What Front-Line Workers Talk about When They Talk about Practice: The Influence of Task and Group Structure on Peer Discussion Groups

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Studies of street-level workers have tended to focus on who they are and what they do as individuals. We know much less about how street-level workers exercise discretion when they come together to talk about their work on a regular basis, though the potential of peer discussion and reflection on practice among frontline workers has been noted in passing. This paper draws from two intensive, qualitative studies of groups that convened frontline workers to talk about practice with the intention of improving service delivery, one a study of teams of child welfare workers and the other a study of communities of practice made up of self-sufficiency workers. We discovered that while workers in the two settings discussed the same broad topics, the time spent on the topics and the particulars of their discussions differed significantly. This paper describes where the groups converge and diverge and draws on the nature of their task and the characteristics of their groups to explain the differences.
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Studies of street-level workers have tended to focus on who they are and what they do as individuals. This focus on individuals is understandable given that so much of social service delivery occurs in the one-on-one interactions between workers and clients (Lipsky 1980, Musheno and Portillo 2010). Policies and professional norms delineate accepted practices; supervisors and managers strive to guide workers’ performance; and the organizational and service environment influence how the work is pursued (Jewell and Glaser 2006, May and Winter 2009, Hupe and Hill 2007, Keiser 2010, Hasenfeld 2010). Yet even in the most tightly monitored service contexts, street-level workers have considerable discretion over what occurs in these interactions.


We know much less about how street-level workers exercise discretion when they come together to talk about their work on a regular basis. It is widely acknowledged that coworkers play a key role in work life: how they feel about their jobs, how they organize to promote workplace rights, and how they form social bonds (Crozier 1964; Van Maanen and Barley 1984; Baines 2008). Brehm and Gates’ (1997) analysis of extensive surveys of frontline public servants found that those who derived utility from their friendships with fellow employees were more likely to conform to one another’s patterns of working (completing assignments), fudging paperwork (shirking), or bending the rules (sabotage). The potential of peer discussion and reflection on practice among frontline workers has been noted in passing (eg. Lipsky 1980, Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Yet we know relatively little about how frontline workers help one another resolve challenging dilemmas of practice or pursue creative solutions to problems that emerge as they strive to serve their clients. Even fewer studies have investigated groups that convene frontline workers for the purpose of improving
service delivery (exception are Foldy and Buckley 2009 and Goldman 2009).

Recent research suggests that group approaches to fostering the frontline workers’ participation in service delivery improvement warrant further exploration. An emerging body of research examines work groups as venues for sharing information, professional socialization, creative problem solving, and collaborating to get the work done (Edmondson et. al 2001; Argote, Gruenfeld, and Naquin 2001). However, much of this research investigated private sector contexts or involved managers and professional experts in nonprofit and public sector organizations (Goodman, Ravlin & Schminke, 1987; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996; West and Field, 1995, West and Poulton, 1997; Bates and Roberts 2002, Koliba and Gajda 2009). Little is known about how findings translate to the context particular to frontline service workers. Frontline workers exercise discretion in a complex accountability environment of multiple stakeholders, indeterminate outcomes, and contested theories about what constitutes effective practice (Hupe and Hill 2007, Brodkin 2008; Hasenfeld 2010, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, Sandfort 2000). Consequently, decision makers are less inclined to trust street-level staff to take risks associated with fruitful learning and problem solving. Nor do workers at the bottom of their organizational hierarchy typically have access to resources to support inquiry and experimentation.

This paper draws from two intensive, qualitative studies of discussion groups that convened frontline workers to talk about practice with the intention of improving service delivery. One study of teams of child welfare workers lasted about four years. The other study investigated 3 communities of practice of the staff of two economic self-sufficiency programs over 5 years (11 years with the historical perspective prior to observations). Each of the studies provides examples of service delivery improvements that ranged from expanding members’ understanding of appropriate practice to initiating new approaches to the work. Yet there were also significant differences between the two sets of groups. We felt an investigation of these differences would help us understand the role of street-level groups for promoting accountable and creative service delivery.

The two contexts differed in significant dimensions. First, although all of the groups aimed to improve service delivery, the impetus for their establishment differed. The child welfare teams were established as a result of the state commissioner’s initiative with the explicit objective of providing more emotional support to workers, changing established routines and
rethinking the way workers interacted with families. The self-sufficiency groups were established in order to facilitate the implementation of new federally sponsored programs in the low-income housing agencies responsible for carrying them out. Second, they differed in the nature of the work, including the extent of discretion granted to the members. The child welfare workers share professional norms and have considerable discretion to decide how to ensure children’s well-being. In contrast, program regulations delineate practice for self-sufficiency staff. Finally, the settings for the two studies also differed in the structure of the peer discussion groups themselves, including the organizational homogeneity or heterogeneity of the membership, the degree of interdependence among the members, and the group leadership roles. Members of the child welfare teams worked in the same organizations, began with the expectation of sharing work responsibilities, and were facilitated by a direct supervisor. The self-sufficiency groups operated the programs in different housing organizations and did not initially anticipate collaborative work. The two groups comprised of nonprofit staff are facilitated by a mid-level manager from one of the member’s organizations; the third group of public sector staff was self-led.

In addition to providing breadth of analysis, these differences facilitate comparisons that allow us to draw initial inferences about how these factors influence decision making and creative practice in these street-level groups.

The following section describes the methods used to collect and analyze the data discussed in this paper. We then describe our findings about the topics of discussion in the groups. The subsequent section analyzes the similarities and differences in the content of the discussions between the child welfare teams and self-sufficiency communities of practice. We close the paper with a discussion of how these findings shed light on prior research on front-line social service workers. We also chart next steps for further analyzing these cases and suggest directions for future research beyond these cases.

**METHODS**

This paper draws on two independently designed studies, one led by the first author and one 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. Furthermore, both studies took
place in the same northern state and their time periods overlapped by about two years. Since that discovery, we have investigated how to build on both studies to create knowledge about the practice of front-line workers. In this section, we describe the context and data collection of each study separately and then describe how together we analyzed data to create the argument contained here.

**The Self-Sufficiency Study**

This study, led by the first author, investigated three communities of practice comprised of front-line staff from different housing agencies operating the same two economic self-sufficiency programs. The two programs incorporate the goal of promoting economic independence from public assistance into the US. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s (HUD) system for administering low-income housing subsidies.

The Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program targets families who already hold rental housing subsidies (Section 8 vouchers) who voluntarily enroll in the 5-7 year program. Participants receive case management services to help them establish employment goals and develop strategies to achieve those goals 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 self-sufficiency. JOBLink, as the state called the voucher program, stipulates that participants comply with a work requirement in order to retain the housing assistance. Unlike FSS, JOBLink participants do not receive referrals to training and supportive services or other case management supports.
Like the better known welfare-reform policies, both programs not only demand more from the clients in exchange for receipt of benefits, they also place considerable responsibilities on frontline service workers. They involve the work of “people changing” in addition to “people processing” (Hasenfeld 1992) and involve a “culture of self-sufficiency” as opposed to the “culture of eligibility determination” that dominates housing subsidy allocation (Bane and Ellwood 1994). The emphasis on case management means that FSS practitioners have considerably more flexibility in implementing the program than their counterparts in the more regulatory JOBLink program.¹

The staff of both programs are typical of other frontline human service workers in the variety of backgrounds they bring to the job. In contrast to the child welfare requirements, there are no educational prerequisites; the majority have some college education and the exceptional few have degrees in social work or social services. Most are women; several are women of color, although most are white; and many are single-mothers who have benefited from public assistance in their own lives.

The workers who staffed these programs convened in one of three discussion forums or communities of practice (CoPs): one comprised of the practitioners who staff FSS in the eight regional nonprofit housing organizations that contract with the state for all Section 8 administration, its JOBLink counterpart, and the group of FSS practitioners from public housing authorities around the state. The forums shared each of the primary characteristics of CoPs (Wenger 1998; Wenger et al 2002). They were all expressly dedicated to the purpose of deepening knowledge for self-sufficiency practice. Participation was voluntary and, although membership was restricted to those who held particular positions, members attended as

¹ Because this paper seeks to examine the broader differences between the child welfare and self-sufficiency cases, we do not delve into the distinctions between the more flexible FSS and more regulatory JOBLink programs.
individuals rather than representatives of their respective organizations. Each of the forums met regularly, usually bi-monthly and typically lasted two to three hours.

The two nonprofit forums were chaired by an appointee of the Rental Assistance Committee (itself a CoP) comprised of Section 8 directors from each of the eight nonprofits. The Chair assumed responsibility for setting the agenda, reminding participants about the dates of the meeting, and, occasionally, facilitating the discussion. The state’s Self-Sufficiency Coordinator also attended many of their meetings. She served as a liaison between the forums and the state policy makers and she co-facilitated on occasion. The public forum, in contrast, was entirely self-led. The member-elected leaders took responsibility for convening the meetings and setting the agenda.

Data collection included observations of 61 meetings of these groups from 2000 through 2005, captured in near-verbatim field notes. Follow-up interviews with the practitioners helped clarify and elaborate points made in the meetings and allowed further investigation of their individual practices and experiences in their particular agencies and interactions with partners in their service environments. Analysis of meeting minutes dating back to the first meeting of the nonprofit FSS practitioner discussion forum in 1994 and interviews with previous members of the community of practice extend the historical horizon of the study. Dozens of interviews with other housing agency actors, partner organizations, and state level actors, as well as e-mail correspondence among CoP participants were also part of the dataset. This paper is based largely on meeting observation but is informed by interview and archival data as well.

The Child Welfare Study

This study observed a pilot Teaming Initiative at a state child welfare agency (hereafter known as CWA) which was launched to explore how a team-based structure could improve
social worker morale as well as services to families. The agency was concerned about its front-line employees who worked directly with clients and suffered considerable stress and isolation (Nissly, Mor Barak, and Levin 2005). It hoped that a team-based model could facilitate better outcomes for workers and clients in two ways: by bringing together a broader set of perspectives and experiences in thinking about how to work with a given family as well as by providing more emotional support to individual social workers.

These front-line workers were the agency employees who were out in the field, going to people’s homes to investigate allegations of child abuse or neglect, speaking with teachers, counselors and other “collaterals” as the agency called them, finding resources (such as counseling or temporary financial support) for families, and making recommendations to their superiors about whether or not a child should be removed from a home.

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 near each other, but each worker had his or her own caseload, and was singly responsible for those cases. (Caseload was officially capped at 18, but often went higher.) In the Teaming Initiative, the structure was similar: each worker was a member of a “team” with a supervisor and four or five social workers. However, the form of service delivery was expected to change in that 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 what cases they would focus on and how they would structure their work.

The Teaming Initiative involved seven teams in six offices around the state. The second author enrolled all seven teams in the research and collected both qualitative and quantitative data, working with a research assistant, a doctoral student in social work. Data collection began
in spring, 2003 with observation of organizational meetings bringing together high level central and regional staff to plan the Teaming Initiative as well as several other agency-wide initiatives. Data collection from the pilot teams began in spring, 2004 and finished in the winter of 2007. Three rounds of data collection from the teams took place: at the beginning of the teams’ work together (2004), after about one year (2005), and after two to two-and-a-half years (2006-07). We gathered both qualitative and quantitative data during each round, including surveys with team members, team interviews (interviewing the whole team at one time), and individual interviews. We also observed team meetings, roughly every other month, over about 2.5 years. Finally, we conducted surveys and interviews with team stakeholders and observers, including the team’s immediate superior, the director of the office in which the team was located, a teaming consultant working with the teams, and the coordinator of the Teaming Initiative.

This paper is built largely from the transcripts of 47 team meetings, though, as with the self-sufficiency study, includes insights from the interview data as well. The team meetings lasted at least an hour and sometimes longer. We wrote field notes as we observed, as well as taped the meetings. All the tapes were transcribed. We also compared these transcripts to the field notes, since the latter captured things like non-verbal behavior that the transcripts did not.

Joint Data Analysis

Data analysis unfolded over a series of stages, which gradually honed our research question and focused our analytic lens. Over the process of approximately six months, we conducted our own independent analyses on our respective datasets, wrote analytic memos that we shared with each other, and met regularly to discuss our emerging insights.

We began with simply learning about each other’s study. We related to each other the context for the study, theoretical lenses used, data gathered and previous analyses. We read
existing articles and manuscripts from each study. As we talked, it became clear that our studies shared both important similarities and interesting differences. Both were designed to illuminate the role of peer consultation and discussion in learning new ways of working, though the child welfare study focused on formal work teams in a single organization and the self-sufficiency study on informal, cross-organizational communities of practice. Both were attentive to individual characteristics and organizational environments. The child welfare study also focused on group-level factors. The self-sufficiency study positioned the regulation-bound case workers within the policy and societal context of welfare-reform, an economic downturn, and ensuing budget cuts.

As time went on, we also referred to the existing literature on street-level practice to help us identify our contribution. We agreed that while there is a wealth of information on front-line workers, there is virtually no research on what happens when they meet regularly to collectively discuss their work. Therefore, we decided to begin at a basic descriptive level and identify the topics of conversation that arose in these group discussions. We independently went back to our data and identified the topics that we saw and found examples of each. We compared our notes and ultimately came up with a set of categories that worked for both studies: Clients, Broader Work Practices, Organizational and Policy Context, the Self in Relation to the Work, and the Group.

As we conducted this initial analysis, it became clear that while participants in both studies discussed all five of these topics, they varied in how much they did so and in more precisely what they talked about. Therefore, our second set of analyses created finer-grained distinctions within the five topic areas, as well as roughly assessed the amount of time our respective sets of participants spent on the topic. Not surprisingly, as we studied our datasets in
more detail, we wondered why we saw these differences. Therefore, the third analysis sought to explain the heterogeneity, based on the structure and context of the work and on the nature of the task in which the participants were engaged.

Ultimately, this paper is motivated by three research questions: 1) What do street-level bureaucrats talk about when they meet in groups to discuss their work? 2) To what extent do these topics converge or diverge across settings? 3) What accounts for these similarities and differences? These questions are all answered in the following section.

**FINDINGS**

As noted above, we found both similarities and differences between the discussions frontline workers in the two studies. In this section, we will outline and provide examples of where the datasets converged and diverged. We begin with a descriptive review of what the workers actually discussed, that is, the various topics engaging both groups, illustrated by examples, along with notes about how both the quantity and quality of discussion differed across the studies. We follow with some tentative explanations for why we see these differences.

**Topics of Discussion**

We found that the participants in both datasets talked about the same broad topics: their clients; broader work practices that would affect multiple clients; aspects of their respective organizational and policy contexts; themselves as individuals and their experience of their work; and the dynamics of their team or group. (They also spent time talking about things unrelated to work, though this was quite limited.) However, they sometimes talked about these topics in different ways or focused on different elements; further they sometimes differed in the extent to which they discussed each of these topics.
Clients. The main task of the participants in both studies was casework with individual clients or families, though one set of workers focused on child welfare while the other focused on self-sufficiency among public housing tenants. Therefore, a large portion of their conversations, across the settings, was about their cases, though these conversations varied widely both within and across the studies. Here we provide several examples illustrating different ways in which clients were discussed.

Many of the child welfare workers’ conversations related to logistical issues. One team had a long conversation about supervised visits (visits between a parent and a child removed from the home, supervised by a CWA staffer or some other third party). In this particular case, the team felt that the mother -- who said that she very much wanted to see her child – was not attempting to overcome the logistical hurdles necessary to make that happen; for example, she had not figured out how to obtain transportation to the visit location, though buses were available. The team members discussed what to do. The lead worker felt she had done what she could and the mother needed to take some initiative. The team members agreed. One worker said she didn’t have a lot of sympathy for the mother; the lead worker agreed, but noted that “legally, we have to facilitate visitation.” The team supervisor agreed.

However, other conversations were more clinically oriented. For example, as one team discussed a case with a mentally ill child, the supervisor used the opportunity to get more details about the child’s illness. The caseworker mentioned that the child could be violent and the supervisor asked exactly what the child did. The worker noted that the child kicked and bit people, sometimes going to the kitchen to find weapons to use. The supervisor asked about the child’s diagnosis but the caseworker said the child had not yet been formally diagnosed; the team
then mentions some potential diagnoses including ADHD, PTSD, ODD, and mood or seizure disorders. The team also discussed whether the source that the caseworker is relying on was accurate and reliable.

In some cases, these conversations could be quite lengthy, with the lead worker providing a detailed description of the case and team members asking questions to ensure that they had a fuller picture of the family, in case they were asked to help with interventions. In one conversation lasting roughly 45 minutes, one team discussed a very complex case of a Liberian family, one that had witnessed extensive violence in the civil war there, consisting of a 14-year-old boy who was acting out, his grandparents and another female family member, in her late 20’s. The lead worker on the case found it quite difficult and often turned to his team members for help and guidance. They discussed the boy’s behaviors, whether they might be culturally informed, if he was receiving the appropriate care at his residential treatment program, whether the younger female family member was the boy’s sister or his mother and if their inability to figure this out was related to language or perhaps deliberate deception, and how best to staff the case as a team.

Although most of their discussions concerned clients in some way, the discussions in the self-sufficiency groups delved into the specific details of clients’ lives or situations less extensively than did the child-welfare teams. The two nonprofit self-sufficiency groups typically began meetings with brief updates about how each member’s clients were fairing with respect to program requirements. These reports included program-wide statistics about the number of clients enrolled, their earnings, and their compliance with work requirements. Members of each of the FSS groups also occasionally recounted clients’ noteworthy achievements such as when a
client obtained an associate’s degree after a prolonged struggle with basic reading skills, opened her own business, or purchased a home.

SS group members did occasionally discuss particular clients in more depth, rather than simply report on them. These conversations focused on clients’ struggles to fulfill program requirements and what the practitioner could do to help rather than trying to understand a client’s mental state or motivation for change. For example, one worker told the group about an FSS participant who earned $250 a week in her current job and wanted to go to school during the day but was unable to afford child care to cover both her time at work and at school. Group members referred the worker to programs that offered extended child care subsidies and suggested that she make sure the cost of childcare was being included in her adjusted rent payment calculation.

Such conversations about clients’ difficulties sometimes referenced how the regulations influenced clients’ ability to comply with the work requirements. For example, one member told the group about a client who recently had a baby and was having difficulty looking for work because she was not eligible for a childcare subsidy until she found a job. She was also having trouble getting to job interviews because she lived in a town with little public transportation and she did not have a car. The group talked about the problem of eligibility for child care and car purchase programs for low-income people who were not yet employed. One member suggested that the client use her housing voucher to move to a location with better public transportation and childcare resources. This suggestion led to a discussion about what was realistic and ethical to expect a client to do. One worker noted, “I wouldn't tell my own child to go out in the wilderness without a job and transportation.”

While the self-sufficiency discussions were rarely clinical in nature, they also occasionally attended to cultural issues, like the CWA employees. One of the more extensive
conversations about a specific client concerned a woman whose immigrant husband had been the family member responsible for fulfilling the work requirement. After he was deported to his home country on grounds of inadequate documentation, the group discussed the likelihood that the woman would be able to find work given her lack of experience and English skills. Yet the discussion quickly turned to broader questions about how to take into account differences in clients’ cultural background with respect to norms of woman’s work outside the home and the hazards of dependency on one’s spouse.

Finally, the self-sufficiency workers were more likely than the CWA workers to talk about how they perceived the client population as a whole. In this excerpt, workers had a discussion about clients’ tendency to move from job to job without amassing sufficient experience to develop a career trajectory, invoking both individual and systemic reasons for this trend.

Worker 1: They leave because of personal as opposed to professional reasons. It's an issue of persistence and discipline. There are places they can go with their experience. We're dealing with people who are socially retarded. They are so accustomed to reacting to crises. They are in perpetual crisis mode that overtakes all. They need to address their social issues. To pull them out is difficult. It's familiar to them. They resist change.

Worker 2: Crisis becomes what they want.

Worker 3: It's not what they want but how they're trained to respond.

Worker 4: They're not thinking about their whole responsibilities.

Worker 5: It's a systemic problem. If we are underfunded and understaffed, it's hard to do this.

Worker 6 (Chair): It requires creativity. We need to sit with them and help them analyze their response to the crisis so that they can do it differently from before.
Overall, this topic reveals several differences between the two groups. First, the CWA workers were much more likely to talk about specific clients and they spent much more time discussing them than did the SS workers. Approximately two-thirds of discussion time among the CWA workers was spent on discussing individual cases, compared to less than one-third of the SS group meetings. Furthermore, the CWA workers sometimes engaged in clinical conversations about their clients which was outside the boundaries of the SS workers’ role. Their conversations about individual clients, on the other hand, were usually part of longer discussions about work practices and changes in the implementation environment. Finally, the SS workers were more likely to make generalizations about their clients.

**Work Practices.** Both sets of front-line workers went beyond talking about individual cases to thinking about broader practices or guidelines relevant to multiple cases. But this was far more extensive in the self-sufficiency forums.

The SS groups’ work was accompanied by lengthy federal and state guidelines and regulations, and much of their discussion was about understanding and interpreting these rules. A number of discussions were about specific terminology: for example, what did “at risk for homelessness,” “suitable employment,” or “good faith effort” actually mean? Some of these discussions were brief exchanges about the language of the regulations. For example, JOBLink workers quoted the program regulations to clarify that current or former welfare beneficiaries were eligible to apply for the program if they meet HUD’s definition of “severe housing need. They also informed one another about the rules and procedures for accessing resources such as fuel assistance, child care subsidies, and job training from other providers.

The meetings also sometimes functioned as training opportunities where state administrators or experts instructed the practitioners about the more complex program
requirements. For example, the State Self-sufficiency Coordinator spent the majority of an early meeting of the JOBLink group explaining the different time frames during which clients needed to secure employment depending on whether they had just enrolled in the program, were fired from their job, were laid off for reasons beyond their control, or were recovering from a temporary disability. The FSS group brought in an accountant to demonstrate how to calculate how much of the client’s rent payments would be deposited into their personal escrow accounts.

Discussions were more extensive where regulations were ambiguous and afforded the practitioners discretion in how to interpret them. For example, a discussion about whether a client should be considered a successful graduate of the FSS program prompted an extended debate about different interpretations of the requirement that they secure “suitable employment.” Some referenced the HUD regulations, while others interpreted the requirement in reference to the conventions of the client’s occupation and still others emphasized the need to base the determination on the particular client’s capabilities. The group sought the opinion of the State Coordinator who stressed that they use their own judgment to discern whether the client was doing her best to achieve her personal goals and recommended that each practitioner add clarifying language to her agency’s administrative plan to reinforce that interpretation.

The SS groups also occasionally developed novel practices to help them exercise discretion when program directives were vague or insufficiently specified. The nonprofit FSS group devoted several meetings to devising a two-step process for assessing clients’ service needs, a core aspect of the program that was not delineated in the guidelines. The questionnaires and meeting protocols became common practice among group members, including the newcomers who joined the staff after the procedures were developed. The JOBLink practitioners developed a number of practices to help them discern whether clients were making
what the regulations termed a “good faith effort” to secure employment. They shared templates for letters to physicians to ensure that they provide sufficient explanation of whether a client’s disability prevented them from working to fulfill the documentation requirements. They also established a new system for tracking whether clients were devoting sufficient effort to job search. Clients were asked to fill out and submit weekly Job Search Logs where they recorded the number of activities – according to a list the group devised -- that would count as meeting the requirement.

These creative additions to FSS practice expanded the repertoire of ways the practitioners could help their clients achieve the program goals. The JOBLink group actually changed the program regulations themselves, regarding the effectiveness of the “work-first” philosophy. The JOBLink group successfully advocated to allow some clients to pursue longer-term education programs and career-related internships in lieu of the work requirement. The revised regulations allowed the staff to devise FSS-like individualized plans for JOBLink clients that stipulated goals for “enhancing employability in addition to promoting employment.”

At CWA, conversations about larger practices happened much less frequently. When they did, they generally concerned team or organizational practices or norms rather than regulations or rules. One team – prompted by a memo to unit supervisors encouraging them to review their interactions with fathers – had a long conversation, including this excerpt, that focused more on general organizational practice than their own.

Team supervisor: [There is a] historical disregard and indifference for fathers.

This needs to change.

Worker 1: Think that we need to have a different approach -- shouldn’t go on hearsay with Mom. Definitely get birth certificates right from the beginning if we
decide we’re going to keep this case open, let’s request birth certificates. Even during the assessment. It is important to do outreach. [What we do now] enables fathers not to be involved with their children.

Worker 2: I think we should at least take the steps to find out what role the father thinks he wants to play. A lot of times we don’t make contact. We don’t know. Maybe there is somebody out there who wants to be in their child’s life. Maybe they don’t.

While conversations about practice were rarely prompted by formal rules or regulations, sometimes teams appeared to be actively looking for clearer guidelines. One team discussed how to determine whether and when to close a case (that is, conclude their work with a family and formally discharge them from the system.) This team had been experimenting with providing intensive resources early in their work with the family and believed that that had enabled them to close cases more quickly. In fact, they and their higher-ups were largely pleased with their high closing rate. But the team had begun to worry that they were closing too quickly. The supervisor noted, in the context of this conversation, “We’re still not where we want to be, I don’t think, we haven’t mastered anything really, we’re still learning as we go.” A team member noted that they were finding they had to re-open cases soon after they were closed and added that they lacked specific standards or guidelines; for example, how long a parent should remain sober before a case was closed.

Like the SS workers, the CWA employees also experimented with novel approaches to their work, both small and large. One team decided to hold a Christmas party open to all the families they worked with. They brought in a photographer who could take family portraits and
had a variety of children’s activities. Another team quite dramatically changed the way they worked with families. Standard practice at the agency divided work with families into three functions: investigation, or the task of following up on allegations of abuse or neglect and determining whether to take on the case; assessment, or the job of doing a more extensive exploration of the family and creating a “service plan” for the family; and ongoing, the work of implementing the service plan and engaging with the family to ensure a safer environment for the child. As part of this change in function, this team dramatically changed the timing of services to the families. Traditionally, it could take weeks for families to begin receiving services, after the investigation period and sometimes the assessment. However, the team began providing support during the investigation phase because they felt immediate support could improve the situation and perhaps preclude the agency taking the case. If the case was screened in, it meant a jump start for the family.

As with discussions of clients, while both groups of workers discussed broad practices, they differed greatly in how much they did so. The CWA workers did this quite infrequently, rarely invoking formal regulations, while conversations about practice, often attempts to discern the meanings of rules and guidelines, took up the majority of the SS workers’ discussions. Both groups did, however, discuss and create new ways of working with their client populations.

**Organizational and Policy Contexts.** Of course, both sets of practitioners operated in nested contexts, consisting of their immediate office, the larger organization or agency they worked for, the politics of the northeastern state in which they were located, the economic climate, and so on. While members in both settings referenced both organizational and policy contexts, there were also clear differences as we illustrate below.
Closest to home, one CWA team had a long conversation about how their immediate supervisor was an impediment to its work. In particular, the team members felt they were attempting to enact a “strength-based” approach to their work, in which they worked as much as possible with the family to ensure that the parents would not lose their children or would be able to reclaim them as soon as possible. This was contrasted with a more punitive or forensic approach in which parents were more likely to be seen as adversaries or barriers to their children’s well-being, which meant they warranted something akin to a police investigation. The team members felt their superior did not understand the strengths-based approach and often second-guessed the caseworkers’ practice, sometimes overturning decisions the team had made about how to proceed.

CWA workers also discussed office-related issues. In the case of one team, the agency was opening up a new office not far away and a number of employees were going to be transferred, though individuals were allowed to volunteer. However, things were up in the air for a long time and the team expressed some apprehension about whether their group would remain intact. Ultimately, it did. The groups also occasionally discussed their relationship with “collaterals,” other service providers with whom the agency interacted, such as teachers, counselors, social service agencies and the like. One team discussed their frustration that the local agencies in their catchment area -- on whom they relied for providing resources to families such as parent aides -- no longer had any Spanish-speaking service providers.

Agency-wide issues were also occasionally referenced. For example, during the time the research took place, the agency stopped paying for drug screens. This put the caseworkers in a difficult position since, for some families, they had to determine whether a parent had stopped
using illegal drugs before they could return children to the home. They said they were given little guidance about how to handle these situations without access to drug screens.

Like the CWA workers, the SS caseworkers occasionally talked about how workplace dynamics influenced their work. Their conversations tended to focus on their relationships with the staff responsible for administering the regular Section 8 program rather than organizational changes and actors above them in the organizational hierarchy. They voiced complaints that their co-workers did not help them recruit prospective clients or track changes in their work status despite their more frequent, face-to-face contact with clients and more direct access to the agency’s computerized data base. The SS practitioners occasionally expressed frustration with managers or agency directors for failing to support their efforts to coordinate with Section 8 staff, for requiring them to assume tasks beyond the scope of their own programs, such as taking over the reception desk, or for thwarting creative endeavors. However, such conversations were much less frequent than in the CW meetings. In fact, at one point the FSS Chair actually shut down a discussion about internal agency conflicts, shifting the focus to discussion of the overall clientele rather than within-organization issues.

The SS workers also discussed their relationships with other service providers to whom they refer clients. For example, both FSS and JOBLink practitioners frequently complained that the staff of the One Stop Career centers did not offer sufficient guidance to less experienced job seekers or welfare case workers and who pressured FSS clients to accept job offers instead of holding out for an opportunity to work in the field in which they had trained to pursue as a career. They also praised their counterparts who were exceptions to this generalization and told one another about arrangements they had made with certain service providers to ensure that their clients received special attention.
At certain points in time, the SS staff also discussed the effect of the economic and policy environment on their work. For example, they talked about how welfare reform influenced FSS clients’ ability to follow through with their plans, especially education; how the economic crisis influenced JOBLink clients’ ability to meet the work requirements; and how budget cuts influenced their own operations or the availability and quality of services to which they referred clients.

In fact, the SS workers discussed the broader environment much more than the child welfare workers did. It was a regular part of their conversations, while it was a rare discussion within the CWA teams. The CWA teams, however, talked much more about the close-in context of their work: their superiors and the office within which they worked.

**Self in Relation to the Work.** Conversations among both groups of front-line workers also included members describing their own behaviors, thoughts or reactions while carrying out their work. At CWA, one worker talked about her feelings in the wake of a suicide of a mother that she had been working with. She noted it was the first person she had “lost” in her five years as a social worker. Her team members provided moral support, telling her she had put a lot into the case, that it had gone “as best it could” and that the family still relied on her.

In another team, a member reflected on her own bias. She described, early in her work experience, being put off by one family because their home was not clean – the home smelled and there were bugs in the house. She told how her supervisor (who was also in the meeting where this was brought up) had said to her that she couldn’t let that kind of thing interfere with her judgment about whether the family was taking adequate care of their children. “I learned…that I had to put my belief system, needed to leave it at the door,” she said. However, such explicit self-reflection was rare.
The SS practitioners also reflected on themselves, including their attitudes about specific clients and their feelings about what they had accomplished or been unable to accomplish, including feelings of guilt, pride, frustration, enthusiasm and worry. When one member expressed her guilt about not having found a way to allow a client to receive the balance of her escrow account because she had not met the requirements according to her interpretation of “suitable employment,” her peers in the group commiserated and tried to contextualize the decision. Another member offered this statement of consolation:

I still live with the guilt about [client’s name]. She did everything and accumulated escrow. But she had to go back on welfare. I offered her an extension, but she wouldn't change the ITSP [Individual Training and Service Plan]. She wouldn't come in to do it. I live with that guilt but it was a small thing that this person had to do and she didn't do it. I begged her to do it, to be able to give the money to her daughter if she didn't want it for herself. But she said we should just keep the money. That's the same as in your case.

The meetings also occasioned expressions of satisfaction over being instrumental to a client’s success. After her first experience seeing her client graduate from FSS, Luz told the group, “I worked with her step by step. ….. I told her, ‘Your success is my success.’”

As in the CW teams, the SS practitioners seldom considered how their own biases were influencing their interactions with clients. Nevertheless, each of the FSS groups initiated day-long sensitivity training workshops for themselves to help them surface their race and class prejudices and discern how they affect their work. While holding such trainings indicate that the workers were aware of the possibility of bias in their work, neither of the groups reflected on their experiences in these workshops in subsequent meetings.
In both groups, however, discussions of the self in relation to the work were uncommon. When they did happen, they were more likely to be descriptions of how they were feeling at that moment in time, usually expressions of frustration or accomplishment, than any deeper reflection about their own thoughts and actions and how that might have affected their work.

**The Group.** Finally, all the various collectives that participated in this research spent some time talking about their own group processes and practices. The child welfare workers spent a lot of time on this, at least in part because they were figuring out what it actually meant to work as a team rather than as individuals. Some of these conversations were led by teaming consultants, hired from outside the agency to help the groups make the transition. For example, the consultants had team members fill out the Myers-Briggs Inventory, discuss their personal styles and how that affected their work together as a team. Team members also facilitated their own discussions on their work together, including how to partner on cases, whether they should partner on the entire caseload or just a subset of cases, and what it meant to be a primary or secondary worker on a case. Two teams had lengthy discussions about how their team was not working as they had hoped, in both cases, conflict-laden conversations with no serious resolution of what they could do differently.

The SS workers mostly talked about feelings of appreciation for the group with little time spent on group processes or dynamics. One member noted the gains she felt she received from talking with her peers in the group, “In our agencies, we don’t have anywhere to go to say we are jacked up about a participant getting a job. They say, ‘Big deal. We all work.’ But I know it’s a big deal. I can tell you guys and you’ll get it.” And one member leaving the group reflected on its role: “This group has meant a great deal to me. We all convene in one place as FSS
coordinators to get energized to go back to our agencies and confront whatever we face there for another few months and then come back and get reenergized again.”

Overall, discussion of the group was not only more frequent in the CWA teams than the SS teams, but tended toward deeper conversations about designing group processes and helpful or problematic group dynamics.

**Comparisons Across the Child Welfare and Self-Sufficiency Groups**

The emphasis of discussions in both the child welfare and self-sufficiency groups was on understanding clients’ needs and what they could do to help them. Both sets of groups reflected on their experiences with multiple clients as well as clients’ individual circumstances. They discussed other topics in terms of their influence on their work with clients. Conversations about work practices typically concerned how to employ established routines effectively and how to modify them to improve service delivery. Both also devoted time to critiquing accepted approaches to child welfare and self-sufficiency practice. They also converged in considering the impact of factors in their work environments on their clients and their interactions with their clients. Even conversations about their personal experiences on the job tended to relate to their experiences with clients and their desires – fulfilled or frustrated – to ensure the that they were meeting their needs. Both the child welfare teams and self-sufficiency groups also talked about the group itself, including its impact on their practice and how group members should work together. These similarities suggest that opportunities for front-line social service employees to talk about their work on a regular basis may in fact be conducive to improving service delivery in the context of complex policy and administrative environments.

We also observed several significant differences between the child welfare and self-sufficiency workers’ discussions. The child welfare workers devoted considerably more
attention to the nuances of particular clients’ circumstances than did the self-sufficiency staff. Discussions among child welfare workers served to ensure that other team members were familiar with the case and to bring different perspectives to assessing the case and possible courses of action. In contrast, self-sufficiency group discussions were devoted either to understanding the program directives and discerning appropriate applications of the program regulations to clients’ circumstances or to drawing inferences from cases to inform group norms.

The self-sufficiency groups discussed a larger number and greater variety of novel practices than did the child welfare teams. Whereas the self-sufficiency group members shared creative practices they had developed independently in addition to those the group designed together, all of the innovative approaches to child welfare emerged in the context of the team discussions. The self-sufficiency groups engaged other actors in the social service delivery system to implement their creative initiatives and sometimes persuaded decision makers to change official program regulations. The child welfare teams occasionally discussed organizational policies or practices that inhibited their ability to do what they felt was right, but rarely sought authorization to alter official directives.

We also observed differences in how the discussions referenced the context of their practice. The child welfare teams talked about interactions with supervisors and other office-related issues more frequently than did the self-sufficiency groups who devoted more time to discussing their interactions with their counterparts in other service providing organizations as well as the impact of conditions in the broader economic and policy environment on self-sufficiency practice.
We found that characteristics of child welfare and self-sufficiency work and distinctions between the team and community of practice configurations help to explain many of these differences.

**Characteristics of the Work:** Many of the differences reflect the contrast between the professional orientation of child welfare practice and the regulatory context of self-sufficiency program implementation. Child welfare workers determine appropriate practice based on their detailed assessment of each client’s situation in relation to the norms of the social work field; the source of accountability is internal and professional (Romzek 1996, DeLeon 2003). The group discussions facilitated good practice by thickening the case assessments with considerations of clients’ psychological states and family dynamics. In contrast, self-sufficiency practice requires conformity to externally delineated eligibility and compliance requirements and demonstration of the desired program outcomes across the entire clientele; staff are held accountable to bureaucratic rules and for measurable results rather than professional judgments (Romzek 1996; Behn 2001; Aucoin and Heintzman 2001). Group discussions helped the SS group members understand the program expectations and discern how to allocate scarce resources fairly and systematically while striving to help each client succeed.

The different focus of discussions between our cases also reflects differences in the systems for encouraging staff performance in each discipline. Clinical supervision between an employee and her supervisor is a customary practice in the child welfare agencies. The teams served as an extension of this supervision, with both peers and the supervisor, or team leader, taking part in discussions about the client and the appropriate course of action. There is no comparable practice in self-sufficiency implementation. On the contrary, management in the housing agencies tends to concern progress towards achieving policymakers’ performance
measures. In fact, the majority of the self-sufficiency practitioners’ managers had little experience in social services. The peer discussions reflected this attention to these performance measurements.

Child welfare workers’ greater latitude to tailor their responses to a client’s case also helps to explain the observation that the self-sufficiency groups shared and developed a greater number and variety of creative modifications to established practices. The self-sufficiency workers attended to “practice problems” (Rein 1983) -- the obstacles that emerged through program implementation -- that they recognized as hindrances to meeting program objectives. The constraints of the program regulations and the limitations of the often contested program theories of change were an impetus for many of the novel practices the self-sufficiency groups pursued, both the additions to practice and the changes to the existing regulations. At the same time, the SS groups had more latitude to alter established practices. Because the SS programs were considered tangential to the missions of their housing organizations, they were able to introduce new practices without upsetting the status quo of their organizations as long as they did not demand additional resources. Further, the child welfare workers faced the very 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 inhibited their willingness to experiment with broader practices as opposed to adapting to individual clients’ needs.

Finally, the goal of promoting economic self-sufficiency is more dependent on the labor market and income support policies than is the goal of protecting children and families. It is thus not surprising that the self-sufficiency groups talked about these factors more than their child welfare counterparts.
**Characteristics of the Groups:** Differences in the structure and composition of the CW teams and self-sufficiency communities of practice also explain some of the variation in our observations of the group discussions.

The relative frequency of the CW team meetings (once or twice a week) was more conducive to discussions of particular client cases than were the bi-monthly meetings of the SS groups; members of the SS groups typically needed to resolve the specific dilemmas of practice more quickly than the cycle of group meetings permitted. In fact, SS group members offered one another guidance about clients in between the meetings, via e-mail instead of during the meeting times. The longer span of time between meetings may also explain why the SS groups were more inclined to devote attention to overarching problems and trends influencing the clientele as opposed to the immediate pressures of the work week.

The expectation that team members share responsibility for individual cases is another reason they talked more about specific clients than did the SS workers who had no overlap in clients. Given the CW teaming mandate, we might have expected more discussion of problems with existing work practices and collective approaches than in the SS groups. Instead, we found that the constraints the self-sufficiency workers faced in their own organizations were an impetus for jointly pursued activities. Operating as a group, they were able to take advantage of the economies of scale of their combined clientele; they engaged partners in collaborative projects and they persuaded state officials to endorse their creative ideas.

The fact that the SS practitioners hailed from different organizations and service environments meant that they were able experiment with new approaches in different contexts. This opportunity for experimentation and replication may account for why we did not observe the diffusion of innovative practices among members of the CW teams. It is interesting to note,
however, that contrary to ideas about heterogeneity as the source of innovation (Cohen and Levinthal 1990; Rogers 200X), the creative practices that were widely replicated among the SS group members employed resources, skills, and technologies common across members’ organizations. The contextual differences were more apparent in the inability of group members to implement novel practices in their own organizations.

Differences in the leadership structure may also account for some of the observed differences. The CW teams included a team leader, a first-level supervisor who had authority over the other members of the team even as they were encouraged and coached to enact a more collective managerial style. In contrast, the self-sufficiency groups were not facilitated by the members’ direct supervisors and the public sector group was entirely peer-led. Although the presence of a stronger group leader might have been expected to encourage more conversational depth and more generative experimentation with novel approaches to practice (Edmondson, 2003; Wageman, Hackman & Lehman, 2005), this difference was not apparent in the comparison between the CW and SS groups. It may be that the absence of direct supervisors in the SS groups resulted in a more pronounced sense of psychological safety to discuss alternatives to established practices (Edmondson, 1999).

Thus, we suggest that task and group structure can explain many of the differences we saw between the two groups. We position these findings in the broader literature in the next section.

**DISCUSSION**

Listening to the discussions among the CW and SS workers who gathered to talk with one another about their work sheds new light on front-line social service workers. Our findings suggest that regular discussions helped group members contend with several of the common
challenges to service provision documented in previous literature on street-level bureaucracies. The differences between the child welfare and self-sufficiency groups and our comparative analysis of those differences suggest that the nature of the work and the characteristics of the group are important factors to consider in understanding how such meetings inform ongoing practice. This paper is a first step towards understanding the influences on and impact of group discussion on street-level practice. It also charts a course for a broader research agenda about decision making, learning and creative problem solving in groups of frontline social service providers.

What we heard in the group discussions reinforces prior research that many street-level public are dedicated to public service and committed to helping their clients (Brodkin 1997, Denhardt and Denhardt 2003, Light 2003, Riccucci 2005). Like other ethnographic research (Vinzant and Crothers 1998, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), the meeting observations exposed workers’ efforts to help their clients, efforts that are harder to capture in surveys or other quantitative approaches (cf. Brodkin 2008). The discussions provided an additional methodological advantage in that they enable attention to how workers describe their work to their peers, ask for help or guidance, respond to feedback and make decisions, sometimes jointly, to either continue or modify practice.

The group discussions also exposed a different dimension of peer influence than has been explored in prior research. The group meetings were venues for talking about CW and SS practice as opposed to advancing rights to better salaries and working conditions (cite re street-level unions). Although the conversations conveyed a sense of camaraderie among the group members documented in other studies (Brehm and Gates 1997, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), the connections among peer group members were based on their common interest in
furthering the work rather than simple social bonds. Others have documented collective action of street-level workers to oppose organizational or policy priorities (Crozier 1964; Piven and Cloward 1979; Baines 2008). In contrast, our findings point to the possibility that frontline workers can join forces to convey their concerns and ideas to decision makers or pursue collective solutions to problems.

The analysis of the topics of group discussions illuminates how meeting together on a regular basis can help workers contend with the challenges to frontline service delivery identified in previous studies. Complex, ambiguous, and contentious policy directives are among the reasons frontline workers simplify work routines or focus only on the tasks that are relatively easy to accomplish (Meyers et al 1998; Meyers et al 2001, Riccucci 2005, Nielsen 2006). The group discussions about clients, work practices, and context were occasions for clarifying expectations, resolving ambiguity, and discussing competing priorities. This finding is significant in light of the acknowledged paucity of training resources for frontline workers (Light 2003; Riccucci 2005; H. Hill 2003).

Our findings also suggest that group discussions allow workers to grapple with the moral and ethical dilemmas characteristic of front-line work recognized in previous research (Hasenfeld 2000, Vinzant and Crothers 1998, Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The extensive discussions about clients’ circumstances allowed group members to acknowledge and question idiosyncratic, individual justice beliefs (Kelly 1994), prejudices and inadvertent bias in favor of clients who are easier to serve or are considered more deserving of assistance (Soss 2002, Schram et al 2009).

The group discussions also helped the workers contend with scarce resources, cumbersome administrative routines and inadequate treatment technologies that characterize the
front lines of social service work. Other research shows that workers sometimes respond to such challenges by blaming clients for less than desirable outcomes or justifying practices they know to compromise service goals in light of the organization’s other priorities, norms, and values (Sandfort 2000, Lin 2000, Spillane et al 2002). Instead, in some cases, the participants in our studies either did their best to exploit current resources or approaches or explore novel approaches to fulfill their obligations to their clients (Levitt and March, 1988). The idea that street-level workers’ knowledge from practice can inform creative problem solving is not a new idea (Schon 1983; Moore 1995, Light 1998; Sparow 2000; Borins 2000; Cooney 2007). Nor is the idea that convening as a CoP or work team can generate innovative solutions to service delivery (Snyder and Briggs 2003, Bate and Roberts 2002, Willem and Buelens 2007, Koliba and Gajda 2009). What is interesting about these examples of exploration and exploitation is that they were conveyed and pursued in groups where frontline workers are the primary contributors to creating public value.

These findings suggest that the group meetings can provide a structure for facilitating judgments exercising discretion, responding to individual client concerns and being accountable to an entire clientele and official policies. However, not every conversation led to clearer understanding, effective decision making, or creative problem solving. Nor did the groups seek creative solutions to each of the problems they identified in their conversations. While within-group analyses will shed further light, the comparison between the CW and SS group discussions and the nature of their task and group structure is a first step towards understanding the conditions and mechanisms that promote informed decision making and creative problem among peers.
The professionally-oriented CW discussions devoted more time to helping one another with client assessments whereas the programmatic SS groups placed more emphasis on interpreting and applying program regulations as well as sharing and devising novel approaches for addressing the limitations of program designs. These differences suggest that research about street-level behavior would benefit from further attention to the nature of the work pursued. Several studies have compared street-level behavior and peer influence across professional domains (Brehm and Gates 1997; Vinzant and Crothers 1998; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003) or between organizations in nonprofit and public sectors (Sandfort 1999). Hupe and Hill (2007) suggest that examining difference “accountability regimes” warrants further investigation. However, few studies have actually examined how different degrees of discretion, sources of legitimacy, and qualities of client-worker relationships influence street-level behavior and, to our knowledge, none have explored how these factors influence how peers help one another improve service delivery.

The finding that the frequency of meetings, degree of interdependency and heterogeneity among group members, and nature of group leadership influenced discussions about practice also warrants further investigation. These characteristics are among those that differentiate work teams from communities of practice (eg. Wenger 2000, Wenger et al 2002). Although the organizational studies literature has devoted some attention to characterizing the distinctions between these two organizational forms (Bogenrieder and Nooteboom 2004, Handley et al 2006, Amin and Roberts 2008), little empirical research has investigated the comparative processes or outcomes of one group form over another. Our findings suggest that this is a promising direction for future research.
Despite these contributions, this paper has a number of limitations. First, we cannot speak to the full extent of working, shirking or sabotage engaged in by these or the larger population of street-level workers; we can only illustrate how group talk seems to influence their attention and, often, genuine commitment to their work. Second, we can’t draw conclusions about whether these groups actually influenced their work with clients since we did not observe worker-client interactions. Third, we also can’t conclude whether these peer-discussion groups enabled better outcomes for their clients or agencies since we don’t have control groups.

This analysis of the similarities and differences among topics of discussion in the two settings is a first step of a larger research project. Next steps include, first, deepening the comparative analysis of the characteristics of the work and the groups and understanding their impact on the different dynamics we observed. Second, we will undertake a closer analysis of the micro-process of the discussion groups, including whether and how group members took divergent perspectives into account, how group practices and facilitation techniques encouraged problem identification and analysis, group decision-making and the generation of creative approaches to practice. Further, tracing discussion themes over time will allow us to ascertain whether the knowledge derived from the groups’ conversations was cumulative.

Our combined studies offer robust terrain for examining peer groups dedicated to improving frontline practice. To understand the extent to which findings from these cases are generalizable to other policy contexts, additional research is warranted. Studies of peer discussion groups in different professional jurisdictions, regulatory environments, and organizational contexts would further the research agenda. Other useful research would compare how front-line workers exercise discretion and contend with the challenges of service
delivery in settings with and without the opportunity to meet with their peers. This work would contribute to understanding the promise and the challenges of front-line service delivery.

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