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# The Space before Action: The Role of Peer Discussion Groups in Frontline Service Provision

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**ABSTRACT** Studies of street-level discretion tend to focus on what influences workers' behaviors and the consequences of their choices for advancing or compromising policy goals, but studies rarely focus on the space before action, that is, the processes through which workers make decisions and, in particular, how they deliberate with one another about practice problems within groups dedicated to improving social service delivery. Drawing from two qualitative studies of peer discussion groups, a study of teams of child welfare workers and a study of interorganizational groups composed of employment service workers, we find that workers in each setting grappled with similar types of problems but differed in their focus on specific clients or routine tasks, how they sought to legitimate their responses, and the extent to which their proposed solutions modified established approaches to practice. Our analysis suggests that features of the accountability contexts associated with the two policy fields help explain observed differences.

## INTRODUCTION

Foundational scholarship on street-level bureaucracy has established that how frontline workers' exercise discretion is fundamental to policy implementation (Lipsky 1980; Hupe and Hill 2007; Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010). How social service workers translate policy directives and guidelines into practice determines who receives resources and services, how much they receive, and how they receive them. While considerable research has investigated factors influencing workers' behaviors and the consequences of their behaviors for advancing or compromising policy goals, we know much less about the space before action, or the processes through which

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they make choices about how to proceed (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003; Loyens and Maesschalck 2010; Brodtkin 2011). Moreover, scholars have noted that frontline workers have unique perspectives and abilities that could be deployed to improve policy implementation (Elmore 1980; Schön 1983; Moore 1995). Studying workers' deliberation of implementation challenges could elucidate these assets.

This article illuminates workers' reflections on how they align their work with external expectations for appropriate service delivery within the particular conditions of the implementation environment in which both they and their clients are embedded. Unlike prior researchers who have focused on individual workers, we studied groups of social service case workers in two policy fields who convened regularly for the purpose of improving service delivery.<sup>1</sup> In one instance, teams of child welfare workers met weekly to discuss the families with whom they worked. In the other instance, the staff of housing-based employment service programs from different organizations met bimonthly in interorganizational groups to talk about program implementation with respect to their caseloads of low-income individuals. Frontline staff in both the child welfare and employment services policy contexts were responsible for discerning how to help their clients in the face of inadequate resources, and they faced conflicting expectations about what counted as appropriate practice. At the same time, they operated in accountability contexts that placed different degrees of responsibility on the workers and posed different pressures for demonstrating the appropriateness of their responses to the challenges they faced.

Observing these group discussions allowed us to hear workers wrestle with the challenges they faced. Workers debated how to resolve dilemmas in light of their collective experience and understanding of the clients they served, discussed the norms and standards of their field and other sources of authority, and drew on the range of resources at their disposal to consider solutions to common problems.

We find that peer discussion groups allowed frontline social service workers in both of these policy contexts to grapple with practice problems. Yet, how they deliberated together differed with respect to their focus on

1. We use the term *policy field* to refer to the issues the policy actors seek to address and the organizational and cultural factors that shape how the issues are understood and pursued (see Stone and Sandfort 2009).

specific client situations or ongoing routines for working with the entire clientele, the ways in which they sought to legitimate their responses, and the extent to which they introduced novel solutions to the problems they faced. Our analysis suggests that two dimensions of the accountability context help explain these differences: the degree of *latitude*, or the range of movement prescribed for workers by their organizations, and the degree of *autonomy*, or the extent of the oversight workers had over their actions.

These insights open up an agenda for research about peer discussion groups as a practical management tool for street-level decision making and creative problem solving among policy actors who typically struggle alone. It also suggests a pathway for further examination of the dimensions of the accountability context.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE EXERCISE OF STREET-LEVEL DISCRETION**

##### **A FOCUS ON ACTION VERSUS THE SPACE BEFORE ACTION**

Prior empirical research on street-level discretion focuses on the factors that influence workers' behavior as to the exercise of discretion and the consequences of their choices for clients and policy objectives. Workers' departures from policy directives may reflect attempts to tailor their responses to clients' specific situations or to shirk responsibilities, or they may reflect workers' coping mechanisms or resistance to policy makers' demands (Lipsky 1980; Brehm and Gates 1997; Meyers, Glaser, and MacDonald 1998; Riccucci 2005; Lens 2008). Numerous studies seek to explain why workers comply, shirk, or cope. Some identify individual characteristics like personal preferences or demographic characteristics as factors that influence workers' behavior (Brehm and Gates 1997; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Nielsen 2006; Oberfield 2009; Watkins-Hayes 2009), others stress policy-related factors such as complex or ambiguous regulations coupled with scarce resources (Brodkin 1997; Riccucci 2005; Fording, Soss, and Schram 2007), and still others point to the effects of organizational priorities and role structures (Sandfort 2000; Smith and Donovan 2003; Hasenfeld 2010; Dias and Elesh 2012).

Scholars have also devoted considerable attention to the implications of these behaviors for achieving policy goals. Certain negative behaviors, such as incomplete implementation, deficient policy outcomes, and discrimination against particular population groups and other biases, are asso-

ciated with a lower likelihood to achieve policy goals (see, e.g., Hasenfeld 2000; Lens 2008; Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011), as is worker burn-out (see, e.g., Font 2012). Studies that document how workers' behaviors advance policy goals are less common. Those that exist provide evidence that workers sometimes go the extra mile to respond to clients' circumstances (Kelly 1994; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003) and that they can adapt standard procedures to contend with obstacles to implementation (Borins 2000; Cooney 2007; Gofen 2014).

An early researcher in the history of street-level scholarship, Richard Elmore (1980), suggests that the emphasis on the problematic consequences of street-level discretion is due to researchers focusing on workers' choices rather than focusing on their process of applying their knowledge and experience to solving problems that they encounter in the course of implementation. Yet, subsequent street-level research has rarely studied how workers actually arrive at their decisions (Loyens and Maesschalck 2010; Brodtkin 2011). Thus, we know relatively little about workers' struggles to discern appropriate responses to dilemmas of policy implementation or how they take into account the limitations of policy design or the implementation environment.

While extensive field research illuminates the organizational processes and structures that create an environment in which discretion is used in ways that, at times, go against policy intentions (e.g., Brodtkin 1997; Meyers et al. 1998; Winter and May 2001; Riccucci 2005), it does not provide much insight into how workers think about and talk about their use of discretion (Brodtkin 2008). The few studies that explicitly examine workers' decision making convey a mixed view of the depth of their reflections. The stories Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno (2003) elicited from workers reveal that they rarely thought abstractly or questioned the power they wielded. Their judgments tended to be based on idiosyncratic beliefs about justice (Kelly 1994) and who is worthy of assistance.

Others suggest that frontline social service workers have a greater capacity to discern appropriate responses to dilemmas of practice than is suggested in the dominant street-level narrative. For example, Janet Coble Vinzant and Austin Lane Crothers's ethnography describes how workers engage in what they call "street-level leadership" (1998) by referring to a variety of sources to legitimate their decisions on behalf of particular clients. Other studies document workers' efforts to reference norms, beliefs, and shared knowledge to justify modifications to established procedures that make it easier for them to carry out their tasks given the

constraints of their workplaces (Lin 2000; Sandfort 2000; Brodtkin 2011). Although the examples of creative solutions illustrated in these studies accommodate organizational priorities rather than further policy objectives, these scholars suggest that workers could use similar sense-making strategies to craft responses that enable them to fulfill multiple, and sometimes conflicting, accountability requirements.

It is important to note that these prior studies either elicited workers' reflections retrospectively or captured occasional interactions among coworkers; none of these studies explicitly investigated workers' thought processes as they occurred in venues dedicated to deliberation about implementation. Our study addresses this gap in our understanding of street-level discretion by examining how frontline workers grapple with practice problems in the context of peer discussion groups.

#### THE POTENTIAL OF PEER GROUPS FOR GUIDING DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

It is widely acknowledged that coworkers play a key role in how employees behave on the job, organize to promote workplace rights, form social bonds, and establish their professional identities (Crozier 1964; Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Feldman 1992; Brehm and Gates 1997; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The potential for peer discussion and reflection among frontline public service workers has been noted in passing (e.g., Lipsky 1980; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Wagenaar 2004), but we know little about how frontline workers help one another resolve challenging dilemmas of practice, particularly when they meet regularly for the purpose of improving social service delivery.

Scholarship about group processes suggests that group approaches that foster frontline workers' participation in service improvement warrant further exploration. A large body of research examines work groups as venues for sharing information, professional socialization, and creative problem solving (Wenger 1998; Argote, Gruenfeld, and Naquin 2001; Edmondson, Bohmer, and Pisano 2001), but much of this research investigated private sector contexts or involved managers and professional experts in nonprofit and public sector organizations (Goodman, Ravlin, and Schminke 1987; Guzzo and Dickson 1996; Bate and Robert 2002; Koliba and Gajda 2009). Little is known about how these findings may trans-

late to social service workers, who may have less authority and fewer resources to support inquiry and experimentation.

Group settings also foster deliberative dialogue about complex policy problems (Forester 1999; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). Deliberation allows stakeholders to acknowledge and question their assumptions and beliefs, expose and examine their differences, and test their hunches and explore alternatives (Landy 1993; Forester 1999). Moreover, we know from scholarship on citizen engagement that even those who lack authority and resources can engage in constructive deliberation about complex policy issues if they are given adequate support and meaningful attention (e.g., Fung and Wright 2003). Studies of deliberation about policy problems seldom focus on the implementation phase of the policy-making process, however, and when they do, they do not tend to focus on frontline workers. Our observations of child welfare workers' and employment services workers' group discussions afford a distinctive opportunity to examine how they deliberate about the common challenges they face when serving their clients. Further, because we compare groups in two policy fields, we can also assess how differences in how peer groups discuss challenges seem to reflect distinctive characteristics of the implementation context and its accountability pressures.

#### THE EXERCISE OF DISCRETION WITHIN DIFFERENT ACCOUNTABILITY CONTEXTS

Although scholars have noted the need to understand the effects of the policy environment (Sosin 2010) or "accountability regime" (Hupe and Hill 2007, 292) to develop street-level bureaucracy theory, there are few empirical studies that expressly compare the exercise of frontline discretion across policy fields with different accountability pressures. Moreover, some scholars have recently noted the need to adopt a more nuanced understanding of street-level discretion to replace what they see as a false dichotomy between discretion and rule-based implementation (Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010).

While terms and definitions vary, scholars suggest that the dimensions of latitude and autonomy are among the primary shapers of discretion.<sup>2</sup>

2. We drew on a variety of specific works to identify and name these two dimensions, latitude and autonomy. Some highlight both of these concepts (e.g., Lipsky 1980; Feldman

*Latitude* refers to the extent to which an organization's policies require workers to exercise judgments about how to perform. While program regulations and requirements, as well as professional codes of conduct, dictate the parameters of the work across policy fields, policies vary with respect to the rigidity of these standards of conduct and the extent to which guidance is open to interpretation (DeLeon 1998; Sosin 2010). The second dimension of discretion, *autonomy*, refers to the amount of supervision and oversight workers have when operating within this terrain. Ideally, all workers are held accountable to multiple actors in the system of governance (Behn 2001; Hupe and Hill 2007; Langbein 2009). Contexts can vary with respect to how closely their work is scrutinized, which stakeholders are paying the most attention (Romzek 2000; Hasenfeld 2010), and the extent to which stakeholders' norms, standards, and priorities conflict with one another (Sosin 2010; Garrow and Grusky 2013).

Our study considers the potential influences of both these dimensions of the accountability context on decision making and problem solving in child protection and employment service programs. While a few studies examine differences in discretionary behavior across policy fields (e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Oberfield 2009; Garrow and Grusky 2013), they focus on the relationship between professional identity and the exercise of discretion rather than the nature of the job's latitude or autonomy as established by the policy environment. A noteworthy exception is Jodi Sandfort's (2000) comparison of frontline workers' practices in public sector welfare agencies with more traditional styles of management and welfare-to-work nonprofits with more flexible management approaches. Sandfort analyzes how workers' collective beliefs shape their resistance to policy directives, yet she does not focus on group deliberation about ways to reconcile competing expectations.

Ultimately, our inquiry is motivated by an interest in how social service workers use peer discussions to navigate the boundaries of their discretion and to explore how to use the tools at their disposal. Our study was designed to answer three research questions: (i) How do frontline workers use peer discussion groups to grapple with difficult practice challenges? (ii) How did the two types of workers included in this study, child welfare (CW) and employment services (ES) workers, vary in how

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1992; Hupe and Hill 2007; Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010). Some of this work uses the term "discretion" to refer to decision-making latitude (e.g., Handler 1986; Feldman 1992; Hupe and Hill 2007), some focuses on autonomy (Sosin 2010); and some use neither term but are clearly getting at the same concepts (e.g., Loyens and Maesschalck 2010).



they discussed the challenges they faced? (iii) How do the characteristics of the policy context help explain the differences observed in the nature of the discussions taking place in these different peer discussion groups?

## METHOD

We draw on two independently designed studies, one led by the first author and one led by the second. We discovered only after data collection and initial data analysis were complete that our studies provided complementary explorations of the same phenomenon: street-level workers meeting regularly in groups to discuss their work. Combining the data sets derived from each study afforded us a larger pool of more varied examples of group discussions than each study supplied on its own.

### THE EMPLOYMENT SERVICES (ES) STUDY

The employment services (ES) study, led by the first author, investigated two peer discussion groups, composed of frontline staff from eight different housing agencies that operated two programs that promote employment and economic independence from public assistance among low-income families currently receiving housing subsidies from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The first of these programs, the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, targets families receiving rental-housing subsidies who voluntarily enroll in the 5–7-year program. Participants receive case management services to help them with career development through services available in their communities. FSS also includes an incentive to earn income and build assets in the form of an individual, interest-accumulating escrow account linked to HUD's rent calculation formula. The second program, HUD's Welfare-to-Work Voucher demonstration program, was initiated to address the lack of stable, affordable housing available to families attempting to transition from welfare to work. JobsFirst, a pseudonym for the state's Welfare-to-Work Voucher program, provides housing vouchers to current and former welfare recipients on the condition that they comply with a work requirement.

Both programs not only demand more from the clients in exchange for receipt of benefits than their agencies' other housing subsidy programs, they also place considerable responsibilities on frontline service workers to both monitor clients' compliance and encourage their success (Rohe and Kleit 1999). The workers were tasked with determining who was eligible

for the program, what acceptable participation entailed, which details about clients' activities they were to enter into the computerized management information system for the purpose of compliance monitoring, and, in the case of FSS, calculating accumulated savings in the individual escrow accounts. Staff of both programs also had to discern whether clients had made what the regulations termed a good faith effort to fulfill program obligations as a basis for granting extensions and making other exceptions to accommodate circumstances beyond the clients' control.

The ES workers convened in two discussion forums. One forum was for the FSS staff and one was for JobsFirst. Both groups included those who staffed the ES programs in the eight regional nonprofit housing organizations that contract with the state to administer federal and state housing subsidy programs. Each forum included 11 regular members, one or two from each agency, depending on the size of the caseload.<sup>3</sup> Most were women, several were women of color, and many were single mothers who had themselves benefited from public assistance. Each of the groups met regularly, usually bimonthly, and the meetings typically lasted 2–3 hours.

Data collection included observations by the first author of 41 meetings of these groups from 2000 through 2005, captured in near-verbatim field notes. Follow-up interviews helped clarify and elaborate points made in the meetings.

#### THE CHILD WELFARE (CW) STUDY

The child welfare study observed a pilot initiative to create social worker teams at a state child welfare (CW) agency. The study was launched to explore how a team-based structure could improve social worker morale, as well as services to families. These frontline workers, here dubbed CW workers, were out in the field investigating allegations of child abuse or neglect and making decisions about whether to remove children and how to strengthen family environments. In the traditional set-up, each social worker was a member of a unit with a supervisor and four or five workers. Members of these units sat together, but each worker was solely responsible for his or her own cases. The structure of the teaming pilot was somewhat similar to that of the regular CW program in that each

3. The membership of these discussion forums changed in response to staff turnover in the agencies. Over the study period, six workers replaced their predecessors.

worker was a member of a team with a supervisor and four or five social workers, but multiple workers would be involved in cases, and all team members could be called on for advice and assistance. Beyond these general parameters, the agency left it up to individual teams to define in more depth which cases they would focus on and how they would structure their work.

The initiative involved seven teams in six offices around the state; all were enrolled in the research. Data collection from the teams took place over about 2.5 years (from 2004 to 2007) in three rounds: at the beginning of the teams' work together, after about 1 year, and after 2–2.5 years. The second author gathered qualitative data during each round, including team interviews (interviewing the whole team at one time) and individual interviews. She also observed team meetings, roughly every other month, over about 2.5 years. Finally, she conducted surveys and interviews with team stakeholders and observers. There were 76 individuals enrolled in the study, about three-quarters women and about 70 percent white and 30 percent of color.<sup>4</sup>

The CW study's contribution to this article is built largely from the transcripts of 47 team meetings; however, as with the ES study, it includes insights from the interview data as well. The team meetings lasted at least an hour and sometimes longer. The meetings were taped, and the second author also wrote field notes. All the tapes were transcribed with near-verbatim accuracy.

#### JOINT DATA ANALYSIS OF PRACTICE PROBLEMS

Data analysis unfolded over a series of stages, which gradually honed our research questions and focused our analytic lens. We conducted our own independent analyses on our respective data sets, wrote analytic memos that we shared with each other, and met regularly to discuss our emerging insights.

In both studies, the groups of workers discussed challenges they encountered in the course of their work. Building on Martin Rein's (1983) concept, we refer to these challenges as "practice problems," which have three distinctive facets: they concern problems that interfere with service delivery and meeting clients' needs rather than problems with the

4. Turnover on the teams over the course of data collection ranged from a high of 77 percent to a low of 17 percent.

workers themselves; they are problems that workers identify from their experience as opposed to those that emerge in externally conducted evaluations; and workers raise practice problems with the intention of contending with them, not merely worrying about them. Using practice problems as the unit of analysis allows us to examine how the group discussions occasioned problem solving among the workers themselves. It also enables us to focus on the workers' efforts to improve service delivery, even if their efforts did not ultimately lead to improved outcomes.

To begin our analysis, we independently went back to our data, randomly chose about 10 percent of our meeting transcripts, and identified examples of discussions about discrete problems. We shared these examples and together came up with a set of basic codes that worked for both studies, which are described below. We then chose another 15 percent of our transcripts and used those data to revise this coding scheme. Finally, we chose another 25 percent of transcripts for another round of refinement. At this point we had reviewed 50 percent of the meeting transcripts, or about 200 discrete discussions about practice problems, and we had reached "theoretical saturation," a term from Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) meaning that no new categories or refined definitions were necessary. Therefore, we stopped coding at that point.

We began our coding by identifying whether each incident we were analyzing met all three of the aforementioned criteria for practice problems. If so, we included the discussion of that incident in our data set and coded it along four dimensions. First, we indicated whether it addressed a specific client situation or case or an ongoing routine or standard operating procedure; second, we noted the length of the discussion (from extremely brief to extensive); third, we noted whether the workers analyzed the problem, explored solutions, or did both; and, fourth, if a solution was discussed, we noted whether it was a simple application of a previously existing procedure or whether it modified an existing routine. This analysis of the similarities and differences in these facets of the ES and CW group discussions resulted in the findings we describe below.

#### STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH DESIGN

We drew on two separate and independently designed studies for this article (see O'Mahony and Bechky [2006] and Howard-Grenville et al. [2010] for other examples of this technique), which brought both strengths and weaknesses. On the positive side, we have two studies delving into the

same concern: frontline staff engaged in group deliberation about the challenges they encountered in their efforts to meet expectations in their respective policy fields. Furthermore, CW and ES workers are situated in the kinds of public-serving bureaucracies in which street-level theory was developed, and workers in both policy settings must contend with the challenges of high case loads, inadequate resources, and the often-competing demands of clients and policy makers. Moreover, both sets of workers were charged with case management tasks that afforded them at least some discretion in how they contended with these challenges in their work with their clients.

However, these ES and CW workers navigated different accountability contexts with respect to both their latitude for independent judgment and the degree of autonomy from scrutiny over their behavior. Regarding latitude, the ES workers were expected to follow formal, detailed federal regulations and their agency's procedural manuals. These regulations served as their primary source of accountability. As there were no educational prerequisites, the majority of ES workers in our study had some college education, but only the exceptional few had professional credentials of master's degrees in social work or social services. In contrast, the CW workers, all of whom had at least a bachelor's degree, had leeway to base their judgments on internalized norms of social work practice. The agency was subject to federal guidelines that mandated reporting in seven outcome areas, such as reducing recidivism, but while we occasionally heard agency leaders reference these outcomes, we never heard any team members or team leaders mention them. Team members were more likely to mention agency requirements that they visit every family on their caseload at least monthly, complete assessment reports within 45 days, or keep their dictation (typed updates on each family) up to date. Thus, the CW accountability context afforded workers more latitude in judgment than did the ES accountability context.

The story with autonomy is the reverse. Although both sets of workers were subject to external oversight, the CW workers were relatively closely supervised, with their superiors sitting close by and systematically reviewing their work. Moreover, their work was more prone to scrutiny from the public. If a child under their care were to die, for example, the incident would inevitably end up in the news. HUD's annual audits did monitor ES workers' procedural compliance, as evidenced by randomly selected client files, but the workers were subject to relatively little direct supervision. Indeed, the ES discussion forums were established to offer

opportunities for peer guidance because few managers in their housing organizations had experience with social services. Moreover, the fact that programs were assessed on the basis of clients' aggregate outcomes (e.g., increased employment and earnings) gave ES workers some flexibility to deviate from established procedures as long as they demonstrated the desired results. Thus, as long as they remained within the general boundaries of the official program directives, the ES workers had more autonomy than did the CW staff.

These differences facilitate our inquiry in two respects. First, they allow us to document the capacity of frontline service workers to deliberate about practice problems despite differences in their degree of freedom. Second, the differences allow us to analyze how the accountability regime shaped group discussions. Facilitating this comparative analysis, both studies took place in the same northern state and overlapped by a few years. Thus, all of the workers operated in service delivery systems within the same social, economic, and policy environment. Our observation that the groups discussed similar types of practice problems underscores the commonalities of their service technologies and implementation contexts.

The research design has significant limitations as well. Most significantly, we could not carefully choose cases in which we could hold virtually everything but policy context constant. There were other factors that differed between the two studies. In particular, the structure of the discussion groups was quite different. Notably, a group involving individuals across multiple organizations (like the ES discussion groups) is not the same forum as a work team led by a supervisor, whose members share tasks and operate interdependently (like the CW discussion groups). We do think group structure matters. In particular, it affects what we have called autonomy, since autonomy is clearly influenced by the degree of both interdependence and supervision. We explore the role of group structure in the Discussion section, where we delve into the role of latitude and autonomy in depth. In the Discussion we also briefly review other alternate explanations and explain why we believe our argument still stands.

## **FINDINGS: GRAPPLING IN GROUPS TO ADDRESS PRACTICE PROBLEMS**

Our first two research questions ask how frontline workers use peer discussions to grapple with difficult practice problems and how the characteristics of the policy context help explain the differences observed in the

nature of the discussions taking place in these different peer discussion groups. The examples we provide depict how workers in both groups used peer discussion groups as a vehicle for understanding practice challenges and exploring solutions. They also illustrate some important differences in how they went about doing this.

As explicated in the Method section, all of the discussions we excerpted from the meetings were devoted to exploring practice problems. The groups in both studies deliberated about a similarly broad range of practice problems. They clarified complex policy directives and programmatic expectations. They discussed how to draw on the strengths of their clients and the resources available in their service delivery systems to do so. They also deliberated about the implications of society-wide factors, such as the economic recession and racial discrimination, for their clients and their efforts to help them achieve policy objectives.

We begin by showing how each set of groups dealt with dilemmas of working with specific clients and their circumstances. We then document how they addressed problems in relation to ongoing routines for working with their clientele.

#### DELIBERATING ABOUT SPECIFIC CASES

Both types of groups grappled with challenges related to individual cases. This approach to contending with practice problems was more common among the CW groups than the ES groups, where they comprised some of the most extensive conversations. Nearly one-half of the discussions in the CW data set concerned specific situations, as opposed to less than one-fifth of the discussions in the ES data set.

*Applying guiding principles.* The CW workers' discussions about specific client situations involved detailed diagnosis of the client's needs or deficits and analysis of the case circumstances in order to devise comprehensive solutions. These discussions were guided by professional norms of social work and child welfare, as well as by clinical understandings of mental health and human behavior. For example, one team tried at length to understand why a young mother who was struggling to remain sober seemed unmotivated to have visits with her daughter who had been removed from her care. "My phone should be ringing off the hook, 'When can I see the baby?'" said the lead caseworker. "I think she's giving up a little bit," said her teammate. They did not leave it there, however, because they felt it was their professional responsibility to facilitate the mother seeing her

child. They noted that the mother had to deal with an inflexible employer who required her to keep strict hours and that she had to be drug tested three times a week, which took time she would otherwise have available. Ultimately, the caseworker decided to work with the foster mother to make visitation easier on weekends.

In another long discussion, a team delved into a very complex case involving a West African family of refugees from the civil war. The agency was involved because the 14-year-old son, raised by his grandparents, had been placed in a group home when he became too difficult to handle. At the group home, "he was trying to put his head through the window . . . he trashed the room, everything demolished," the lead worker described. He also made inappropriate sexual comments. The team discussed possible reasons for his behavior, referencing clinical diagnoses like posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as possible cultural factors. They also assessed the program he was in. The lead worker felt the program was appropriate because it was based on play therapy and gave the boy individual attention, but a teammate wondered if the boy was getting the consistent messages that he needed. Ultimately, they decided to request a cultural evaluation to better understand cultural influences and added another worker because the case was so difficult.

In contrast to the CW teams' extended discussions about clients, the ES groups' discussions about dilemmas regarding specific client cases tended to be brief and were often raised in the course of exemplifying a generalized operation or considering a solution to a recurring problem. For example, in a discussion about enforcing the work requirements for JobsFirst clients who were pregnant, a member told the group that a welfare worker had refused to place her client in a job training program because she was 7 months pregnant and would not be able to complete the program before giving birth. The group did not discuss the specific details of this case. Instead, they discussed the need to speak to their counterparts in welfare offices to make sure they understood the Jobs First requirements.

Rather than draw on clinical expertise to guide their decisions, as the CW workers did, the ES group members advised one another about how to align their response to the clients' situations with other sources of legitimacy. This is revealed in the following excerpt from the discussion that followed the previous example.

WORKER 1: I think it's fair if we give them [the clients] the policy up front. This is a commitment to [JobsFirst] and to self-sufficiency. It's about



having a plan and goals and a vision of how you want things to be for yourself. Then if you're set on having a family and not working, then this isn't your program. The regular Section 8 will be a better one. I think that's fair when we are letting them jump the line. It's not fair to the other 52 people who are concentrating on self-sufficiency.

WORKER 2: Our concern is that [there are] people who have been in good standing all along and are making a good faith effort but it's getting them nowhere. It's not getting them a job.

WORKER 3: Legal services could be on us so quick [if we terminated a client because she was pregnant]. We could be potentially in very big trouble [because of] the consequences of certain decisions we make.

WORKER 2: I don't want to terminate someone who's pregnant.

WORKER 3: I don't want to terminate anyone!

This excerpt illustrates the ES workers' consideration of the program requirements and principles of fairness both for the clients who were making the effort to juggle family life and employment and for those on the waitlists for scarce housing subsidies, as the first worker's remarks convey. Her peers' retorts also imply that societal norms around the vulnerability of pregnant women influenced their deliberation, as did concerns about potential reactions of legal advocates who are an additional check on their judgments about clients.

The conversation that followed points to how the group handled the limited options at their disposal to respond to such situations as they deliberated about whether to make exceptions for a specific client who was struggling to comply with the work requirement. After entertaining possible solutions, the group concluded that simply referring her to available services was unlikely to meet her needs and that encouraging her to use her housing subsidy and the agency's housing search assistance to move to an area that had better access to services would undermine the additional policy goal of enabling families to live in low-poverty areas. Instead, the group went on to discuss how they might modify the program requirements for all clients who faced difficulty satisfying work requirements during their pregnancy; they deliberated about the merits of allowing them to investigate arrangements for childcare and make plans for how they would resume employment efforts after the baby was born in lieu of working or training.

*Supplementing the group's judgment with external expertise.* While talking about challenging decisions allowed members to draw on one an-

other's cumulative experience and understanding, this collective knowledge was not always sufficient. To buttress their own interpretations, both sets of groups sought guidance from external experts, albeit in different ways.

The CW team members occasionally sought guidance from professional specialists who provided advice, sometimes in the meeting itself. In some instances, external experts gave very specific guidance for approaching a case. In the course of a discussion about an alcoholic mother whose children were living with her brother and who was on the brink of losing her house to foreclosure, a substance abuse specialist suggested particular wording that could be used with the mother to convince her of the need to make a change and of her capacity to succeed. The worker found this advice very helpful and asked the expert to come when she met with the mother. But more often CW workers would integrate outside expertise with their own. Team members helped a colleague decide whether to increase the number of supervised visits a mother struggling with substance abuse and bipolar disorder had with her daughter. A staffer at the mother's inpatient program said the substance abuse was an artifact of the mother's serious mental illness. Along with this assessment, they reviewed other details from her history, including that she had abruptly left two different inpatient programs. Ultimately, they decided the mother needed to "focus on getting well," while also deciding it was unlikely that her child would be returned to her. Increasing her visits with her daughter would simply give her false hope, they agreed, and they decided not to increase the number of supervised visits.

The ES groups also reached beyond their members' perspectives. They often turned to government officials or intermediaries' publications to help them interpret the regulations, a source of legitimation the CW workers did not consult. Like the CW groups, the ES groups also invited outside experts to group meetings to guide their application of principles of compliance and fairness. The ES workers tended to defer to these experts rather than interact with them to develop a joint understanding of how to proceed. Moreover, their discussions tended to focus on guidance for responding to common dilemmas among the clientele rather than in-depth analysis of individual cases. For example, the FSS group brought in an expert who worked with people with disabilities to introduce them to the specialized programs to which they could refer their eligible clients.

In addition to consulting with external experts in the meetings, the ES groups developed new systems for obtaining expert guidance for

particular cases. One approach involved emulating a system devised by a few of the JobsFirst members; specifically, they circulated templates for letters to physicians to elicit assessments of clients' health that were sufficiently detailed to establish exemption from the work requirement. The FSS group proposed an entirely new system by asking state officials to establish an advisory committee of mental health experts for the benefit of all of the members. Such generalized solutions were rare for the CW workers.

Discussions in both types of groups demonstrate workers' efforts to discern what they saw as appropriate and effective measures to help individual clients, though such deliberations were more prevalent in the CW meetings. The CW discussions delved into nuanced diagnoses of the clients' needs and circumstances, while the ES deliberations focused on aligning clients' situations with their interpretations of the regulations and principles of fairness. Both groups turned to professionals from outside of their groups to supplement their own assessments, but the CW workers integrated those assessments with their own. In contrast, the ES groups deferred to external experts and state officials.

*Grappling with ongoing routines.* The group discussions in both policy contexts also addressed challenges concerning the routines of service provision. These conversations were particularly prevalent in the ES meetings, where virtually every discussion referenced routine operations, though about two-thirds of the CW conversations did so as well. The groups grappled with two types of practice problems: the challenge of comprehending the routine or standard procedure in the first place and the challenge of overcoming obstacles to carrying out these routines as they understood them.

*Understanding the routines.* Helping one another understand the more complex and ambiguous regulations governing the FSS and JobsFirst programs were common topics of discussion in the ES meetings. Members answered one another's questions about eligibility and compliance requirements. As in their deliberations about applying the regulations to specific cases, the groups sometimes invited experts to their meetings to explain confusing procedures. For example, the FSS group arranged for the staff accountant from one member's agency to demonstrate proper procedures for calculating savings and interest for the escrow accounts. Sometimes their deliberations led them to adopt group-wide standards to guide their interpretations of ambiguous regulations. For example, after struggling to operationalize the stipulation that they could allow

clients more time to complete their employment goals for “circumstances beyond the client’s control,” the group delineated three specific and acceptable criteria for granting extensions.

Discussions about understanding how they were expected to carry out CW practices occurred in the CW teams but much less frequently. They did not, for example, talk about their interpretations of what a strength-based approach to working with clients entailed. Instead, they assumed that all members already understood this term as they discussed how to apply it to particular cases. Nor did they instruct one another regarding logistical details, like how to set up supervised visits for parents who could not visit their removed children without supervision. Occasionally bureaucratic procedures stumped them. One team discussed the point at which workers needed to fill out a particular form if a child in their custody was enrolled in public school.

*Overcoming obstacles in implementing the routines.* In addition to helping the workers understand what they were expected to do, the meetings afforded the participants opportunities to contend with obstacles that impeded their efforts to meet these expectations. They sought solutions to these practice problems by drawing from their repertoire of established routines, the materials they had to work with, and their relationships with the staff of other programs in their agencies and other service providers. The CW teams grappled with obstacles to carrying out routine operations by drawing on the resources available to them. Sometimes these solutions represented extensions of the group’s established practice. For example, prompted by an agency directive to attend more to fathers, one team criticized its own practice and discussed how to improve. One worker pointed out that what the agency termed the six “core practice values” already provided a blueprint. “Our core values should be applied to fathers,” she said. The proposed solution applied the customary approaches to a relatively neglected part of their target population.

Other solutions discussed by the CW workers involved changing the way in which they interacted with other staff in their organizations to facilitate their work with families. One of the CW teams proposed a solution to address what they saw as the agency attorneys’ reluctance to go to court without enough evidence for what the workers termed a “knock-out punch.” The team proposed meeting with the attorneys while the team was making its decisions about how to proceed, rather than informing them afterward, as had been the practice. If this solution failed, they

planned to take the problem to the next level of the hierarchy. This example involved changing the timing of their interactions with other professionals within the agency without introducing new roles.

A farther-reaching change in one of the CW teams' ongoing practice emerged in a discussion about how they might ease the strain of heavy case loads. They proposed to conserve travel time by attending to one another's clients when they were in the same vicinity as their own. To facilitate case sharing, they would modify the standardized client forms so that teammates would have sufficient information to carry out these tasks. This solution aimed to enhance the efficiency of an established routine by sharing tasks with one another in new ways and by adapting common materials (i.e., the client forms) to accommodate the team approach.

The ES groups employed similar strategies for exploiting established routines, materials, and relationships to contend with obstacles to program implementation. For example, both ES groups frequently noted that inadequate coordination with the regular housing staff who were responsible for administrative aspects of all of the agency's clientele interfered with their ability to follow up with current clients and recruit potential new program participants. Group members told their peers about a variety of solutions they had introduced in their own agencies to improve coordination. Some made use of the existing channels of communication and administrative process by attending staff meetings to explain the relevance of the ES programs to the housing organization's mission and by color-coding the ES clients' folders to call attention to the need for additional data processing. The groups also persuaded peers' department heads to introduce a new staff position dedicated to working exclusively with the FSS and JobsFirst clients. These examples show how ES workers employed similar resources as those discussed in the CW teams with similar aims of improving the practices the workers were already pursuing. The difference is that these discussions involved sharing solutions the ES workers devised independently in their own organizations, whereas the CW workers' solutions generally emerged during their team meetings.

In addition to this exchange of ideas for novel approaches to existing practices, the ES group also dedicated their meetings to crafting approaches to promoting employment that introduced entirely new practices to their repertoire. For example, in recognition of the limitations of the prescribed, one-on-one case management approach, the FSS group

joined forces to establish what became an annual 2-day retreat to give their clients a chance to learn from one another, build self-esteem, and get some respite from their harried lives. The idea for the retreat expanded on the peer support groups, modeled after their own discussion group, that many of the members convened for their clients. To implement the idea in the absence of a discretionary budget from any of their organizations, the FSS group collaborated with a retreat center that donated room and board, and the group planned and conducted the activities together. Although the CW teams were designed with the intention of developing novel approaches to practice that drew on the potential advantages of teamwork, they did not introduce new program components like the ES workers' client retreat.

Finally, the ES groups also worked together to persuade decision makers to change the regulations to contend with what they saw as limitations in program design. For example, the JobsFirst group convinced state officials to allow clients who were struggling to find jobs to take advantage of career-building volunteer positions or to pursue more education than was allowed in the regulations on the condition that they followed an individualized plan devised by the workers. They also extended the amount of time that clients were allowed to devote to these activities before they were required to find a job. This proposal represented a substantial change in the program design. We saw nothing similar come about as a result of the CW meetings.

Discussions in both the CW and ES groups helped the workers contend with barriers to ongoing practice. The ES workers devoted more attention to helping one another comprehend what program implementation entails, while the CW workers rarely parsed the basic elements of CW practice. Both groups contended with obstacles that interfered with their ability to carry out their work, and both devised solutions by exploiting available resources. Members of groups in both studies sometimes joined forces with one another to pursue their proposed solutions. This similarity is striking, given that the ES discussion groups were composed of workers from separate organizations and were not convened with the intention of promoting collective action. But the ES groups employed two problem-solving strategies that we did not observe among the CW teams. First, members of the ES groups took practices that individual members had developed independently and diffused them more broadly throughout the group. Second, some ES solutions introduced entirely new program elements or even led to changes in regulations.

SUMMARY: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE  
GROUP DISCUSSIONS ABOUT PRACTICE PROBLEMS

Meeting regularly with their peers allowed both the CW and ES workers to reflect on a broad range of challenges away from the immediate pressures of their interactions with clients. These discussions embodied attributes of deliberative dialogue such as acknowledging and questioning assumptions, exposing and examining differences, and exploring alternatives referenced in the literature review (e.g., Landy 1993; Forester 1999). Despite differences between the policy fields, workers' professional backgrounds, and the structure of the groups, reflections in both sets of groups synthesized members' diverse perspectives to resolve dilemmas concerning specific client situations and overcome obstacles to carrying out routines. Both the CW and the ES groups deliberated to align abstract norms and guiding principles with the complexities of practice. Both drew on members' familiarity with the resources of everyday practice to devise novel solutions to persistent challenges. Finally, members of both groups supplemented their collective knowledge from experience on the job with perspectives of external experts to inform their judgments during their discussions.

There were also substantial differences between the two types of groups. The CW teams devoted more attention to resolving dilemmas concerning specific clients than did the ES groups. The CW groups' discussions about their clients' situations were often extensive and typically involved detailed analysis of multiple barriers in order to arrive at comprehensive solutions. In contrast, the ES deliberations about specific client cases were relatively rare and were often raised in the context of grappling with routine tasks of service provision. The ES groups' discussions about specific cases focused on aligning clients' situations with the workers' interpretations of the regulations and principles of what is fair with respect to other participants or potential participants, or in light of clients' due diligence to fulfill the requirements.

The workers in the two studies also differed in how they legitimated their judgments about appropriate practice. The CW groups were more inclined to rely on one another's opinions than were their ES counterparts, who referenced program regulations and sought the guidance of state officials. The CW workers sometimes integrated insights gleaned from their supervisors, other agency decision makers, and specialists from other orga-

nizations into the group's deliberations about a case. In contrast, the ES groups deferred to the state officials from whom they sought guidance and they devised new systems for eliciting advice from professional experts.

The ES groups dedicated more of their time to contending with challenges to carrying out the routine tasks of service provision than did the CW groups, and they grappled with these problems in different ways. The ES groups functioned as a venue for learning about the complex and ambiguous regulations governing ES work. The CW workers rarely discussed the nuances of routine procedures or the basics of CW practice.

We also observed differences in the scope of the solutions to barriers affecting ongoing practice. The CW teams tended to turn to their existing repertoire of routines and their established relationships, and the solutions they considered sought to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of already-established approaches. The ES workers were more likely to make use of new types of routines and relationships with additional professionals in the field in order to introduce entirely new elements to their practice.

#### **DISCUSSION: LATITUDE, AUTONOMY, AND THE SPACE BEFORE ACTION**

Our third research question considers how the characteristics of the policy context help explain the differences observed in the nature of the discussions taking place in these different peer discussion groups. Our analysis suggests that two features of the accountability context helped to shape the workers' very different approaches: the latitude, or range of motion prescribed by the policy design, and the autonomy, or extent of oversight for ensuring that workers stay within the prescribed range of acceptable behaviors. At the same time, since we cannot rule out other influences, we also briefly explore additional factors.

##### **DEGREE OF LATITUDE**

The distinction in degree of latitude helps explain several of the patterns of difference, including the primary focus of attention of the group discussions, the ways in which workers legitimated their assessments of appropriate responses, and the scope of the solutions proposed by the CW and ES groups.



The CW workers' relatively wide latitude to exercise their own judgment about appropriate practice is one explanation for why more of their deliberations concerned specific clients than did the ES workers' discussions. Because CW workers expected to be accountable to internalized norms of social work practice, they had considerable leeway to treat each client's case according to their understanding of the salient details. This freedom came with increased burdens. The CW workers were expected to attend to the full range of needs of every family brought to their attention, and so they devoted extensive attention to subtle details of each case in order to provide the requisite comprehensive diagnoses with solutions to match.

Similarly, the ES groups' attention to ongoing routines reflects their narrowly circumscribed latitude to inform their judgments about individual clients. Consistent with their administrative rather than professional accountability orientation, they focused more of their attention on comprehending the regulations so that they could ensure that their work with clients was in alignment with the program directives. While this need for fealty could be seen as constraining, particularly in contrast to the broader latitude of the CW workers, it also relieved the ES workers of the burden of attending to all the needs of each individual client. They were, however, responsible for balancing accountability to the regulations with accountability to principles of fairness for clients, a tension that has been noted in prior research (e.g., Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The ES workers thus devoted attention to interpreting regulations and considering the implications for the full clientele, even as they tailored their responses to individuals' circumstances.

The greater latitude of the CW workers also helps explain the different ways in which the two sets of groups codified their own knowledge and expertise and drew on the judgments of others. The ES workers sought to devise their own group standards to guide their operationalization of ambiguous directives in part because they lacked internalized norms on which to base their decisions. The lack of internalized norms also explains why they deferred to the external experts they invited to their meetings to inform their interpretations, whereas the CW teams integrated the insights external experts offered into their own process of analyzing each case.

Finally, the CW workers' greater latitude meant that they had a relatively broad repertoire of acceptable routines to draw from when they en-

countered obstacles that interfered with ongoing practice. They also had some room to bend the rules, especially if their supervisors concurred or looked the other way. Consequently, they rarely needed to modify established practices to devise solutions. The ES workers, by contrast, occasionally drew on the resources at hand to devise solutions that departed from official directives and established ways of working because their program regulations provided a finite and sometimes inadequate set of options. Constrained latitude prompted them to introduce new approaches that extended the parameters of their efforts to promote employment. In effect, the ES workers changed the procedures to fit the implementation context in which they and their clients operated, whereas their CW counterparts already had tools to adapt to their environments.

#### NATURE OF AUTONOMY

The divergent approaches to grappling with practice problems also reflect differences in the nature of autonomy, or systems for supervision and oversight, in each discipline. By design, the CW team supplemented the customary clinical supervision between an employee and his or her supervisor with the opportunity for peer-to-peer advising. The CW team discussions were thus conducive to a clinical, case-by-case approach to problem solving, typical of such supervision. The nature of autonomy also likely reduced the CW workers' forays into experimentation. Given that their direct supervisors were sitting in the team meetings with them, the team members may not have had the sense of psychological safety (Edmondson 1999) needed to discuss alternatives to established practices. Moreover, the CW workers were also more prone to scrutiny from the public than were the ES workers. They faced the real possibility that they and the agency could end up in the headlines if a child in (or out) of their care died or was badly injured. This may also have focused their attention on adapting to individual clients' needs.

The less direct supervision over the ES workers' interactions with clients and the focus of the monitoring system can also help account for differences in their discussion focus. Because managers were not expecting the groups to deliver comprehensive explanations for how they worked with each client as long as they had some confidence that program implementation was proceeding according to the directives, the groups' discussions primarily sought to clarify what those expectations were and how workers might

fulfill them. The fact that the ES programs' focus was not central to their housing organizations' missions also helps explain their propensity to introduce novel approaches to their tasks, as change is more likely at the margins than at the core of organizational activities (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978).

The fact that ES workers were not subject to the extensive oversight and public scrutiny that the CW workers faced also helps explain our findings about how the groups deliberated. HUD's relatively infrequent audits of randomly selected files and attention to participant outcomes measured in the aggregate put less pressure on the ES workers to consult with their peers about the details of their work with each client. Instead, they could ensure the likelihood that cases selected for review would meet approval by directing attention to how they operationalized program directives. Our observation that the groups were more likely to discuss client details in the exceptional situations when they were concerned that legal service advocates might challenge their judgments reinforces that the ES groups' deliberation reflects the nature of their oversight. Moreover, the groups' interpretations of these details in relation to the regulations and principles of fairness are consistent with the legal reasoning that governs the advocates' function as checks in the accountability system.

HUD's attention to program-wide outcomes (e.g., increased employment and earnings rates) also affords some flexibility to the workers to experiment with alternative approaches to achieving the desired outcomes as long as they are within the accepted parameters. While child protection programs are also mandated to track aggregate outcomes such as time to permanency, the relative difficulty of attributing clients' employment and earnings rates directly to the ES workers' specific actions also grants them more leeway to experiment than the CW workers, whose interventions tend to have a more visible effect on a child's welfare.

Finally, the ES workers' greater autonomy over how they interacted as a group may account for observed differences in their deliberations. Although a department director from one of the agencies chaired the ES forums, the members were free to discuss their approach to practice problems without the presence of their direct supervisors, which may explain why they sometimes adopted a more proactive approach to interacting with decision makers than we saw in the CW teams. While ES group members tended to defer to the external experts and officials they consulted, the ES groups initiated the invitations with the purpose of clarifying

questions that arose in their discussions and in order to seek approval for their proposed changes to procedures when they exceeded the bounds of their discretion.

Thus, we can see how differences in the accountability context influenced how the groups deliberated about the challenges they encountered. Greater latitude allowed CW groups the freedom to address problems on the level of specific clients, whereas more constrained latitude directed the problem solving focus of ES groups to ongoing practice and its implications for the entire clientele as well as individual clients. Constrained latitude may also be an impetus for modifying the established approaches to service delivery, as is greater autonomy from scrutiny over specific responses to dilemmas with clients.

#### ADDITIONAL INFLUENCES

We should note that, given our research design, we cannot rule out other influences on how the groups deliberated. In fact, we think it is likely that there were additional factors. Most important, variation in the structure and composition of the CW teams and ES discussion forums may also have contributed to their differences. The relative frequency of the CW team meetings (once or twice a week) may have been more conducive to discussions of particular client cases than were the bimonthly meetings of the ES groups, since members of the ES groups typically needed to resolve the specific dilemmas of practice more quickly than the cycle of group meetings permitted. The interdependence of the CW team members in managing individual cases may also help explain why they talked more about specific clients than did the ES workers, who had no overlap in clients. Finally, the fact that the ES practitioners hailed from different organizations and service environments meant that they were able to experiment with new approaches in different contexts. The absence of a similar opportunity for experimentation and replication may help explain why we did not observe the diffusion of innovative practices among the CW team members.

Characteristics of the organizations themselves may also have shaped the groups' discussions. As noted above, we think the peripheral location of ES within the housing organizations offered more freedom to the ES discussion groups to modify routines than the CW teams experienced. While both groups were embedded in public bureaucracies that exemplify the pressures identified in prior research on street-level behavior, it

could be significant that the ES group members in this study hailed from nonprofit contracting organizations. Arguably, nonprofit organizations may be more conducive to innovation than public sector organizations. However, since the ES workers (and the entire staff dedicated to administering the housing vouchers) engaged in the same tasks and were subject to the same monitoring systems as their counterparts in public housing authorities, this may not be a primary causal factor.

Another set of explanations may lie in the demands of the different jobs and the available resources with which to tackle them. For example, perhaps case complexity differed between the two sets of workers. While we did not explore this comprehensively, we were both struck by the entrenched obstacles and dilemmas the workers faced, and we think it would be difficult to systematically determine who faced the harder or more complicated task. It is also possible that the CW workers had more assets, such as financial support, counseling, and resources such as parent aides, at their disposal than the ES workers did. But that does not necessarily explain why they attended more to individual cases than to broader routines, nor would it obviously lead to less experimentation. If anything, it seems plausible that the more extensive educational attainment and professional credentials of many of the CW team members would have provided the teams with skills and sensibilities to generate more innovative solutions than the ES groups. But the opposite seems true. Our findings suggest that grounding in professional norms and practices led to the application of the repertoire of established routines rather than experimentation with alternatives. Since professional expertise is the basis for the relatively wide latitude afforded to the CW staff, this observation seems consistent with the explanation that accountability context influences the nature of group deliberation. Ultimately, we believe that latitude and autonomy take us a good distance in our understanding of the differences in the groups' deliberations, but we also believe that they are not the full story.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP AND SOCIAL SERVICE PRACTICE**

Analysis of these discussions sheds new light on how frontline social service workers determine their course of action. Our inquiry moves beyond examination of the tension between the constructive and destructive motivations and consequences of workers' choices, which has dominated previous scholarship on street-level bureaucracies. We describe how meet-

ing with their peers on a regular basis provided these workers with a forum for deliberating about their choices. We also show how the contours of the accountability context in which the workers and the groups operate seem to influence the ways in which they deliberate about dilemmas of service provision and explore solutions to obstacles that impede their efforts to help their clients. In doing so, this article charts a course for a broader research agenda about decision making, learning, and creative problem solving in groups of frontline social service staff. In this section, we position our findings in relation to three facets of the frontline literature: the effect of peer influence, the potential of deliberation to enhance accountability and foster innovation, and the relevance of the policy context to how workers engage in deliberation.

The group discussions we observed expose a different dimension of peer influence than prior research, which has explored aspects such as professional identity formation (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Oberfield 2009), collective bargaining to advance rights to better salaries and working conditions (Citino et al. 2006; Nielsen 2006), and worker solidarity to resist directives that hamper common personal interests (Crozier 1964; Brehm and Gates 1997) or to rationalize deviations that ameliorate work pressures (Lin 2000; Sandfort 2000). Our findings show how frontline workers can draw on their cumulative knowledge to strive to advance policy goals more purposefully and strategically than has been documented elsewhere.

Moreover, the peer group discussions exhibited characteristics of deliberative dialogue, which is more typically discussed in relation to citizen engagement in the policy process (Landy 1993; Forester 1999; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003). They teased out multiple facets of complex problems, tested hunches, discerned inconsistencies, and explored options to determine which were the most compelling. They also discussed clients', policy makers', and other stakeholders' competing priorities and solicited input from external experts and officials to legitimate their judgments and proposed solutions. The groups functioned as systems of accountability where street-level workers sought to take into account diverse perspectives about appropriate service delivery. This finding is significant because prior research has documented that workers' lack of understanding of complex and ambiguous directives and the strains of their working conditions can lead them to resist new directives or to focus on tasks that are relatively easy to accomplish, even when they are motivated to serve their clients (e.g., Meyers, Riccucci, and Lurie 2001; Riccucci 2005). We do not

know if the information shared, analyzed, and debated in the groups was always sufficient to prevent resorting to coping mechanisms, but we did witness numerous hours of workers weighing options and considering implications in preparation for their interactions with clients.

Our observation of workers' discussions also illuminates a decision-making process that contrasts with the dominant depiction of judgments based on workers' idiosyncratic beliefs about what is fair, just, and effective (Kelly 1994; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Further, whereas prior research has questioned frontline workers' capacity for critical reflection (Rein 1983; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), we observed that peer group discussions helped frontline workers develop guiding principles that aimed to take into account broader policy implications, as well as the needs of individual clients. Of course we do not know to what extent their analysis of practice problems was accurate or whether their judgments were likely to be accepted by relevant stakeholders. Nor do our findings suggest that talking about practice challenges with peers is sufficient to ensure that workers follow through with the decisions discussed in the meetings. Discussion groups could, nevertheless, be potentially valuable management tools, especially given the acknowledged paucity of training resources for frontline workers (Hill 2003; Riccucci 2005).

The groups are also venues for creative problem solving. The idea that discussion forums or work teams can generate innovative solutions to service delivery is not new (Bate and Robert 2002; Willem and Buelens 2007; Koliba and Gajda 2009). Our study is interesting because it observes groups of frontline workers. Although we heard reports that the workers we observed implemented many of their proposed solutions and successfully advocated for their institutionalization in their organizations, we cannot know whether these solutions actually resulted in better outcomes for their clients. Our findings nevertheless illustrate that groups of frontline workers may be able to leverage their understanding of routines, their connections with other service providers, and their own relationships with their clients and with one another to generate creative solutions, as do those with more education and training and with greater decision-making authority (e.g., Bardach 1998; Feldman and Pentland 2003; Wagenaar 2004).

Finally, our findings contribute to emerging theory about the significance of the policy and surrounding institutional context on the exercise of discretion (Hupe and Hill 2007; Sosin 2010). Prior empirical work ex-

plores how this context influences individual workers' identity on the job (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Oberfield 2009), and we suggest that it matters for how frontline workers grapple with practice challenges. Moreover, while prior scholarship acknowledges that both latitude and autonomy shape the amount of discretion workers have for independent judgment and action (Lipsky 1980; Hupe and Hill 2007; Maynard-Moody and Portillo 2010; Sosin 2010), there has been little empirical investigation of how each of these dimensions influences workers' navigation of that space. Our comparative analysis suggests that the amount of leeway for decision making and the extent of oversight and guidance over workers' actions are among the factors that shape street-level problem solving in complementary, yet distinctive, ways. The degree of latitude played a role in focusing workers' attention on client-specific dilemmas or ongoing practices, as well as the extent to which proposed solutions introduced novel approaches to their work. The nature of scrutiny over their work was related to how workers engaged with external experts, as well as the scope of their exploration of promising alternative approaches.

These findings matter because they suggest that peer discussion groups can be a useful approach for harnessing the power of street-level discretion, which is sensitive to differences across accountability contexts. Even workers without the professional background associated with more expansive latitude exploited the opportunity to share and generate solutions to practice challenges. The discussion groups served as a supplemental system of oversight and guidance for the groups with greater autonomy, which also underscores their potential for improving street-level implementation. In fact, such groups may be especially conducive to creative problem solving among workers who lack professional expertise and have less support from more informed policy actors.

This article is a first step toward understanding the conditions and mechanisms that can enable the productive deployment of discretion to inform decision making and creative problem solving among peers. Additional work is required in several areas, however.

#### **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This paper has a number of limitations. We examined the workers' process of grappling with practice problems in the context of peer groups dedicated to improving service delivery. Determining whether their judg-



ments were, in fact, aligned with policy priorities and professional standards was beyond the scope of this article, as was an examination of potential variation in the extent to which group members participated in the discussions. Because we did not observe worker-client interactions, we cannot draw conclusions about whether these groups actually influenced how the workers served their clients. Nor can we conclude whether these peer discussion groups enabled better outcomes for their clients or agencies since we did not have control groups or outcome data. Moreover, we did not compare the conversations we heard in the meetings with problem solving that might have transpired in other settings.

This article provides a foundation for further work. These initial gleanings suggest that more comparative research about the effects of latitude and autonomy is warranted to test and elaborate these observations. Moreover, future research could examine additional dimensions of the policy context referenced in theoretical work, such as those with more participatory worker-client relationships or with management systems that employ incentive-based systems of oversight. Comparing peer discussion groups among the frontline staff of public and nonprofit sector organizations or organizations of different sizes would also enrich our understanding, as would investigation of groups composed of workers with different educational and professional backgrounds. Future studies could also illuminate the differences between deliberation in peer groups and more informal conversations that may occur among workers who do not meet regularly for the purpose of improving practice.

Our analysis surfaced illuminating differences in the extent to which discussions attended to specific cases as opposed to ongoing routines, the ways in which discussions incorporated guidance from external experts, and the extent to which proposed solutions drew from the existing repertoire or introduced innovative modifications. Future research may uncover additional aspects of grappling with practice problems.

Furthermore, as we suggest above, differences in group structure may also have influenced how the workers engaged in deliberation. Further attention to factors such as the frequency of meetings, the degree of interdependence and heterogeneity among group members, and the nature of group leadership may deepen our understanding of the potential of peer group discussions as structures for fostering accountability and creative problem solving. Given the dearth of research at the group level in the street-level literature (Foldy and Buckley 2009), this avenue could be promising.

While previous scholars have suggested that group learning environments could be a route to flexible, insightful, and accountable frontline work, little empirical work has explored them. This article suggests that collective street-level attention to the rigors and dilemmas of frontline work is worth further investigation.

#### NOTE

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