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Doing Ambivalence: Embracing Policy Innovation—At Arm’s Length

MALIN ÅKERSTRÖM, *Lund University*

This article considers the social organization of responses among human service staff to changes in public policy, using a study of a Swedish treatment center for juveniles as an illustration. The stance toward a new treatment ideology, “family-work,” was not one of either accepting or rejecting the new policy; the staff conveyed both embracing and distancing. Policy innovations, it is argued, create conditions that work as a catalyst for “doing ambivalence,” an accommodative rhetoric that integrates the new and subtly expresses reservations.

Treatment regimes, models for training and education, and policy reforms are constantly in flux in the human service world. When investigating the ways in which staff in human service occupations talk about new policies, one might expect people to hold either “pro” or “con” positions. Those responsible for implementing or evaluating reforms often describe a staff as either “opposing” or being “receptive” to new ideas (Czarniawska 1993:229); some staff members are described as “wanting to change patterns of actions, others as digging their heels in” (Jacobsson and Sahlin-Andersson 1995:88). Staff rhetoric, then, is generally expected to either defend or critique reforms and innovations.

This article suggests that there is a third way of relating to public policy changes: policy innovations can be met with “accommodative rhetoric,” where staff members strike a delicate balance and give credit to both new and existing policies. In effect, staff members “do ambivalence” by presenting an understanding of and appreciation for the new, while simultaneously expressing reservations, often delicately delivered. During times of professional ideological change, the stances adopted by staff members are more complex and nuanced than simply accepting or rejecting change. In this article, I use a study of a new rehabilitative ideology—family-work (*familje- och nätverksarbete*)—to substantiate the argument.¹ In the process, I examine the interpretive practices (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) that workers used to *both* embrace and distance themselves from policy innovations.

With notable exceptions, ambivalence has drawn only limited sociological attention. Neil Smelser (1998) noted in his presidential address to the American Sociological Association: “The sobering paradox is that although we as sociologists are perhaps among the best equipped to understand ambivalences, we scarcely think about or study them” (p. 10). Robert Merton (1976) discussed ambivalence in terms of structurally induced contradictions in professions, roles, and norms. And Donald Levine discussed sociological canons in *The Flight*

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1. A direct translation of *nätverksarbete* is “network-work,” but as “network” and “networking” have other connotations in English, I refer to this rehabilitative ideology as “family-work.”

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from *Ambiguity* (1985), claiming that American social scientists especially are trained in modes of thought where the univocal and one-dimensional tend to prevail. His treatise offers a plea for social theorists to “tolerate and enjoy ambiguity when it is appropriate” (p. 220).

But while ambivalence has been appreciated conceptually and academically, its actual *practice* in the course of everyday life warrants further attention. Smelser, for example, spoke mainly about psychological models of ambivalence, but his insights may also apply to the analysis of professionalism as rhetoric (cf. Miller 1991), especially with respect to street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980). Human service work and the settings in which it is performed are certainly fraught with contradictions, complexities, and constraints. Staff members are not free to respond in any way they want to either the practical demands of everyday situations or to the formal demands of rules and regulations. Staff members are constantly bombarded with messages promoting current or emerging policies and practices. In the case investigated in this article, one Swedish authority, the National Board of Institutional Care, set policy for rehabilitative practices. This article will show how policy imposed “from above” influenced staff members at the same time they expressed resistance to it.

This study investigates how staff members “do ambivalence” with respect to policy innovation, showing how they fashion the conditional acceptance of policy changes. It shares the analytic sensibilities of a host of constructionist ethnographies of human service work and considers a variety of factors affecting the practical delivery of human services: local culture (e.g., Loseke 1992; Margolin 1994; Pollner and Stein 1996), organizational discursive environments (e.g., Buckholdt and Gubrium 1979; Gubrium 1992; Weinberg 2001), and interactional and ideological tensions (e.g., Fox 2001; Jarvinen 2001; Loseke 2001; Spencer 2001). It also addresses the question of how and why different groups formulate different discourses on the same topic in the same time period (e.g., Haney and March 2003). The current study is especially attuned to the need to discern subtle complexities and equivocations as human services workers go about the task of implementing new social policy.

Stances toward current ideologies, reforms, and policy innovations are important aspects of professionalism. Several important perspectives have framed sociological analyses of professionalism; it has been studied as essential qualities such as collective altruism or service orientation (Parsons 1951) or as collective strategies for monopolistic control over occupational jurisdiction (Abbott 1988). More recently, Gale Miller (1991) proposed an alternative approach: professionalism as rhetoric. Many studies of professionalism have looked at street-level bureaucrats: “Public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work.” Typical street-level bureaucrats are teachers, police officers, social workers “and many other public employees who grant access to government programs and provide services within them” (Lipsky 1980:3). The subjects of this study can be regarded in substantially similar ways. These workers’ “concern for justifying their claims to professional standing is partly related to the public’s reluctance to accord them the same deference given to physicians and others typically treated as real professionals” (Miller 1991:15). Rhetoric, then, is central to analyzing professionalism. It is not peripheral or epiphenomenal. Rather, it is a key resource employed by street-level bureaucrats to claim expertise, and with it, the right to intervene in other people’s lives.

“Doing ambivalence” is a rhetorical activity through which staff members in human service occupations both comply with and subtly criticize, and thereby, *make* or *create* new policies. They do not simply implement new recommendations from above. Through myriad everyday arguments, description, decisions, and actions, staff members in various agencies and institutions form policy “for all practical purposes” under the auspices of prevailing formal or abstract social policy. As Michael Lipsky (1980) points out, “street-level bureaucrats often work in situations too complicated to reduce to programmatic formats” (p. 15). “It is overly simplistic,” as Gale Miller and James Holstein (1991) put it, “to assume that policy-makers’ definitions and rationales are mechanically invoked by street-level bureaucrats.

Rather, they treat such definitions and rationales as resources to be selectively used and elaborated in explaining and justifying their orientation" (p. 195).

For staff in human service occupations, new or reformed policies act as catalysts for rhetorical work and policy-making in the course of everyday work. Work is reorganized, priorities are shuffled, staff members deliberate and present alternatives, and workers instruct others in how to understand and implement new policy, or present rationales for why it is difficult to implement. "Doing ambivalence" is thus an important professional tool that is used to institute new practices and policies while also accommodating innovations to previously taken-for-granted assumptions, procedures, routines, and habits.

Analyzing Interpretive Practice in Human Service Settings

Analyses of the rhetoric of professionals in human service settings are part of a constructionist tradition of studies in social problems work (Holstein and Miller 2003). In the present study, the context of policy change is a vital part of staff workers' talk about rehabilitation, clients, and their own work. Context, of course, is a complicated phenomenon, comprising both distal and proximal elements. Sociological analysis tends to proceed from one end of the continuum or the other, taking either a top-down or bottom up-approach. Although, as James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium (2003) note, "neither the bottom-up nor top-down approach suffices as a comprehensive explanatory framework This is because, in the practice of everyday life, at least two primary sources of context—talk-in-interaction and culture and institutions—are themselves always interacting; they are always at play with each other" (p. 194).

Holstein and Gubrium (2003, 2004) thus provide a rationale for an "analytics of interpretive practice." Their approach suggests an analytic distinction between the *whats* and the *hows* of social life. The importance of context (a major component of the *whats*) is acknowledged by investigating the kinds of conditions and interpretations, such as, settings, institutions, specific roles, social organization, cultural forms, and shared stocks of knowledge, in ways that might resemble Foucauldian studies of "discourse-in-practice" (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 2003, 2004). When exploring talk and social interaction (central features of the *hows* of social life), the analytic focus shifts to ways in which members in a local setting produce everyday realities through "discursive practice" (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 2003, 2004). Bringing these concerns together, such studies might analyze the interactional practices through which members *use* context, conditions, and common cultural knowledge as resources when they produce, manage, and sustain a certain part of social reality.

The idea of "*analytic bracketing*" (Holstein and Gubrium 2000, 2003, 2004) is used to capture the interplay between the *whats* and the *hows* of everyday life. This strategy "sustains an oscillating indifference to the realities of everyday life, allowing the analyst to momentarily focus on one of reality's constitutive components at a time" (Holstein and Gubrium 2003: 198–99). In such an analysis, one moves back and forth between discourse-in-practice and discursive practice. While documenting each in turn, one continually makes reference to the other.

Employing the analytics of interpretive practice, this empirical analysis begins by considering the "conditions of interpretation" within which policy innovations involving the ideology of family-work are implemented in a Swedish human service organization. This involves a description pertinent to discourses-in-practice as well as the settings, social organization, notions of professionalism, and typifications of youngsters and parents that characterize the local scene (the *whats*). It then turns to discursive practice, analyzing *how* juvenile center staff members "do ambivalence" in relation to new social policy. The practice of doing ambivalence is divided into practices of embracing family-work and staff members distancing practices, or the ways they resist policy innovation.

Research Settings and Methods

This study looks at Swedish *särskilda skolhem*, or juvenile treatment centers, which are institutions housing from six to forty youngsters who are placed in the centers by either the court or the Social Welfare Department.² Each of these authorities can place youngsters because their parents are deemed unfit to raise them (often for being known to use drugs or being imprisoned) or because the youngsters are deemed “unruly,” on account of drug problems, or because they have been involved in juvenile delinquency.

Basically, the juvenile centers are designed to be both home and school to youngsters between twelve and twenty years of age. The centers are expected to provide the same educational experience other schools offer. As “homes,” the centers resemble intimate domestic environments. The staff tries to be a family of sorts: some members are explicitly assigned the responsibility and role of being “extraparents” to their clients. The centers seldom employ formal treatment modalities such as therapy sessions. Instead, treatment is integrated into everyday practices: instituting a firm and safe environment, daily schedules, school attendance, and leisure activities described as “valuable.”

Several kinds of empirical material are considered in this analysis. We sent a short questionnaire to the directors of all Swedish juvenile treatment centers at the beginning of the project. The aim was to provide an overview of how program administrators described family-work. We received answers from 31 directors of 35 institutions we surveyed. The eight open-ended questions (i.e., with no fixed response alternatives) included such things as whether the institution had a program for contacts with relatives, the advantages and difficulties of family integration, parents’ involvement, and whether there was any exchange with other institutions concerning family-work.

The primary data consist of field observations and unstructured, tape-recorded interviews collected between 1995 and 1998. Field observations and interviewing were conducted by the author and a research assistant. The author was responsible for interviewing staff at the central authority, and attended family-work conferences organized by them, and the material at the juvenile treatment centers was gathered by the research assistant.

The two institutions where the fieldwork was done were selected on grounds of convenience (they were both situated a couple of hours’ drive from the university) and difference, as described below. But the shared social characteristics of these institutions, not their differences, form the basis for this analysis. One of the settings, Havsvik (all names are pseudonyms), was a locked ward in a large center consisting of twelve houses, situated in wooded countryside near a lake. The ward we studied housed three girls and three boys between 13 and 16 years old. Each pupil had an individual room and the ward included a hall and a kitchen. Next to the kitchen, was a living room equipped with a sofa, television, and a bookcase full of games such as Monopoly and Mastermind. A “staff contact” provided support for each pupil and the pupil’s parents. On average, two fulltime staff members took care of eight pupils.

The other institution, Sandby, was a small, open unit administered by a director located at another institution. It was situated in a small village in the countryside. The house was a two-story building with bedrooms for each of the youngsters, a living room, and a kitchen. The house was as “home-like” as possible. The youngsters decorated their own rooms, and the living room was equipped with televisions and games as in the other institution. Six youngsters, aged 14–16, lived at Sandby. Their stays there ranged from one to three years, at the most until they had finished compulsory school. A “contact-group” of four rehabilitative assistants ran the center, with two of them responsible for family relations. The staff had

2. They are placed in institutions by the court, under the Care of Young Persons Act, which regulates the circumstances in which a young person can be taken into care or protected without his or her consent, or that of the parents. The Social Welfare Departments rely on the Social Service Act, which is based on voluntary consent.

taken a course on family-work since “there were differences in opinion as to how this should be done,” as one interviewee put it.

Field observations included following the teenagers through their school days, eating with staff and youngsters, helping with dishes, and spending time in the living room making small talk. During staff meetings, we had access to deliberations concerning diagnoses and treatment, division of labor, and other concerned parties such as parents, foster families, social workers, police, etc. Meetings lasted from twenty minutes to two hours, and we recorded ten of the twenty observations. The interviews consisted of both informal interviews conducted during days of field observations and of twenty-seven pre-arranged, formal, but unstructured, taped interviews. Interviewers used a very short, loosely formulated list of themes and keywords. These included: what “family” means, if they had any type of family-work, cooperation and conflict with parents, descriptions of various types of parents, visits from parents and visits to parents’ homes, and descriptions of youngsters’ view of parent-staff cooperation. All the interviews were carried out and transcribed in Swedish, and field notes were written in Swedish. The quotations and excerpts used here have been translated to English by the author, with the help of an American English translator.

An analysis of the directors’ completed questionnaires provided initial, orienting data for the fieldwork. After discovering in a review that respondents “did ambivalence,” a thorough search of the various materials confirmed instances of both embracement and reservation. In this process it was clear that all our data sources (field notes, interviews, and the questionnaire) provide evidence of staff “doing ambivalence.” There were, however, some differences between the types of material: discursive acceptance was elaborated more in the questionnaire, which can be viewed as demanding more accountable knowledge (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:166–68), while reservations were aired mainly during interviews and observations.

Emerging Policy Innovations: Conditions of Interpretation

In recent years, a “family orientation” to juvenile problems has been applied to Swedish human service policy. As such, it represents both a policy innovation and a new discourse-in-practice. This new discourse shows how “family-work” has been formally institutionalized as part of the new human service vocabulary at the juvenile centers.

Family-work as Innovative Policy Discourse

During the last decade, family-work has become a “buzz-word” in Swedish discourse on rehabilitation, care, and education (Rytterbro 2002). “The family” itself, has now become the dominant figure in discussions of social problems, “service users” (Blomqvist 2004), medical settings (Åkerström 1996) and juvenile troubles and delinquency (*Föräldrastöd i teori och praktik*, Council of Crime Prevention 2003:8).

In the case at hand, “the family” has also made its mark in terms of the public policy and the treatment of troubled youngsters. This is most obvious in newly formulated laws. In 1998 an amendment to the Social Services Act emphasized the importance of relatives: “22 § In placement of children the first consideration should be whether the child can be received by a relative or other close person.” Whatever the placement, when children are in public care, the new policy emphasizes continued contact with their families, even when they are in foster homes. After the amendment passed, one government report stated: “Today, the importance of the biological parents is emphasized. Social welfare boards scarcely recruit foster parents that are not prepared to cooperate with the child’s parents and let them be a part of the child’s life even if they do not live together” (The Swedish Government Official Reports 2000:77, p. 127). This orientation can also be seen as a response to critiques by such governmental bodies as the National Board of Health and Welfare, which claimed that social service

officials did not do enough to maintain relations between (biological) parents and children in care (SoS report 1990:4, p. 79). Similar formulations are also found in parliamentary reports (Committee report, Swedish parliament, 1996/97:SoU18). This new emphasis stands in sharp contrast to descriptions of earlier practice that tried to limit contacts between children and parents through permanent placements in foster homes—previously considered “the rescue for children with inadequate parents” (Vinnerljung 1996:41).³

The National Board of Institutional Care, which is responsible for the juvenile centers in this study, mirrored the new orientation in their encouragement of family-work. While it was not enforced as a mandatory policy, its importance was signaled through conferences, courses, brochures, and grant-funding priorities. “Education in Family-work in Juvenile Centers” reported that between 1993 and 1999 twenty-three of the thirty-five juvenile centers in Sweden had received 8.5 million SEK (around 1 million USD) in funding for fifty-five projects for education and development involving family-work. Documents, titles, and conference themes for from the mid 1990s to the start of the 2000s often included family-work, which also served to reinforce the centrality of this policy.⁴ In sum, family-work appeared as an innovative rehabilitative ideology, and it has progressively gained bureaucratic and public popularity and support (Swedish National Board of Institutional Care, *FoU*. 1994; *Erfarenheter av nätverksarbete* 1992; Korman and Söderquist 1994).⁵

In everyday use as well as formal documents, family-work has indistinct shape and borders. This imprecision is common in many professional arenas (Gieryn 1999). The meaning of “family-work” could vary as much as the meaning of “family” itself (see Gubrium and Holstein 1990). Glancing through documents on family-work, one comes across expressions such as: “family participation in treatment,” “information,” “involvement through contact-persons,” “drawing network-maps,” “meetings with families,” and less often: “parental education” and “family therapy.” These diffuse boundaries surrounding family-work may provide space for professional interpretation.

Local Conditions of Interpretations

The emergence of local cultures within juvenile centers increased the visibility of family-work in several ways. Some institutions reserved special buildings as family accommodations, as was the case with Havsvik, the larger of the two institutions where we collected our field material. Both parental visits and students’ leaves of absence were discussed as part of the treatment at both institutions.

Different ways of dividing staff labor also evolved. At both institutions, some of the staff was given “responsibility for the family.” One of the work tasks for these staff members was to lead “planned parental talks.” And staff work itself began to take families into account more often and more concretely by integrating parents into the rehabilitation plan.

Both of the centers where we did our fieldwork adopted family-work policies but in slightly different ways. The larger one had the following formulation in their plan of operation (1995/96): “At Havsvik we purposely aim to get the whole family involved in rehabilitation.” Later, the same orientation was stated a bit differently: “Motivational work with parents and youngsters goes without saying” (Plan of Operation 1997/98). At the smaller

3. Such a stance has been described both by other Swedish researchers such as Claes Levin (1998) and by international scholars such as Anthony Platt (1977) and Victor George (1970).

4. Examples from the report series published by the National Board of Institutional Care are: “Working with the family—report on development work at Högantorp” (1995:3) and “With the family for change—parental projects at juvenile treatment centers 1995–1998” (1999:2). An illustrative title for one of the main talks at the annual conferences held by The National Board of Institutional Care in 1997 was: “The significance of the family and the network in rehabilitative work,” and the theme of the whole conference in 2000 was: “Family-work at juvenile centers.”

5. Whether working with and integrating families in Swedish juvenile institutions really is something new is difficult to assess, as there are no historical studies specifically investigating this.

institution, Sandby, the family-work policy was more cautious: "Parents and other parts of the social network are seen as a resource to be involved, whenever possible, in rehabilitation" (Activity Report, undated). In spite of these differences, we could not discern any major difference in how staff members explained the rationale behind family-work. In both settings, staff argued that family-work was necessary and talked about the family as a treatment resource.

The youngsters' problems were generally considered to be caused by their parents, and staff often maintained that the core problem lay in parents' inability to set limits for their children. (Such discourse centered on unruly or delinquent juveniles. Youngsters taken into care due to parental abuse or incest "disappeared" during such discussions.) "Setting limits," echoes the recent American "tough love" ideology, although that was somewhat differently emphasized and applied (see, for instance, Gubrium 1992; Burns and Peyrot 2003). In Havs-vik's locked ward, the emphasis was on the need for strict routines and the enforcement of rules, and metaphors such as "sitting on a kid" and being "*fyrkantig*" ("square," as being rigid) were used repeatedly. At Sandby, staff members talked extensively about "setting limits," but also about the necessity of trusting the youngsters.

Institutions may employ multiple discourses, sometimes in conflict with each other (Spencer 2001:159). In this case, "setting limits" and family-work were sometimes at odds with one another. "Home leave," for instance, was considered an integral component of family-work, but staff also talked about it as a sanctioning tool (something to be withdrawn) by advocates of "setting limits." At times, the two discourses were integrated, as when the main task was described as teaching parents the importance of "setting limits."

Notions of professionalism became apparent when staff talk focused on family-work. Staff members might say "our job is to strengthen the parents," while others would explain that "the core of our job" is to take care of the kids. Issues related to professionalism and professional identities also implicated divisions of labor, and thus responsibilities. These are essential issues in most professional realms (Abbott 1988; Allen 2001). In this case, staff members talked about two groups of people, from outside the institution, who nonetheless, played key roles in treating troubled youngsters: parents and social service officials. Staff members could, for instance, talk about some decisions or activities as "really" being the duties of a mother or father, and other issues might be referred to as the social assistant's job.

Even though staffers proclaimed that family-work should include and benefit all parents, in practice they often drew a distinction between those children and parents suitable for family-work and those for whom the family-work concept was not so easily applied. The suitable category included parents who had voluntarily given up custody, who were said to have "accepted" their problems, asked for advice, and did not criticize the staff during visits. Meanwhile, staff described as unsuitable those parents whose children had been committed to public care against their will, who had never acknowledged the need for institutional care, or who could not be treated with family-work (parents in prison, for instance). These "difficult" parents were also discussed in terms of being "very critical." Staff complained that these parents did not inform them about family events or failed to involve themselves in discussions during visits or formal meetings.

Doing Ambivalence: Embracing New Policy at Arms Length

This section shows *how* staff members embraced the new organizational policy "at arm's length." Typically, their discursive practices consisted of presenting an initial appreciation of the basic ideas of family-work, but later expressing doubts about its rehabilitative ideology. Analytically, these practices of "doing ambivalence" can be divided and presented as *embrace-ment* practices and *distancing* practices, although the two practices were often exhibited in the same interaction, sometimes going hand-in-hand. They should therefore not be viewed as necessarily distinct from one another.

Embracement Practices

All the staff members to whom we spoke, or who responded to our questionnaire, displayed a commitment to the new family-work rehabilitative policy and model. They talked about family-work when explaining why and how treatment should be conducted. Some portrayed their own particular interests in terms of family-work. Others indicated that they were willing to follow the family-work policy, even when practical matters prevented it.

Explaining Why. Staff members often communicated the expectation that the family should be involved in treatment through short statements such as “we are family-centered” or by mentioning that “the family is an important resource in treatment.” Sometimes, however, staff provided more elaborate accounts. In the introductory talks with the staff at juvenile centers, and in answers to the open questions in the questionnaire, we heard explanations concerning the benefits of family-work. These answers were given in an educational form. One variant of this was a lecturing style, *docere*, to use the Latin classical rhetoric term. We were told that parents often undermined the staff’s messages to the youngsters. Such “obstructing” was either attributed to parents having “other values or norms” or to a parental desire to turn the youngsters against the staff in retaliation for their children’s placement in an institution. One major advantage of family-work was thus described as making it possible to work out a common ground of principles and rules for youngsters to follow, because it was deemed important that “we are all pulling in the same direction” and that “we give clear and consistent signals.”

Staff members also conveyed the same educational message in a more intimate, familiar style by displaying “inside” expertise, telling about how things “really” are. They would start such talk with a matter-of-fact statement that the young person would be united with his/her parents after the stay in the institution. Then they would let the listener understand that this happened even in cases where the parents were not, as one interviewee put it, “what you and I would consider good parents, they may even be addicts.” Staffers often acknowledged the continuity of the social bond between parents and youngsters. One of the assistants concluded after such a discussion:

I think it’s like a deadly sin to, to tell them [parents] that they’re not good enough, that is, that they’re not needed. “Now, we’re in the picture, you’re not needed anymore.” I believe that’s a deadly sin, ‘cause after all we’re there for such a short period. And they will, if not live together, be bound together for the rest of their lives.

Given that *and* the understanding that parents were probably a significant part of the young people’s problem in the first place, the staff would then summarize the message, stating that improving the family was essential for the youngster’s treatment. This was often presented in formulations defining their job as “to strengthen the parents,” to “give parents self-confidence,” or to “give parents a chance to re-establish themselves as parents.” This way of formulating a taken-for-granted conclusion (the family as the problem) and then justifying one’s practice (family-work through which the family becomes the solution) is a form of “quasi-theorizing” (Hewitt and Hall 1973; Miller 1991), forming a “folk theory” about the causes of juvenile troubles. We hear this summarized in the words of a staff member at one of the centers: “The family has to change; otherwise it’s no use sending the kids back home again.”

Explaining How. Their understanding that the family should be involved includes specific suggestions as to *how* this should occur. In telling about these methods, staff members used a variety of embracement techniques. For example, they presented themselves as knowledgeable professionals, comparing, evaluating, and explaining that some rehabilitation techniques were better than others. “Network meetings” involving many relatives and friends, were said not to work very well, whereas “planned parental meetings,” informal meetings and “doing

things,” such as leisure activities with family members, were advocated as more suitable methods. Staff could also embrace family-work by simply recounting, or listing, the ways they did family-work:

We’ve said that we’ll be in contact with the parents twice a week even if nothing special has happened. We have a list that we write as soon as we’ve talked to the parents so that we keep track and can go back and have a look when they come . . . And then we’ve meetings, both with social authorities and with parents. Usually every sixth or eighth week . . . And then we’ve got meetings with the parents only.

Portraying True Commitment. Embracement was sometimes exhibited by criticizing those who were said to have only a theoretical or academic knowledge of family-work. This suggestion often implied the superiority of a staff member or institution that actually practiced family-work. One staff-member, for example, pointed out that the juvenile center staff for many years had included the relatives in the treatment, which provided practical experience, not “book-knowledge”: “We have acquired much experience, which often directly contradicts what is written in the handbooks.” Another staff member explained that family contact must be sincere, and not the expression of a method or of guidelines from some remote central organizational department. She noted:

They [the family] have to feel it like that, too. Like, you’re doing this because you believe that they are . . . a resource, not because it’s written down somewhere that we . . . should do like this . . . I think people can see through that rather easily.

Such statements also fend off suspicions that one may only be engaged in family-work until the short term trend has passed. Choosing an innovation because it is fashionable leaves one open to criticism (Sellerberg 1994), giving the impression that one really isn’t genuinely interested (Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1995).

Contrastive Rhetoric: Comparisons with Others. As Miller (1991:92–99) has shown in his study of staff at a work incentive program, other parties, such as state officials, can be incorporated into displays of professionalism. In this study, personnel at “neighbor agencies,” especially representatives for social service departments, were cited as sources of comparison to show how local staff members were better at incorporating family-work into typical routines. In doing so, staff members could embrace family-work by telling how they were more skillful than social assistants or other bureaucrats in dealing with families. A youth assistant, for instance, talked about how a climate of mutual understanding was important during “family-meetings” involving many parties. He thus implied that “mutual understanding” was not always present, but went on to construct an image of “us,” (the staff at the institution) as being experts dealing with family matters.

A social welfare worker may tell Kalle’s mother that she’s an over-involved mother, which can be interpreted as she’s putting her values into it. We try instead to reformulate such a statement so that it becomes more neutral, so that the mother can get the gist of what the social worker is trying to say, for instance, by saying that the mother has great commitment to her son.

One may also construct a professional identity as especially competent at family-work by talking about other staff members at the same institution. Lennart, an assistant, explained that it is not only the biological family that is important but also other close, family-like relations. He used the “modern knowledge” of the meaning of “family,” conveyed, for instance, at conferences arranged by the Swedish National Board of Institutional Care. He talked about a teenager named David, who could no longer meet his foster family, because of a decision made by those in charge at his institution. This family, said Lennart, is the one that brought him up, and David has strong bonds with them. “They’re the only real emotional ties he’s had with anyone.” Lennart went on to say that it should be more important that the foster family keep in contact than whether they are bad at “setting limits” [ironically] for David as a teenager.

In a short comment, Lennart thus displayed his own commitment to “proper family-work” by first constructing some other staff workers as backwards—people who had not embraced the true family-work spirit—and secondly by criticizing them for assigning a higher priority to the competing discourse of “setting limits” than to family-work.

Indicating Willingness. “Indicating willingness” was a rhetorical device mostly used by those directors and staff members who did not report that they actually did family-work. Typically, these staffers indicated that they regretted not actually incorporating family-work into local routines. For example, directors who reported that they did not have a family-program added that the institution “was planning” to establish one, thus proclaiming their good intentions. They frequently used formulations that signaled that they wanted to embrace family-work, even if they showed little evidence of it. Directors who wanted to give the impression of embracing family-work thus delivered short but telling “apologies,” in Goffman’s (1972:113–14) sense, “splitting the self in two”: a blameworthy part which is cast into the past and a reformed part which is committed to correct behavior in the future. They thereby committed themselves rhetorically to more or better family-work down the line.

Distancing Practices

The staff members to whom we spoke all told us they were in favor of the family-work model. But their acceptance was not wholehearted; they embraced the concept of family-work *at arm’s length*. Typically, after expressing their appreciation for family-work as something basically necessary and worthwhile, they suggested various, sometimes serious, reservations about this rehabilitative model. Their acceptance often took the form of “we agree, but . . .” The “buts,” however, are not necessarily formulated as complaints. Rather, they introduce practical concerns that arise in trying to implement new policy in situations where its adoption has not been seamless or perfect. Staff members typically presented their reservations delicately, simultaneously embracing family-work but registering their qualms. They did this by: 1) invoking competing discourses; 2) questioning the suitability of parents and family; 3) posing questions about “the core of one’s work;” and 4) balancing the various demands of their professional work.

Invoking Competing Discourses. The rehabilitative discourse of family-work is simply one discourse among the many available to human service workers. A bureaucratic discourse, for instance, may be used to convey the essence of the professional tasks at hand. Invoked simultaneously, the two discourses may compete for preeminence in the work setting. In Jack Spencer’s study of staff and client meetings in a human service agency, for example, staff members used “rules and regulations” as a rhetorical device for answering clients’ laments and complaints that were lodged in a discourse of morality (Spencer 2001).

A typical example of the use of a bureaucratic discourse in the centers appears in a response to one of our questionnaires. Here we can see one of the directors “doing ambivalence” by first embracing family-work as a guiding principle, then distancing himself somewhat from the new policy regime by expressing reservations in terms of bureaucratic constraints. Initially, the director endorsed the policy of including family in the rehabilitation plan: “As an all-encompassing principle, we can first of all state that we are positive to collaboration with relatives, and that we want to make contact with them as soon as possible.” Later, he explained his reservations through a bureaucratic “rules and resources” discourse: “But section-12-homes have resources primarily for taking care of pupils—and can hardly be said to have resources or competence to devote themselves to family therapy . . . We also have demands made on us in a legal sense, which we cannot immediately transfer to relatives who would be incorporated in activities at the institution.” In formulating his agency’s practical approach to rehabilitation, the director points out external difficulties as he makes refer-

ences to resources and legal frameworks, explaining that his center is legally restricted because it is a “section-12-home.” Furthermore, by pointing to an extreme case of what family-work may imply—family therapy—the director emphasizes his concerns about lack of resources and family competence under the new policy. Note, however, that the new policy is neither rejected nor forcefully resisted.

Questioning the Suitability of Parents and Family. Staff members in the centers often distanced themselves from the family-work policy, not by rejecting the notion of family-work, but by suggesting that in some circumstances, parents and families were not capable or appropriate partners in the rehabilitation project. They did this in several ways.

Street-level bureaucrats often use *categorization as a rhetorical device*. Some clients, for example, are labeled unresponsive or uncooperative, thereby explaining the staff’s difficulties in achieving institutional goals (Miller and Holstein 1991). In the juvenile centers, staff members typically explained that all parents (even those conventionally seen as unfit) and youngsters could benefit from family-work. They often drew upon the familiar bromide: “blood is thicker than water.” Nevertheless, they also invoked the typification of “unsuitable parents” as a way of qualifying their commitment to family-work.

In effect, staff members employ a strategy of *citing the special case*. Here, one supports a general idea while simultaneously arguing that unanticipated situations, attitudes, and/or actions, and other uncontrollable factors create circumstances in which the general idea, rule, or policy does not apply, a tactic Michael Billig (1987) has called a “strategy of particularization” (pp. 182–85). In the juvenile centers, staff members frequently invoked the special category of very unruly, abused, and/or delinquent clients and their sometimes dysfunctional families as obstacles to family-work.

This was the case with one staff member who initially stated that family-work was a very valuable treatment tool. He then qualified his position by citing a special case:

Sometimes we are dealing with families that are the most dysfunctional; our [young people] have often been exposed to serious abuse from other members of the family; therefore, our work has a different character than that at institutions with a less encumbered clientele. . . . Our job is sometimes helping the young people to learn to live with the fact that their parents will never be able to take care of them.

One could thus claim that family-work in principle is worthwhile, but that, in practice, it is sometimes completely wrong, taking into account the special youngsters and parents one is working with. Such qualifications acknowledge the family-work model’s general validity while presenting one’s own work experience as an exception, not on the grounds of unwillingness, but of applicability.⁶

Staff members used *representative anecdotes* as another way of indicating unsuitable parents and distancing themselves from family-work. These were primarily told on occasions where members shared significant and revealing stories. During a staff meeting at Havsvik, for instance, staff members who had earlier in interviews praised family-work, began to exchange stories about mothers and relatives:

- Bosse: Anja’s mother doesn’t seem like Betty’s mum, luckily enough.
 Katarina: We liked her initially.
 Ingela: We really gave her a lot of support.
 Björn: [Tells a long story of how Anja’s mother offered the youngsters potato chips against the staff’s recommendations.]
 Ingela: [Laughing] Not to mention that very “respectable” cousin of hers who turned up in a silk shirt and was wet combed (a sleazy hair-do).
 Björn: Suddenly he just stood there on the stairs with a rifle . . . Such a fucking . . . my oh my!

6. David Silverman and Jaber Gubrium (1994:191) discuss a similar strategy of nonadherence to popular models in another context, self-help groups for families caring for an Alzheimer patient.

Representative anecdotes are influential epistemological tools because on the surface they may relate to a limited experience or simply report an amusing story, but they actually contain something beyond the story itself (Burke 1969). Such anecdotes imply that the incident in question contains something significant and general; they are, in short, meant to represent a wider category of experience. The general point in the case above, for example, is a warning: "It's not easy to tell about some parents." Parents may appear competent or sympathy-worthy, but staff members must remain vigilant and wary of relying upon them.

Yet another way of expressing reservations about family-work is *damning with faint praise*. This technique allows the staff to support family-work but maintain distance by suggesting its limited effectiveness. Statements of faint praise offer an image of few positive and interested parents; parental involvement is said to make little difference. In the following example of doing "active parentwork," the staff member ends up by suggesting that parental involvement seems to have little lasting effect:

Interviewer: Does the family or other relatives come by spontaneously for a visit?

Staff member: Well, it's quite rare. It's happened but it's not an everyday thing. And then we have one pupil here. If he flips out we can call his mother and she'll come over. And then that has a positive effect for a couple of hours.

There are many other such references that indicate ambivalence, often given in short, ironic replies to interview questions.

Invoking Questions Concerning "the Real Core" of Professional Human Service Work. While staff members typically agreed that family-work was "necessary," and its appropriateness "goes without saying," they also distanced themselves by invoking a rhetoric of professionalism. In a peculiar, upside-down argument, staff members sometimes raised issues of what their jobs really consisted of. In doing so, they suggested that tasks involving parents were outside the boundary of what they considered their proper professional duties. Questioning family-work in this way took two forms. The first invoked distinctions concerning divisions of responsibility. The second raised questions about who "the proper client" really is.

Issues of professionalism frequently concern areas of responsibility (Abbott 1988; Allen 2001). In the juvenile centers, the staff was involved in a specific kind of boundary-work. Occasionally, they explained that some tasks were, in fact, not theirs to deal with. Instead, they argued certain tasks were the duties of parents or other social service workers. Sometimes they conveyed the same message in a more sophisticated way by simply posing questions about who was responsible for what.

One way of questioning family-work was to raise issues of who had responsibility for what, when staff members worked in partnership with parents. Staff talked about family-work as a cooperative effort. Parents typified as "suitable" were those who openly displayed an interest in doing family-work and who "called us [staff] and talked." Still, staff members offered numerous examples of parental "efforts" in which parents did not take sufficient responsibility themselves, but, instead, handed over too much to the staff workers. Workers claimed, for instance, that they could not be expected to handle "normal parental activities." In one contact-group meeting, for example, a staff member openly questioned why a father wanted to have a staff member take him and his son fishing: "Shouldn't he be able to go fishing with him himself?"

Family-work policy also came into question as staff members worked out just where the limits of staff responsibility begin and end. Such discussions often coincided with categorizations of family as unsuitable for family-work. For example, on one occasion, staff members discussed the behavior of a mother (Liselott) and her daughter (Marika). The talk centered on how Marika behaved when she was at home during weekends. One staff member reported that Liselott had called the center and discussed whether Marika could stay out half an hour extra. With her irritated tone, the staff member implied that the mother should have taken

the responsibility for this decision herself. Another staff member filled in with more details, then concluded:

The picture you get is that Liselott acts like a bloody, she becomes a teenager. She becomes a child, sits and sulks, goes into her room and lies down on the bed. And like that, eh. It ended with Marika leaving, having been told to come home again before she left for the evening. She hadn't done that. But that's sort of . . . that's a deal between them. That's none of our business.

The talk portrayed the mother as irresponsible, "acting like a teenager." Although the girl may have broken a rule (keeping to agreed-upon times is usually considered a serious matter), in this case, it was deemed outside the staff's duties to enforce or sanction that rule. It is "none of our business." In this example, we can see the situated relevance of different discourses (Spencer 2001): the discourse of "setting limits," discussed earlier (where time-rules are important) is set aside or "escapes," as David Silverman (1989) puts it, and the talk, instead, highlights the mother's responsibilities, which are more important in family-work discourse. At the same time, however, the importance of cooperation with the family also "escapes," or rather, it is declared to be inapplicable. The mother is on her own, in this case.

The context of professional activity may thus shift from moment to moment, from one situation to another. As Holstein and Gubrium (2004) suggest, context is always "emergent, variable, and highly elastic" (p. 309). In this case, we can see how staff members themselves shift the meaning of the context of care. Even though, as staff members often point out, the center is formally responsible wherever the youngsters are, the mother, in this case, is firmly responsible for the girl's care. *Where* becomes important, since the rule-breaking occurred in the mother's home. It also occurred on a weekend, which was framed as "parents' time." By pointing out a special context—a particular time and place associated with parents—staff members both indicated the importance of family-work and noted its failure when responsibility was extended to the family. In so doing, staff members acknowledged family-work's importance while also offering reservations—embracing it at arm's length.

A similar tactic staff members used to distance themselves from the new family-work policy was to acknowledge that family-work was an appropriate approach, but to simultaneously suggest that this sort of work fell within the domain of *other* social service professional. For example, staff members sometimes noted the value of family-work but claimed that such work was not "mine" or "ours." One section head explained, for example, that it was important to deal with and incorporate family into treatment plans, but that family members' serious problems should be dealt with by the Social Welfare Department (a different agency). Such cases, he said, were outside the legitimate domain of juvenile treatment centers.

Family-work could also be portrayed as outside the scope of staff members' responsibilities by invoking divisions of responsibility *within* the juvenile centers themselves. One staff member explained, for instance, that many family-related issues, and much family-related talk, really didn't fall within his purview, instead they were the sort of thing the "contact person" should handle:

Some parents will talk about the pupil at the beginning and then they talk a lot about themselves. There are some like that, who don't talk about anyone else, only about themselves. And that's OK if it's the contact person. Otherwise it doesn't seem to fill any useful function . . .

Another way of raising questions about professional responsibility for family-work was to raise the issue of just who was the center's proper client. Despite the fact that, under the new family-work policy, staff members are expected to deal with children and their families, staff members nevertheless drew a distinction between the two, raising the issue of who is really the client to be served. Drawing this distinction has considerable rhetorical power in social service settings (Atkinson 1984; Drew 1990). Staff members in human service organizations frequently formulate ideologies, client profiles, work scenarios, decisions, and so on,

in terms of mutually exclusive categories that help them establish their professional domains and identities (Miller 1991). In the juvenile centers, staff frequently contrasted work done with the parent with to work done with the youngster. Instead of portraying the parent and child as an inseparable entity, as the family-work model does, staff might express reservations about family-work by noting how working with parents and with their children were often two separate projects, with different goals and orientations—goals that were sometimes in conflict. The issue would then be: who should staff serve as the client? The staff member quoted above concluded, for instance, that his work with parents might not be an important part of his job because his responsibility was to serve the child—his client. As the staff member noted, “My job here is to be with the kids, you know, not sitting around listening to parents.”

Balancing Unrealistic Demands. Working with families involves many different tasks, formal and informal meetings, visits, telephone calls, and other forms of contact. Apart from physically bringing the youngsters and parents together, staff members’ family-work involves numerous deliberations, decisions, and evaluations. Staff members frequently cite these myriad competing demands and argue for the need to keep them in balance. They commonly suggest that new policies like family-work place demands on human service workers that are unrealistic (see Miller 1991:69).

The following dialogue, which occurred during a staff meeting, illustrates how family-work is portrayed as unrealistic in terms of the demands placed on staff members. Here, staff members Kerstin and Martin are discussing ways of arranging an outing for a girl and her father, which would probably include a staff member.

Kerstin: And then I said, “But sure, talk with your dad and talk, find something like that, we’ll come along for sure.”

Martin: [laughing] This will become difficult soon . . . that’s my feeling

Kerstin: What?

Martin: We won’t be able to cut ourselves in halves, sort of.

While the conversation implicitly acknowledged the importance of family-work and the family activity it was promoting, Martin’s reaction strongly suggested that it placed unrealistic expectations on the staff. His laughter perhaps indicated a sense of uneasiness because he was about to offer a suggestion that might contradict premises of family-work. As Martin followed up, explaining why the outing with Kerstin and her father would be difficult, he made the strong point that staff would have difficulty balancing this particular demand with other work-related duties. Martin used a strong idiomatic expression: “cut ourselves in halves” to underscore the gravity of the situation. As Paul Drew and Elizabeth Holt (1988) suggest, idiomatic expressions are often used to summarize grievances. This statement can, thus, be seen as a sophisticated way of expressing reservations about the demands of family-work. It did not openly criticize family-work, but it did imply that drastic measures would be necessary to balance competing job demands.

Another way to introduce the notion of balancing was to portray the necessity of “juggling” the demands of working with family members as partners and the necessity of “setting limits” for those family partners. Consider, for example, a family visit to the juvenile center that became quite hectic and chaotic. The large family in effect “took over” the ward. Younger siblings were racing around screaming, while staff members tried to remain detached from the emerging chaos. Still, on several occasions, they needed to tell the children to be quiet and to control their behavior. Later, one of the staff members commented sarcastically on the visit, noting that it was “quite clear what a great influence the parents have on their children.” She continued:

We [had to] set limits for the younger brothers and sisters. Some of it we tried to turn a blind eye to, you know. You can’t just intrude on their . . . but there’s a lot . . . that we had to tell them in order to maintain any order at all in the ward.

In this short account, the staff member depicted the competing demands of family-work that continually need to be balanced. On the one hand, staff had to work with the family and respect the parents' right to manage and discipline the children in their own fashion. They were, after all, part of the same treatment team, serving as "co-rehabilitators." On the other hand, the staff had to maintain order if they hoped to accomplish anything, and also to set the clear example of a functional, home-like surrounding in which the staff and adults "set the limits." Maintaining both stances under the guise of family-work was thus a juggling act that balanced the demands of working *with* the family against those of working *on* the family.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study of Swedish juvenile centers has examined how street level bureaucrats tentatively and conditionally implement social policy innovations—embracing them at arm's length. The paper is about how street level bureaucrats *do* ambivalence, not about their feelings of ambivalence. Therefore, it focuses on the rhetorical and descriptive actions—descriptive practices—through which new social policy is actually enacted, even if the policy is not literally adopted or totally accepted. This focus reveals how street level bureaucrats participate in *making* social policy even though they are charged only with implementing it.

Policy innovations aim to change the current situation, organization, or practice. That is their *raison d'être*. In the course of instituting change, street level bureaucrats are themselves required to change—in their duties, orientations, and identities. They are, therefore, required to integrate new conduct, orientations, and discourses with those that may have been in place for quite some time. Integrating innovation is a constant organizational challenge. The challenge is far more serious than simply adjusting to the latest organizational "fad" or "fashion," as some scholars have depicted them (Czarniawska and Joerges 1996; Jacobsson 1994; Røvik 1996). Innovations can have wide organizational ramifications (Sahlin-Andersson 1994). Organizational personnel must learn and respond to new vocabularies and procedures. In the helping professions, innovative treatment regimes and therapeutic responses call for new ways of asserting professionalism and authority.

Staff members in juvenile centers proved to be quite skillful in responding to the public policy and rhetoric of family-work. This study has examined "both the artful processes and the substantive conditions of meaning making and social order" in social service organizations where new policy has been introduced (Gubrium and Holstein 2000:497). The study shows staff members both embracing and resisting new policy, and it characterizes staff actions as "doing ambivalence." While staff generally described the idea of family-work as excellent, they simultaneously expressed a number of reservations, albeit at times in a subtle and delicate way. Their rhetoric, thus, helped them articulate new policy, orientations, and practices with older, tried-and-true ways of doing things. The articulation was never perfect or seamless, yet it generally proved to be functional.

In a sense, staff members employed an accommodative rhetoric that allowed for the integration of competing organizational discourses and policies. Specifically, staff members were able to implement the new family-work policy without totally accepting the new policy or completely abandoning old ways. The stance they displayed in the accommodative rhetoric was a sort of "yes, but" position. This stance provides a way of integrating the new with the old, of bringing innovation into the organization without totally disrupting established ways of functioning. Rather than compelling either complete acceptance or flat rejection, the "yes, but" stance of juvenile center staff members provided flexibility they needed in order to convert to a family-work mode of acting, working, and talking.

In effect, the "yes, but" stance—embracing innovation at arm's length—allowed staff members to follow policy directives, while remaining true to longstanding professional work

patterns, orientations, and commitments. Staff members had a “stake” in prior ways of acting and talking, some of which were endangered by the new policy. Entrenched stakeholders are often suspected of taking selfishly conservative positions vis-à-vis change. To counter such suspicions, one may engage in what Jonathan Potter (1996) calls “stake inoculation.” Embracing innovation at arm’s length is one form of stake inoculation. Staff members can portray themselves as being in touch with the policy innovation (which they cannot overtly resist without serious risk) but, simultaneously, they can retain valued features of the old regime. Furthermore, they can avoid being seen as simply following a fashion or trend, or caving in to pressures from policy mandates. They can adopt the new policy, while simultaneously retaining aspects of now-supplanted work routines and orientations. Not only does embracement at arm’s length help to integrate new policy measures into ongoing social institutions, but it also helps organization members to integrate themselves into the new way of doing things.

Thus, ambivalent actions with respect to organizational innovation can be seen as organizationally functional. Social institutions—going concerns that are pursued through patterned, routine ways of acting, speaking, and interacting (see Hughes 1984)—do not change easily. A powerful inertia resides in everyday routines, accountability structures, and prevalent discourses. Embracing innovation at arm’s length—as a general practice—may allow for institutional innovation while simultaneously providing the means for resistance. Moreover, this process of integrating innovation is not simply a more palatable way of “easing into” new directives. As argued earlier, embracing innovation at arm’s length allows staff members to make policy at the street-level as they implement policies that are handed down to them. Public policy discourse is *discourse-in-practice*, after all. It is implemented through discursive practices. So, ultimately, social policy takes shape from its practical implementation, not merely its abstract presentation.

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