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) system and a contracted ambulance company. Moreover, a call-taker
cannot simultaneously be a dispatcher for one given incident (although, as was mentioned
in Chapter 2, one can take turns in each shift, taking calls for fours and dispatching fire
units for another four, for example). The call-takers communicate with the callers on the
911 line, with dispatchers in the room through incident information and additional notes
typed into the CAD system and/or direct conversations, while the dispatchers speak to the
units on the street through corresponding channels. Because video/image 911 system and
body cameras are still yet to be widely implemented, verbal communication is predominant
in this setting. This three-way disembodiment—the 911 staff from the callers, from the
front-line responders, and the callers from the responders is the key characteristic of 911
emergency communication. In this context, the caller’s situation felt and expressed through
his or her body has to be transmitted across a number of absent individuals to form a
shared understanding of said situation, and take timely and responsible actions on it.

It may be helpful to specify what specific bodies we are looking at, and what their roles
are in an emergency situation. In first-party calls whose reporting persons are the same
with the victims, and in third-party ones whose callers are not victims themselves. In the
first case, the caller’s body is that of a subject who, upon experiencing an emergency
situation and interpreting it as sufficiently urgent for a 911 call, describes it verbally to 911
staff and seeks help from them. At the same time, the body is an object of the verbal
description of its surrounding situation as well as the response actions it seeks upon itself.
In the second case, the body of the caller is the apparent witness and reporter, while that of
the victim is the target of response and description, but it is also true that the third-party
caller, by being physically present at the site of the incident, and thus a reporting party in a
knowingly recorded and publicly retrievable conversation with the law-enforcement agents,
avails herself or himself of further inquiries, requests and identification—sometimes the caller has to stand by, wait for the units to come, and carefully follow further instructions, for example—thus becomes an object of language and management; the victim, despite often not being able to directly communicate with the 911 call-takers, still maintains the authority over his or her experience of the incident as a subject who carries information regarded as justifiable for a 911 response.

At the moment of the call, the integrity of the body is a joint objective informing the respective efforts of three physically separate parties organized around the reaction to the incident being reported: the callers on scene, the dispatchers working at the emergency communication center, and the front-line responders receiving information from the dispatchers. Calling 911 for help is a self or other-directed action upon the body, which is accomplished through the verbal communication among a group of physically absent actors as well as the interpretation of its experience within specific situations.

*Foregrounding—The Body In Conversation Across Space*

In this section, I demonstrate how the callers report an incident and talk about the emergency situation in question. I show how callers communicate the details of their situations through embodied messages, and how the call-takers solicit and prioritize such information to interpret and react to the reported incidents. I call this process “foregrounding.” I focus on how all the key information—the identification of the actors (who), the location of the incident (where) and the nature of the situation itself (what)—is understood and expressed through foregrounding of verbal messages. I also show how callers demonstrate the validity of their claims, their involvement in the case, and the
willingness of cooperation through the foregrounding of verbal messages of bodily experience. I then show how the dispatchers are sensitized and attentive to such information, extracting it and foregrounding it to make it transferrable to their frontline colleagues.

Reporting emergencies, the callers foreground the body in the conversation to convey key information. The callers describe their situation through their senses, and dispatchers interpret such information, and make coding decisions accordingly through their work of visualization. The callers’ verbal transmission is characterized by the pronounced presence of the body, and such communication is mutually accepted and understood by both the callers and the dispatchers. They do so in order to better describe their situation, indicate their role in said situation, and convince the 911 call-takers of their claims and judgments, because of their physical distance from the 911 call-takers who are talking to them. This physical distance brings the body to the forefront in verbal communication in both practical and symbolic ways—because they are not present with the call-takers, callers need to verbalize bodily experiences and details that would be otherwise apparent and accessible to physically-present individuals. Because callers are reporting to absent listeners who have the authority over official interpretation and actions, they need to refer to the victims as well as their own bodies when reporting to validate and justify their claims.

During the calls, instead of saying “there is a fire,” “there is a suspicious person,” “there is a man in danger,” or “I don’t want to get involved,” the callers tend to describe what they see and smell, as well as the place where they are, trying to vicariously bring dispatchers on the other side of the line to the bodily experience in their immediate
environment. Such information is encouraged, solicited and extracted by 911 call-takers who, through training, are particularly attentive and sensitive to it. The decoy example in Chapter 3 where the training supervisor played a call about “an officer is being assaulted” is a case in point. The trainees were taught to assess the validity of the callers’ claims through how they are verbalized—a disembodied report about “an assault” is believed to be much more suspicious and doubtful than a more straightforward delivery of the information that directly comes through the callers’ senses, such as “a cop gets his ass knocked off” or “somebody’s beating up a cop”. In the context of 911 communication, embodied messages are viewed as more specific, informative, and thus reliable to both parties connected through the emergency line.

For example, a caller reported: “I smell overcooked food, but I don’t see anything.” Dispatcher Tom Brady immediately associated it with fire and asked, “Are you outside? Why don’t you wait outside?” But not all calls are as straightforward, for example, that entailing a caller who noted that “Someone just passed by my window.” This is a call that had been mentioned and discussed quite a few times by the dispatchers. “What’s the problem? Did someone break in?” Dispatcher Jimmy Cooper asked. “No, just passing by.” Just as Jimmy was typing in the number and name of the caller, thinking it was possibly a trespassing, the caller added, “Umm, also, we are on the 10th floor.” In this case, the caller presented the incident in separate pieces of information and directly repeated what he saw without any interpretation. His distance from the ground level was key to understanding the “passing.” Piecing the messages together, Jimmy Cooper realized the caller was reporting a fatal incident.

In other cases, in order to locate the individuals in the reported incidents, the callers
provide identifying information that is implicitly embodied while the dispatchers
interrogate, verbalize, and transform such information to pass on to their front-line
colleagues. Below is a call from a concerned driver who passed by an individual appearing
to need medical assistance. The description of the situation is communicated through the
caller’s own bodily experience.

Caller: Umm, I just drove down River Street, River Street in Parkton, and..
Jimmy: Ok, what’s your cellphone number in case it gets disconnected.
Caller: (Phone number).
Jimmy: OK, what’s the problem? Tell me exactly what happened.
Caller: Umm, I drove by and there’s a dodge magnum with its back door
open, and there’s a dude, like, knocked out in the back. I kinda drove by
cuz I had a double pace. But as I go up the street…his legs’re just sticking
out. Either somebody hit the door or he just passed out in the backseat.
Jimmy: Are you with him now?
Caller: No, I kept going up the street and I didn’t realize it till I went up the
street…like…what I was looking at.
Jimmy: Ok, which way in River Street were you going?
Caller: Um, I was going toward West Ave.
Jimmy: Towards West Ave from River? About how far down there?
Caller: Just about halfway to a third…down the road.
Jimmy: Ok, hold on, stay on the line. Is there any chance you can go back
around and you know, and check what’s going on?
Caller: Um, I can, I can drive back to the river and come back on.
Jimmy: I’ll stay on the line with you, in the meantime I will start some help
there and maybe we can find out what’s going on. (Paused as the caller was
driving) What car is it?
Caller: I would say a dodge magnum, a Chrysler 300.
Jimmy: He slumped out of it?
Caller: Yeah, he’s like, his legs are sticking out and he’s like… all the
backseat with the rear door hanging open.
Jimmy: What color is the car?
Caller: Black.
Jimmy: He looked unconscious right? Yeah, I mean, his legs are sticking
out and he’s not moving. You know.
Caller: Yeah.
Jimmy: What’s your name sir?
Caller: David Johnson.
Jimmy: OK, just let me know when you get back around there. Can you tell
if it’s a black male, white male, or Hispanic male?
Caller: No, he just has sneakers and jeans on.
Jimmy: Is there West Ave?
Caller: No, I’m driving by Forest Ave.
Jimmy: I appreciate you going back. His legs still out?
Caller: No, the door is closed. I’m gonna talk to him.
Jimmy: All right, thank you.

On CAD, the incident was recorded as follows.

MAN DOWN D1 Priority 2
14:22 CALL-TKR Added by Update-and-Continue: More information to follow
14:22 CALL-TKR passerby going from river to Water Street a male slumped out of a dodge magnum
14:22 CALL-TKR color black
14:23 CALL-TKR clumped over with feet hanging out of rear door
14:23 CALL-TKR looked unconscious
14:23 CALL-TKR caller going back around
14:25 CALL-TKR he had sports sneakers and jeans on. Unknown race.

During this call, the incident was communicated through the description of a man’s body. “His legs are sticking out” was a detail in the conversation that both parties understood as an alarming sign that needed attention. In connection with its environment—an open car on a driveway, an incident was clearly depicted. Some calls are not as straightforward, and the callers are not sure which details are the most helpful ones. For instance, Supervisor Lisa Adams took a call and decided it was actually a drug deal, which didn’t seem quite apparent to the caller. Lisa and her colleagues on the floor made their judgment call through their understanding and experience while the caller was just repeating what he saw, felt and where he was: “He just drove off to Green Ave. I was waiting here for my food. He was just driving around. There’re many people in the car. He just looks around. There’re many people in the car. He just looks really weird…I saw him literally six times, with six different people. He just looks weird.”

In fact, not only do the callers describe the situation through embodied messages, they
also indicate their relevance and willingness to cooperate through the body. For example, below is a call from someone witnessing some suspicious behaviors. Like the drug-deal witness, he verbalized visual information through the 911 line; in addition, he refused identification.

Caller: I’m at 80 Lincoln Ave by the garage. There’s a guy that has been videotaping the skyline of Leighton for about two hours. And...in our...in this day and age you never know.
Dispatcher Sheila Escovedo: That’s true.
Caller: He is just...taking a lot of pictures of downtown Leighton. And I can see him cuz I’m above him in another building. I don’t know if somebody could just sort of drive by there and...
Sheila (interrupting): Sure, is he in the garage?
Caller: He’s on the roof of the garage. Top level, you know, 4th level of parking. And he’s got a white van and...
Sheila: So he’s on the top of the garage?
Caller: Top parking level, which is outdoors.
Sheila: Alright, white male you said? He’s got a white van.
Caller: He’s wearing a black hat and a black jacket.
Sheila: You said it’s a male, white male?
Caller: Umm, it’s hard to tell from this distance. But male, certainly, maybe Hispanic maybe white. I can’t tell from this distance. Anyway I just think somebody should go ahead and see what he’s doing, he’s been there for an hour and a half.
Sheila: Alright, what’s your name?
Caller: Tim Hall. And I’m just...in a neighboring building and I looked outside.
Sheila: All right, and what's your phone number?
Caller: ...huh...hum (hesitant, nervous giggles)
Sheila: Do you want to give it to me?
Caller: Neh, you don’t have to call me I’m assuming you’ll check it out, it’s fine. I mean, I...he’s not threatening me. He’s been there for an hour and a half taking pictures of Leighton skyline.
G: Ok, I’ll send somebody by, OK?
Caller: Thanks very much.

On CAD, the incident was recorded as follows.

Incident Type SP (suspicious person) Priority 2
19:05 CALL-TKR a male has been there for approx. 2 hrs videotaping the b skyline...the male is on the top of garage top outdoor parking level
19:06 INFO rp (reporting person) was calling from a neighboring bldg (building).
It is worth noting how the caller expressed his reluctance to cooperate or identify himself. And this detail was also recorded and transmitted through CAD system. In fact, in most of the 911 calls regarding homeless population that I listened to, the callers usually discontinue the conversation or refuse further information and cooperation by saying, “I’m just passing by” or “I’m just in my car,” to convince the dispatchers of their status as eyewitnesses while keeping themselves from actual interactions with the reported individuals.

While the callers provide information on the people, location and nature of the situation through such “body talks” with embodied cues foregrounded, the call-takers also need to foreground such information upon receipt to make it transferrable and informative across space as well as organizations to enable official response plans. Therefore, the strong presence of the body in the callers’ verbalization of their experience and situation is reinforced by the trained 911 professionals’ practice on the job.

“Did you see a gun? Did you see a gun? Yes or no? Did you see a gun? Yes or no? Did you see a gun?! Yes or no?!” Sadie Walker was loudly repeating the same question over and over to a caller reporting to be threatened by someone with “something in his hand”. Since she had hung up she had been laughing at herself for sounding so animated and said she would look terrible if someone else listened to the playback. But all she did was the same thing she had told her trainees to do during their class one year earlier: “The weapons always come first,” she instructed the trainees, “That’s the most important thing. Put that in first.” Indeed, a caller might see, hear and report many different things in one call, but the call-takers need to extract and prioritize the piece of information regarding something that poses the greatest and most urgent threat to the integrity of the caller’s body.
For incidents that do not involve weapons, the call-takers still need to control the conversation with the callers in a way that provides the information that helps the call-takers “see” the incident and involved parties most “clearly”. For any incident that involves motor vehicles, for example, there is a “CYMBOLS” rule for the call-takers to follow: color, year, make, body, license plate and the state. Call-takers need to ask the callers to look at or recall these visible identifying details of motor vehicles for a quick and accurate identification. And just as is in the abovementioned call taken by Sheila Escovedo, the call-takers also always ask standard identifying questions like “Male or female? White, black, or Hispanic? What is he/she wearing?” early in the conversation if any human being needs to be identified, whether in a police, fire or medical situation. The CAD notes from the call that Jimmy Cooper answered show the information that he typed down and passed onto the front-line responders after hearing what the caller had reported: black dodge magnum, male, sports sneakers and jean, unknown race. Descriptions of active suspects or criminals need more details, and ideally run “from the top to the bottom”—hair, face, build, age, gender, race, clothing, accessories and shoes, although such an order has to come from the call-takers’ side, because the callers usually do not describe people the same way the call-takers ask questions or take descriptions. “You will be surprised when you sit there,” Sadie Walker said to the trainees, “they’re like, ‘black shoes, orange pants, and white female.’” Besides these standard questions on demographics and outfit, other visible information also very helpful and should be paid attention to. “The difficult new skill of taking descriptions,” training supervisor Sally Grossman commented after playing a call for the trainees to practice taking descriptions, then she emphasized the importance of small visible details to suspect identification and asked: “What did you miss? What would
be cool if the officers know the glasses are wire-rimmed? Help them to identify.” The trainees nodded.

In this section, I have demonstrated how in the context of three-way disembodiment and the joint protection of bodily integrity, the body is both a subject of experience, action and language, but also an object of verbal description, professional management, and official response. I have shown how callers communicate the details of their situations through embodied messages, and how the call-takers solicit and highlight such information to interpret the reported incidents and initiate corresponding response actions. This process of “foregrounding” is shaped by the specific socialization efforts and organizational demands in the 911 emergency communication.

In the next section, I analyze how the three-way disembodiment shapes the way call-takers and dispatchers work and how it affects their experiences on the job. I emphasize their constant efforts to visualize key information from the callers and the incident details. I focus on how the process and consequence of visualizing incidents are patterned by 911 staff’s physical distance from the other two key parties in emergency communication—the callers and the front-line responders, by their responsibility for both of these parties’ bodily integrity, and by the organizational structure of the agency that they inhabit.

*Visualization—The “Zone” and the Body in Time and Space*

“Don’t look at me! Don’t look at me! Stop looking that way! I’m not here! I’m NOT here!!! ” The moment I swiped my ID and the door clicked open I could hear Dispatcher Lewis Johnson yelling at his trainee Keith Wilson, who had just finished the training lessons and started his in-house practices on the floor. For training purposes they both
listened to the same calls at the same time, with the trainee answering and responding and
training officer intervening when necessary. Not quite sure what to do with a call about a
distressed woman in a tunnel, Keith looked at Lewis every now and then, but Lewis told
him to be “there” with the caller, rather than being with him in the room. Lewis explained:

They’re giving you that information: there’s a 48 year old, sitting in Lincoln Tunnel acting weirdly. You already know that information. Someone’s
having a psychological situation—disoriented and infuriated and
distressed—you need to take that information and really understand what’s
going on with that person… I know it’s funny to you and all, but imagine
this: a woman, 48 years old, just lost her job last year, calling from inside a
tunnel, when you get that call, imagine being with that person.

Like every other dispatcher, Lewis works in what they call “the zone,” where some of
the hardest, most emotionally intense work is done. He was trying to bring his trainee to
that zone, too. For everyone working in the room, there is a third space where they imagine
going through the incident with the callers and their front-line colleagues, a space not
readily accessible to other people who are actually present with them in the same physical
space. They are vicariously co-present on scene with people absent from them, while not
present to those sitting next to them. This work of visualization is a result of the three-way
disembodiment and the objective of protecting the integrity of the body. The call-takers are
separated from the callers, and the dispatchers from the units to be dispatched. The units
are to be brought together with the callers; therefore, both the call-takers and the
dispatchers need to visualize what the victims’ bodily experience actually is, how it might
progress before and once the units arrive, what information is most helpful for the units to
navigate the nuances of the incident most effectively and help the victims most timely, and
what are the possible negative outcomes to both parties in that given situation. Though the
work of visualization, the verbal reports from the callers are fleshed out and filled with
vivid details that overcome the physical separation between the callers, the dispatchers and the front-line responders, and warrant responsible bodily actions. Visualization not only consists of the imaging in one’s mind of the past and on-going situations being reported, it also involves the anticipation of the progress of said situations ahead of time in a visualized form, projecting the predicted bodily experiences into a future time frame to inform present-time understandings and decisions. In order to insure that the most effective and safest measure are being taken, the dispatchers’ are trained to visualize by the “worst-case-scenario” rule—to see in their head the incidents worse than they actually are, which causes emotional stress on the job. In a word, the physical separation of the dispatchers, callers and front-line agents as well as the urgent and unpredictable nature of emergencies contribute to this particular visualization process in which the efforts of human mind are being constantly made to overcome the boundaries of both space and time, and to preempt the worst possible consequence.

Visualization demands information typically taken for granted and therefore not salient. Dispatcher Sadie Walker once said: “We always joke about it…if you can see the people calling 911, like if they can Skype you…(What we do) is trying to extract information from people, different from in person. Cuz you need information you wouldn’t ask otherwise.” Jimmy Cooper also told me: “Sometimes we joke about it, you know, because we ask them things like ‘what socks does he have on?’ There was once a guy with a missing arm, and we were like ‘which arm is missing?’ Cuz we can’t see it.” Indeed, a lot of the questioning would be unnecessary if the callers and the call-takers were in the same physical space. For example, a man called to report suspicious males following his girlfriend, and dispatcher Brooke Marie accessed the suspects’ location and their
identifiable details through the caller’s vision and conversation. While the background
detail “they came on the bus” was provided by the caller, the call-taker needed more
information on the suspects’ clothing and whereabouts, as that’s the information she
needed to pass to the police officers on the street and bring them to the scene:

What did they do? They followed your woman. Stay on the phone with me.
Where they outside? What were they wearing? Where’re the two men now?
Are they inside the building or outside the building? They came on the bus.
I understand. Did they go inside the building? Are you talking to a worker
there? Did he say he knows them? And they watched basketball together?
Do you see the officers? Go talk to them.

Through the callers’ senses, the dispatchers visualize the look and location of the suspects,
as well as the overall circumstance the callers are in. As was discussed in Chapter 2,
medical calls are highly scripted in its coding process. But after the coding is done and
units dispatched, the incident might escalate, in which case the call-taker re-evaluates and
re-imagines the caller’s circumstance through embodied information. Dispatcher Bree
Gallo was just finishing a medical call with the scripted instruction, which was the last part
of the EMD protocol, when the caller told her that the paramedics would have problems
entering her apartment.

Bree: I’m sending the paramedics to help you, stay on the line and I’ll tell
you exactly what to do next.
Caller: I can’t open…door…I don’t… my neighbors at 27 have a key. I
don’t know if they’re at home.
Bree: Do you know the phone number for your neighbors by any chance?
Caller: No…I do… but I can’t get up…I’m sorry.
Bree: That’s all right. Just relax. I’ll let them know that the neighbor at 27
has a key. Do you have any windows that are unlocked in case they can’t
get in and they can’t get the key from them?
Caller: Ahh, the window…is left to the door. I can’t close it.
Bree: You have an open window?
Caller: It’s not locked. It has a screen though….
Bree: Facing the house there’s a window?
Caller; Yes… out the door. I’m so sorry.
Bree: It’s Ok ma’am, don’t apologize. So… are you on the first floor?
Caller: Yes.
Bree: Ok, so there is an unlocked window on the left side of the door facing the house.
Caller: I’m so sorry…ahhh
B: You don’t need to be sorry. You don’t know if your neighbors are home or not, but I’ll let them know that you have a window that’s unlocked but there’s a screen in it.
Caller: Thank you.
B: You can let me know when they come in, cuz, the ambulance is out front and now the fire truck is out front too.
Caller: Thank you……I’m sorry….I’m trying to get up…
B: Don’t get up. If you have a hard time, don’t get up, you could fall and hurt yourself. They’re gonna come to your window now so don’t get scared OK?

Because the caller wasn’t able to open the door and her neighbors might not be home, the only way into her apartment at that moment was through the window. Bree visualized the caller’s mobility problem and the structure of the space around her by probing her about the access to the room. Through her questions, she imaged what the window entrance looks like for the paramedics who were then physically separated from both the caller and herself—“there is an unlocked window on the left side of the door facing the house”, even after the code was put in and the dispatch was made. Bree’s visualization of the caller’s spatial situation greatly facilitated the front-line agents’ response. For the same reason, training supervisor Sally Grossman urged the trainees to memorize the landmarks in the city around the subway stations because that way they can visually place themselves where the incidents are:

What’s the last time you were in a subway? If you don’t know what the stations look like, it’s very hard to get a visual of where they’re calling from. It’s good to know the landmarks. The subway is a good place for criminals to hop on and get away. They know the subway better than we do. And people fall over.
Visualization is not only about trying to understand what is happening at the moment. It is also about the estimation and prediction of the future progress, sometimes with people’s lives on the line. Training Supervisor Sally Grossman reminded the trainees:

When I started in Parkton, there was a lot more crime. It reminds me that when I worked there, there was one officer getting killed. For the officer’s safety, it’s very important to know where the suspect is, especially when they are moving. Another officer got killed when he was chasing a suspect on a high-rise—they ran onto the roof. Somebody let loose a dog, a pit bull or something; the officer got killed because the dog lunged him and he fell off the roof. We have police officers’ life at risk here.

Given the heavy responsibility that 911 employees shoulder daily for the victims and the front-line responders’ lives and their physical distance from both, it is always advisable to visualize the worst-case scenarios to avoid tragic consequences and losses. Sally told us:

“You need to understand what they’re saying. You need to visualize it and understand what’ going on. You always imagine the worst-case scenario in the job, you know? What if somebody is in the house? Stab them? Or shoot them? You can’t just lax, it’s important to keep the caller on the phone.”

Visualizing every detail of the incidents by the “worst-case-scenario” rule helps front-line agents find the suspects faster, assists the callers better, protects them both, but it brings great stress and pain to people who do the visualizing. Dispatcher Jimmy Cooper “So from day one, I told myself, the last thing I want to see is a police officer that I work with dies cuz I’ll go home and ask myself if I have done everything right. Or what I could have done. You know? Could I have done something different?” Although they can never see the incident, they imagine it; and despite the visualization, they never know what it really looks like. This is the paradox facing them everyday, as Jimmy put it: “But you visualize it, you know? You don’t know how bad it is. But you can never really visualize what you
can’t see.” Sadie’s colleagues and friends were involved in the response to a major incident for a long time. And she said she suffered hearing everything from the phone and imagining what they were going through: “You are not there but they are your colleagues. I hear them screaming, shouting over the phone…my brother went to it and my mother was working at the hospital. And I was sitting there, seeing these from a work scene. That was a hell on earth for a month.”

As the bridge between otherwise physically separate parties, 911 staff work to realize the full potential and convenience of dis-embodied telecommunication and emergency response through their work of visualization, but have to carry the very cost physical absence because of it. The trauma from visualization comes from the fact that 911 employees have to visualize the worst-case scenarios, with no access to the fully embodied information available to parties on scene to confirm or deny what they visualize.

Dispatcher Bailey O’Hara told me that because of the separation from the collaborating agencies—the disembodiment from her front-line colleagues—it is no longer possible to know the whole story working in a city-level agency:

The first thing that bothered me, is not being able to find out about the end of the story. I like to do the whole thing. If I work in a small town, I answer the call, I dispatch the call. I have a more intimate relationship with fire and police department. Just the level of intimacy with the people you work is very different. Here, for example, how many people were hit by a car today? I don’t know.

The cost of this work of visualization in the context of three-way embodiment in 911 communication is both psychological and symbolic. Not being on scene and talking to both the callers and the front-line agents remotely, 911 employees are regarded as unreliable sources of information with questionable expertise. In emergency response community where physical risk is more honored and respected, 911 dispatchers are perceived—and
know that they are perceived—as “people taking phone calls in a room” or “second-class citizens”, as Sally Grossman called it. In Chapter 3, I explained how the low social status of the 911 community in emergency response and public safety professions impacts the ways in which they manage their emotional stress. This status disparity and unfavorable perception is the outcome of being an absent body in an environment designed and operated to prioritize, protect and savage people’s integrity of the body through others’ risking and sacrificing it. 911 staff’s verbal transmission and visualization of the bodily experiences apart from their own is the key to both the success of disembodied emergency communication and to their own difficulties and struggles on the job.

Despite all the responsibilities and possible “worst-case scenarios”, front-line agents—mostly police officers—sometimes self-initiate dangerous response actions without notification, or disregard information, direction, and instructions from 911 dispatchers. Dispatcher James Gordon called officers who act on their own without notice “pains in my ass” and complained: “The wacky ones, they’re cowboys—in the middle of the night, they’d pull over and have eight kids in the car…. They might have guns with them! They need to tell me everything that they do…there’s one hard-core officer and I wanted to shake the life out of him. It was at night and he stopped three kids with two guns! And he didn’t tell me where he was!”

Bringing themselves into the “zone” and trying to be with the callers, 911 dispatchers become isolated from their colleagues whom they share the same space. People working together often experience their stress and visualize their incidents individually, despite their physical co-presence in practice. During dinner break, I mentioned my “disembodiment” thesis, and Jimmy Cooper responded as follows:
We don’t know what’s going on at others’ line either, cuz everyone is on their headset. Sometimes somebody told me that they had a rough day, because there’s a robbery, and I was like “When was that? Didn’t know about that!” The other day I walked back and passed Sadie and Winnie, they were talking to each other then they saw me, suddenly Winnie turned her head away. I was like “are you guys talking about me and want to avoid me?” Actually Winnie’s on channel one, on her headset. So it’s not just disembodiment, it’s also isolation, with each other.

In this context, the body is a subject of language, action and experience, as well as an object of verbal description, response action and management. Calling 911 is a self or other-directed action upon the body carried out by physically separated parties—the callers, the 911 staff and the front-line responders. To accomplish this action, two key processes take place—foregrounding and visualization. During foregrounding, callers activate embodied messages to verbally communicate their bodily situation, while such communication is reinforced and influenced by the organizational demands and priorities specific to the emergency communication system. During visualization, 911 employees re-embody verbal information from the callers in an imagined space and translate it into actionable messages. This visualization process is shaped by the 911 staff’s physical absence from the incident and their responsibility for the bodily integrity of both the callers and their front-line colleagues. As a consequence, they suffer from stress caused by this process under the “worst-case scenario” rule, which is exacerbated by their lack of social status and isolation on the job.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this chapter I have taken an integrative approach to the body and embodiment in examining how bodily situations are communicated and interpreted between individuals and across space. Borrowing from both conversation analysis and phenomenological
traditions with a focus on the unique context of three-way disembodiment in 911 emergency communication, I have demonstrated through my empirical analysis the key processes—foregrounding and visualization—through which bodily experiences are verbally communicated and interpreted across physically absent individuals to result in actions upon the body, in the context of three-way disembodiment and the protection of the bodily integrity in 911 emergency communication. While foregrounding serves to overcome the physical separation between the callers and 911 call-takers, visualization bridges the distance between callers, 911 dispatchers and front-line responders with a worst-case scenario rule directed towards a projected time of in the near future. Having identified foregrounding and visualization as the key steps, and I have shown how each is shaped by the organizational, structural, and cultural forces in this particular context of emergency communication.

I contribute to the literature on the body and embodiment through my analytical integration of broader stratifying forces, assumed roles and identities in an organizational setting, and emergent individual situations. I have managed to show the specific ways in which the body is verbalized, understood and communicated across space, and how time plays a role in the process. I have also highlighted the inequality and status struggles implicated in the process of foregrounding and visualization in an environment filled with physical risks, harms and dangers.

With the framework and the findings in this chapter, I open up the possibility of developing a typology for the relationship between language and practice of the body in an institutional space. Through a contextual perspective, future research should show the different ways in which the description of the body varies across different settings and
what it implies for the relationship between language and practice, between the body and its representation, and for the research of the body in general. Similarly, future research should be able to show in what ways the embodiment of the speech varies across different contexts, and how time and place play a role in it.

Related, a clarifying remark needs to be made here. As was discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the purpose of this research is not to deny the fact that body techniques and bodily experiences often go unstated and after often communicated non-verbally. But I do believe unspoken, tacit and pre-discursive rules, techniques or patterns of the body, can and sometimes—such as during emergency calls—have to be spoken, explicit and verbalized. It is our job to explore and specify the context, as well as draw on it to shed light on the body and embodiment.

An empirical extension of this chapter can be made through the investigation of 911 call communication with the aid of body camera, images and videos. With more visual access to the incident, and to the callers’ and/or the front-line responders’ physical environment, the ways in which bodily experiences are verbalized and interpreted will certainly be changed. It will also inform training programs aimed to familiarize 911 staff with enhanced technology as well as policies targeting at the upgrade of 911 system and public safety apparatus. It can also shed light on the possible ways in which the relationships and dynamics between 911 staff and police officers on the front-line are altered by the introduction of the new technology and an upgraded system.
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Chapter 5  Conclusion: Discretion, Cognition, Embodiment and Inequality in Context

In this dissertation I have re-conceptualized discretion, cognition and culture in action as well as body and embodiment. In my framework, I have connected each concept to the organizational context of my specific case of 911 communication: the nuances, dynamics and requirements in the bureaucratic classification process through CAD system, the division labor within and without the communication center, the status and inequality in the network of public safety professions, as well as the broader organizational and policy settings. Merging literature on discretion, street-level bureaucracy, culture and cognition, emotional labor, and body and embodiment, and analyzing data from three years’ ethnographic data from a 911 communication center, this dissertation has provided renewed insights into key concepts such as discretion, cognition and culture in action, as well as an in-depth and contextualized look into the process and consequence of the work of 911 communication system.

In Chapter 2 I have re-conceptualized discretion as street-level bureaucrats’ relative freedom to choose among organizationally prescribed alternatives. With this concept, I have demonstrated with my empirical analysis what discretion is in my case—how much leeway the 911 dispatchers have over coding decisions—and how it varies. I have shown that different levels of discretion are found in medical, fire and police response processes. Medical calls are processed with the lowest level discretion with an add-on program PROQA which not only dictates the questions and conversations, but also the diagnostics choices made in the system. Police calls, to the contrary, demand the highest level of discretion with constant probing, questioning, judgment calls and type changes. Fire calls
are responded with discretion less than in police calls but more than in the medicals, with no standard scripts but far fewer questions needed and categories to pick from. The variation in discretion is related to the status inequality and organizational structure of emergency response agencies. Medical calls receive no pushback from paramedics and there is little interaction with them to begin with, while police calls often involve the tension in the interactions with police officers on the frontline. At the same time, medical call response machinery protects 911 dispatchers from liabilities while dispatchers shoulder heavy reliabilities for their decisions and responses.

The implication of the formulation and findings on discretion that focuses on actual institutional alternatives instead of the absence of oversight or the presence of biases is both academic and political. Not only does it challenge the two predominant approaches to discretion in the discipline which rest on problematic hypotheticals, it also casts doubt on the dichotomous perspective on discretion in practice. For example, when looking at police behaviors, the question regarding arrests can be should or should not certain officer have arrested someone, or instead, it can also be, why said officer chose arrest among all possible actions deemed appropriate at the time, what are these options are, how much weight each carries contingent on different circumstances and whether it varies across different agencies. Seen this way, more research and attention should be directed at the structural and cultural characteristics of the organizational environment in which street-level bureaucrats are trained, socialized and working in on a daily basis, besides the context and character of the front-line service interactions with the citizens which have interested many.
With the concept of “desired state of mind” in chapter 3, I theorize cognition as an outcome of intentional social behaviors by individuals embedded in specific organizational contexts. And through the theoretical synthesis with the scholarship on emotional labor and emotion management, I have established emotion as an indispensable part of cognition. Friendly parting ways with two primary approaches to culture in action—the toolkit model and the cognitive model—I show how actions shape cognition, and how that process is patterned by its structural and cultural context. Through my findings on the classification process and human experiences on the job in 911 communication system, I have shown that the “desired state of mind” in the context of 911 emergency communication is “controlled empathy”, as a result of their constant need to bridge the three gaps found in the response to 911 calls during the emergency communication process—the gap between folk languages and bureaucratic codes, that between the description and the actual situation of the incident, and that between the complexity of the situation and the simplicity of official coding system. I have demonstrated that 911 dispatchers in my field rely on negative and escapist coping mechanisms as a result of the lack of outlets and resources, which itself follows from the perceived lower status and insufficient recognition of the vital role of 911 dispatchers in the public safety community, and the criminal justice system on local and state levels.

In Chapter 4, I explained how the situations of the callers and victims are communicated and interpreted across spatial boundaries between the callers, the 911 personnel and frontline law-enforcement agents. Synthesizing insights from conversation analysis and phenomenological traditions and highlighting the context of 911 emergency communication through its key character of three-way disembodiment, I demonstrated
through my empirical findings the two steps taken to share information regarding the body and bodily experiences across space, time and individuals—foregrounding and visualization. Through these two processes, bodily experiences in a physically inaccessible locality are verbally communicated by absent individuals as the basis for the official actions upon the body to restore and protect its integrity. While foregrounding helps calls and 911 call-takers form an inter-subjective understanding of the situation around the remote body, visualization is what it takes to carry embodied information from the callers and to 911 dispatchers and finally reach front-line responders. Due to the job requirements and the nature of emergency requests in the context of 911 emergency communication, the work of visualization is trained and practiced daily by a “worst-case-scenario” rule to err on the safer side, which causes emotional stress and trauma on the job.

Throughout the dissertation, I have built a close connection between the interactive and individual level of analysis with broader structuring forces manifest in my specific case study. My objective in this research is not only to show that structural and organizational contexts matter, but also exactly how they matter in practice and in my specific field site. Whether viewed through discretion, cognition in action or body, or embodiment, the same story of status inequality, power struggles and workplace politics persists: in their own words, the 911 dispatchers are the “fruit cakes” within their own microcosm and in the broader environment of public safety and law enforcement professions. 911 dispatchers’ lack of status and recognition is apparent in their battle of discretion with the police officers, as well as their handling of their stress and emotions on the job. In an institutional setting characterized by physical risks, dangers and sacrifices which receives public attention through high visibility, their physical distance from the front-line response scenes
reinforces their lower status and recognition, despite their vicarious experiences of the trauma, and their constant efforts at controlled empathy, foregrounding and visualization.

While the findings of this research have contributed to a newly founded mental-health support program for 911 dispatchers that provides post-traumatic incident counseling service and stress-relief strategies, the road to increased understanding and visibility of 911 dispatchers and a more positive morale is rugged at best. The progress on the front of retirement equity has been minimal for the last four decades. With the next-generation 911 and text-to-911 system, there will be an inevitable flood of information in the format of text messages, images, and videos. Without a comprehensive understanding of the inner workings of the 911 communication system and the daily work process and experiences of individual 911 dispatchers, the pros and cons of any future technical upgrade cannot be accurately assessed. Without a close look at the bodies, minds, and hearts of those who work at every point of intersection between modalities of time, space, technology, people and organizations, the human stories of modern bureaucracy will remain untold.
Reference


