# The Politics of Time on the Frontline: Street Level Bureaucracy, Professional Judgment, and Public Accountability

## Abstract

This article reports on a study carried out on the impact of quality assurance mechanisms on street-level bureaucrats in Northern England (teachers, nurses and social workers). A key aim of the research was to explore the ways in which these mechanisms negotiate the much older regulatory function of time. The findings suggest that these mechanisms contribute to forms of time compression across professional activities, time compression in turn having consequences for professional judgement. The study explores the mechanisms via which this occurs, while also examining the implications of the research for debates about democracy, political regulation, and public sector management.

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## INTRODUCTION

Political stakes are high on the frontline of public services. Education, health, and social care professionals function as the interface between the public and the public sector, their capacity to fulfill their duty of care a key component of modern state legitimacy. The fact that these services are where public interest meets private concerns means that they represent the state at its most exposed. The success or otherwise of professional practice at the frontline has implications for how governments are judged across a range of issues—financial efficiency, political competence, and, not least, the promotion of democratic values.

Thus, it is not surprising that modern governments have developed extensive mechanisms of quality assurance designed specifically to measure the effectiveness of public services. One of the more striking developments of recent years in national and institutional governance is the rise of what Travers (2007) calls the "new bureaucracy" of quality assurance. This is particularly true of the public sector, with areas such as education, health, and social work under increasing pressure to evidence accountability to the public and the public purse. The mechanisms of this new bureaucracy— performance indicators, audit, inspection, and evaluation—are designed to increase formal levels of accountability to the state while also making the public sector more accountable to the public via marketization and the development of a consumer culture.

This trend toward ever increasing accountability is part of a broader agenda of regulation in relation to public-sector reform initiatives (Bundred, 2006; James, 2005). Given its political importance, it is inevitable that debates have developed over the usefulness of such a bureaucratic apparatus.

Increasingly, evidence suggests that these state bureaucratic systems, rather than alleviate issues associated with a lack of public accountability, have unwittingly managed to help facilitate their development in the first place (Liff, 2014; Mendez & Bachtler, 2011; Ossege, 2012). The evidence from a range of studies indicates that accountability can be a "double-edged sword" (Papadopoulos, 2010, p. 1032), with a number of unintended consequences arising from the reforms, including risk avoidance (Papadopoulos, 2010) and what Bovens calls the "accountability trap" (p. 958), a trap in which public servants achieve success in meeting accountability targets, yet are not "necessarily performing better in the real world of policy-making and public service delivery" (Bovens, 2010, p. 958).[1]

These consequences have also been well documented, in various ways, in research exploring the impact of the new bureaucracy on frontline services. In education, for example, concerns over marketization, targets, and performativity have taken center stage in debates right across the spectrum, from early years to higher education (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2007; Demaine, 2002; Hyland, 2002; Molesworth, Scullion, & Nixon, 2011).[2] Similar levels of concern can be found across the literature emanating from health and social work (e.g., see Learmonth & Harding, 2004; Traynor, 1999; Weitz, 2006). These unwelcome consequences of the new bureaucracy should be a major concern to policy makers and those interested in the effective functioning of democratic institutions: As Michael Lipsky put it in *Street-level bureaucracy* (1980/2010, p. 160), accountability is "the link between bureaucracy and democracy." At the same time, these consequences illustrate how the achievement of accountability (through whatever means) is fraught with difficulty. These consequences do not occur in a vacuum. Reform or administrative measures and initiatives in order to have effect must negotiate already existing structures, cultures, and practices, one of the reasons why unintended consequences occur in the first place. This is especially the case because accountability must, in the messy world of work and public life, encounter other forms of regulatory mechanism. These other forms of regulation, such as law, culture, and social norms, have their own internal logic and cannot be made to bow to the demands of the new bureaucracy without consequences (Parker, 2008).

Given the not inconsiderable additional workload attached to the new bureaucracy, another regulatory mechanism it must inevitably encounter is *time*, the available evidence suggesting that accountability as a form of political regulation has its own set of consequences when it comes to the temporal nature of professional life (Pollitt, 2009). There is, however, a surprising dearth of research on this relationship; surprising, as for Lipsky's street-level bureaucrats, the exercise of professional judgment is essential to their function as shapers of public policy, a core professional function that relies strongly on the quality of time provided to make such judgments. Since the advent of the new bureaucracy, the question needs to be asked: how has the administration of accountability impacted on the ability of street-level bureaucrats to, as Lipsky famously stated, "make policy" (p. 13)?

Using qualitative case studies of street-level bureaucrats in Northern England (teachers, nurses, and social workers), the current research sought to plug this gap in the literature and explore ways in which the regulatory functions of the new bureaucracy negotiate the much older regulatory function of time. The findings of the study suggest that the new bureaucracy contributes to forms of time *compression* across professional activities, this time compression in turn having significant consequences for the exercise of professional judgment at the street level. The study explores the mechanisms via which this occurs, while also examining the implications of the research for debates about democracy, political regulation, and public-sector management.

# ACCOUNTABILITY AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

It should be pointed out that concerns over the unintended consequences of accountability regimes have been expressed long before the advent of the new bureaucracy of quality assurance, with Peter Blau warning of such consequences in *Bureaucracy in modern society* (Blau, 1955; cited in du Gay, 2007). The difficulties attached to quality assurance mechanisms and their use to regulate and control professional behavior, attitudes and outcomes are one of the reasons why accountability is such a "tricky subject" (Barberis, 1998, p. 451). The case of public-sector professionals is particularly problematic when it comes to accountability, because of the specific and specialist nature of their work. Working directly with the public leaves their actions open to misinterpretation, subsequently making them vulnerable to accusations and complaints. The intersubjective nature of their core activity is a testing ground for regulation.

It is precisely this aspect, the intersubjective dimension, however, that Lipsky saw as core to the work of street-level bureaucrats. According to him, the "essence of street level bureaucracy is that they require people to make decisions about other people" (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. 161). Working at the level of the street, the argument goes, allows professionals to "make policy" through their capacity to exercise judgment and use discretion when dealing with members of the public. No bureaucratic regime can be that all encompassing where the activities of professionals can be so regulated that their role as policy filters can be overridden.

Indeed, Lipsky's original notion was designed to acknowledge and identify such a function for professionals, as a way of understanding how they are active players themselves in the process of forming policy (Hupe & Hill, 2007). Understanding bureaucracy at the level of the "street" offers a powerful antidote to less nuanced top-down approaches to understanding forms of government regulation and control. It also offers an intellectual space from which to explore how workers manipulate official policy in the context of their relationships with the public. While Lipsky was clearly aware that street-level bureaucrats operated within the context of significant external constraints, not least the tendency of demand to increase to meet the supply of public services, their position at the level of the street secured them a position of influence:
Within these constraints they have broad discretion with respect to the utilization of resources (by definition). In the application of resources to the job they confront the uncertainty that stems from the conflicting or ambiguous goals [set by legislators and administrators] that unevenly guide their work. They also confront the additional uncertainties that arise from difficulties measuring and evaluating work performances. … Thus the picture of the street-level bureaucrat is one of considerable responsibility in allocating social values. (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. 81—new edition)

This capacity for judgment and discretion, however, must be viewed through the prism of new bureaucratic methods of governance, which ultimately sheds a different light on street-level bureaucracy 30 years on. Indeed, the intervening years have seen some doubts cast over the capacity for street-level bureaucrats to exercise professional discretion (Brodkin, 2008; Jos & Tompkins, 2004; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Yang, 2012). The question is, has Lipsky's connection between accountability, bureaucracy, and democracy survived what some (Murphy, 2010; Power, 1997; Strathearn, 2000) consider a more pronounced presence of accountability mechanisms and quality assurance in public professional life? Specifically, is there still sufficient time to make professional judgments at the street level?

Certainly, the research evidence suggests that professionals such as teachers, nurses, and social workers are increasingly obliged to account for their actions in various time-consuming ways,[3] and to illustrate how they are meeting their targets and responding to evaluations of one sort or another. According to Brown (2007), these obligations come attached with some time-related consequences, specifically in relation to the role of trust in public-sector professionalism. In his study of transformations taking place in the British NHS, he argues that the bureaucratic drain on medical professionals "dramatically reduces the time available to sit down with the patient, answer questions and provide comfort and reassurance" (Brown, 2007, p. 10). Brown suggest that levels of trust are threatened by the rationalization of health care "through the neglect of the communicative act by which the patient's best interests are articulated, agreed upon, and by which the professional can affirm him/herself as both caring and competent" (Brown, 2007, p. 12).

According to Pollitt (2009, p. 208), this relationship between the new bureaucracy and time has resulted in what he calls on-the-job "time compression," a trend which results in public-sector professionals "coping with impossible workloads by suppressing a variety of normal practices and states of mind in order to focus on the 'headlines'" (Pollitt, 2009, p. 208). This relationship between time compression and task suppression was the subject of Sabelis' (2002) study on management in Dutch organizations, where she took to task the often positive view of time compression, defined as "the reduction or condensation of tasks within a time frame, the struggle over performance by doing more in less time, the dynamics arising when things are 'left out' in order to concentrate on what is considered a 'core' task" (Sabelis, 2002, p. 90). Sabelis argued that real concerns remain about the damage time compression could do to the "quality" of managerial work:
My research shows how ambiguous the meanings and effects of compression are, especially regarding long-term effects of organisational processes … the possible "losses" are not understood or acknowledged because of pressures, the need for quick action, and an accepted level of (rational) efficiency. (Sabelis, 2002, p. 102)

Key to this downside is the relationship between compression and suppression—the question for this article is: How has this relationship affected the public sector and in particular the work of public-sector professionals? As Pollitt asks (2008, p. 183), "how far down across our public services has the 'new urgency' spread? … has it permeated all the way down to the 'street bureaucrats'?" The consequences of this connection between compression and task suppression are such that doubts could be cast on the capacity of street-level bureaucrats to fulfill their function as discretionary decision-makers. As Pollitt elsewhere suggests, the "notion of a seasoned judgement, well-marinated in the past, does not appear to be part of this compressed world" (2009, p. 209). If time compression does impact on the suppression of judgment and discretion, this then could have ramifications for the way one thinks not only about the capacity of street-level bureaucrats to deliver effective quality services, but also about the nature of accountability itself. If compression and suppression are inevitable consequences of modern working and bureaucratic practices, can accountability still be understood as the link between bureaucracy and democracy?

## METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the original study[4] was to examine the impact of accountability mechanisms on the work of public-sector professionals in the UK, specifically how mechanisms such as audit and inspection impact on their relationships with the public. Included among the research subjects were nurses, social workers, and teachers. In total, nine interviews and three focus groups were carried out, equally split between the three professions. The focus groups were organized once relevant

themes had been identified in the individual interviews. All interviews and focus groups were conducted in the same borough of the North West of England. Given that three different professional groups were part of the study, it required different strategies to access the respondents. In order for access to be obtained to subjects that could provide adequate narratives around accountability and its consequences, more experienced personnel were requested to take part.

This article reports only on the consequences related to time, although of course these overlap with other aspects (another article detailing these is currently under review). Although the study was not framed around particular unintended consequences, some of these consequences came to the fore from an early point in the research. These included the role of law as a regulatory mechanism and the nature of trust in professional relationships. By far, the most visible theme in the interviews is the politics associated with time. Similarly to Sabelis's work on managers in Dutch organizations, the ideas of time and time compression "kept popping up" (Sabelis, 2002, p. 90).

The results of the study are detailed below—please note that real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

# FINDINGS: THE TEMPORAL CONSEQUENCES OF REGULATION

Evident in participant's responses was the view that time itself has become increasingly politicized. There are a number of dimensions to this politics. One of these relates to a trend for time and resource displacement, where there is the emergence of a strong correlation between observation, time, and prioritizing. Another form of displacement was the impact on nonwork activities, including leisure and family time, but also issues to do with mental and physical health. Most importantly, participants referred to how time has become increasingly commodified—with an increase in on-job consumption combined with a decrease in time allocation; basically, more to do and less time to do it in.

The temporal consequences of bureaucracy are here organized around two sets: impact on time compression and impact on professional judgment.

## Accountability and Time Compression

The pressure to supply visible and tangible evidence of measurement is common across all three types of street-level bureaucrat. The need to document activity and performance for later evaluation and analysis, regardless of context, unites the public-sector workers and places them in a situation where their workloads, subjectively at least, allow little room for maneuver. The pressure on time as a valuable but limited resource is evident: As Laura, one of the teachers states, "We are put under a lot of pressure and we are continually monitoring and assessing the children and there is a greater workload because of the paperwork that has to be filled in." Excessive pressure on time allocation is a theme reiterated by the social workers: "The pressure we are under to stage manage as much as possible is unreal … cases have got to be rammed up very, very quickly" (Bob, social worker).

The pressure for social workers has got to the point where, according to Andrew, "we feel we cannot do any more," a sentiment shared by the nurses: "We have been pushed more to be accountable and meet patient needs but we haven't got the workforce to deal with the increased demand … there is continuous stress in the clinic" (Kirsty, nurse).

The narratives of street-level bureaucrats delivered via the research suggest there is a close relationship between time compression and task suppression. According to respondents, the need to achieve and complete accountability-related tasks, whether in relation to inspections, audits, evaluations, or performance indicators, has significant consequences for their ability to complete what they consider *core* professional tasks—dealing with the issues and concerns of pupils, patients, and clients:

Accountability has come right the way down the line and what it has done in social work is more paperwork. There is a lot of tick boxes and social worker assessment which we had not done before. A lot of it is to do with recording assessment and quality assurance all the time. That's not a bad thing, it's a good thing but it takes up a lot of social worker time. Whereby previously we would be working with service users nowadays I spend a lot of my time behind a computer as opposed to direct work as a lot of it has to be quality assured. (Bob, social worker)

In some of the responses, the connection between compression and suppression at times resembles a game of musical chairs, in which some tasks disappear from the radar—a zero sum game in which the presence of one task inevitably means the absence of another:

Getting visits done means that something else can't be done, and if something else happens … then time doesn't allow it, and it becomes a tick-box, jump through this hoop, because come what may, we have got to please the inspectors. So when they come looking they can find that no stone has been left unturned. (Bob, social worker)

The exclusion of tasks is also evident among the teachers; as one of them puts it, targets in reading, writing and Maths "are your be all and end all" (Laura, teacher):

As teachers you are continually under pressure to fit in all the things you have to in a week and sometimes you don't have the time. You are continually thinking I should have fitted in this particular lesson and you are worrying about fitting everything in otherwise perhaps they won't reach their target. (Laura, teacher)

However, while there is some evidence of task suppression as a result of time compression brought on by accountability demands, there is also evidence of what may be termed task *dilution*. A key theme in the interviews was that compressed time resulted in a shift in the balance of tasks, rather than outright suppression—i.e., more a question of degree to which tasks are suppressed. For example:

It is all about filling in forms and providing them [management] with results for audits and making sure we are all doing the right things and we are all showing that we have lists which prove we are preventing infection. But it is giving us *less* time to spend with the patient. (Emma, nurse, our italics)

Instead of existing in a world of professional absolutes, the workers struggle to balance competing demands, where tasks by necessity are minimized or postponed but not necessarily eliminated. More or less appears the order of the day: for example, one of the social workers suggests that "engagement with families is more *minimal* than it used to be" (Brian, social worker). They expand on this minimization by arguing that a process of task inversion has occurred alongside the advent of the new bureaucracy:

The face to face work used to be 80 per cent face work, 20 per cent administration and filling in forms and stuff in the office. It is probably now the other way around, so that your relationships with service users and their families has to be affected. (Brian, social worker)

This task dilution takes on different forms, depending on the profession—case work in the lives of social workers, illness prevention for nurses, student support for teachers: "Inevitably if your time is taken up doing one new thing then you are spending less time on preparation and accurate marking in the time available" (Helen, teacher). But the principle is the same—the quality of the relationship is impacted by the amount of time available for professional-end user interaction: "Social work has changed. When I started as an assistant social worker, I could spend 2–3 hours with a child who was having a rough time. There is no way now I could afford that time" (Anna, social worker).

This apparent acceptance of task dilution, however, does not mean that all forms of dissent or conflict have disappeared from professional life in the public sector. While the evidence for resistance was minimal, there were some indications that professionals were not wholly fatalistic in their acceptance of such changes:
Whenever I have gone to any management meeting when we are told to do this that and the other I have said what is this going to replace? You then make a suggestion of what to drop and it is refused. If you tried to take on board everything you are asked to do then you would sink. (Yasmin, teacher)

There was also evidence to suggest that some professionals have developed counterstrategies that work to counteract the effects of accountability on task dilution—one of these strategies being procrastination:
Procrastination is always good as well because if you wait the things which are really important eventually will be done. So procrastination is a way of survival because if you leave it, leave it, leave it and if someone really wants something they will come back to you again and again and again. (John, teacher)

## Time and Impact on Professional Judgment

While the evidence suggests that task dilution is just as likely a consequence of time compression as task suppression at the street level of bureaucracy, it was also evident across the three professions that accountability-related time compression has consequences for the ways in which they relate to the public. The interviews and focus groups were awash with evidence of what Blaug calls the "distortion of the face-to-face" (Blaug, 1995). Although Blaug used the phrase specifically in the context of social work, it applies just as well in the context of street-level bureaucracy in an age of quality assurance. The success or otherwise of these relationships is a vital aspect of any analysis of accountability, as these relationships have implications for modern street-level bureaucracy and its capacity to maintain its core functions of professional judgment and discretion. Professional relations with the public and the perceived quality of these relations provide a litmus test for notions of relative autonomy in the public sector.

Of particular concern in this regard for street-level bureaucrats was their grip on judgment, in their interpretation an ever-loosening grip. The capacity to weigh up a situation and make a reasoned and logical decision was questioned by all three professions: According to Sarah, one of the nurses, time compression made making a reasoned judgment more difficult: "A patient's pain can be caused by any number of factors. It could be emotional, or something not related, but if we are going to go in and out quickly, all these issues are going to be missed" (Sarah, nurse). Similarly, the social workers believed that the pressure of accountability on their time affected their ability to get a broader understanding of the context within which clients live: "We are in with them for such a short time we can only deal with the issue on the referral form … we can see that there are much wider issues but we don't have the time to deal with them" (Brian, social worker).

The question then becomes: how is judgment related to time? At least part of the answer to this question lies in the intersubjective nature of the work carried out by street-level bureaucrats, the kind of emotion-laden work that is difficult to measure but unavoidable in such encounters. Dealing with other people, the raison-d'etre of street-level bureaucrats, is an essential but fragile aspect of these professional lives. These intersubjective encounters are easily influenced by factors that mediate the relationship between professional and nonprofessional. Two of these factors in particular were more evident in the research than others: *situated knowledge* and *trust*.

## Situated knowledge

The capacity to exercise judgment in sensitive and pressured situations requires the ability to weigh up levels of knowledge about the patient, pupil, or client. The research suggests that, in public-sector working, these levels of knowledge include forms of personal knowledge—of people's circumstances, history, personality, and desires—forms of knowledge that, according to our respondents, are affected by the additional demands on their time. The inability to incorporate and weigh up such forms of knowledge has a damaging effect on professional judgment making and the exercise of discretion. Social workers, for example, see time as the enemy of judgment:

With the visits you have to keep to time scales even if you feel worried. This can mean that you do smaller visits more often or during the evening and by then the children are out of school … so you might do a 20 minute visit and think "well what can I get out of 20 minutes?" like walking in making sure and then walking out again - it is not long enough to do any productive work with children. (Carmen, social worker)

Another social worker suggested that the pressures of time did not allow for measurement—or in his words, a "balanced" view of the situation: "Quite often we only get to see them at crisis point, not when things are good and sometimes you need to see the balance" (Mike, social worker). This time pressure at critical moments is also evident in nurses' capacity to deal with critically ill patients: "Patients expect you to go in and discus end of life care with them—where you want to die. How do you bring that up in five minutes of knowing a patient?" (Zoe, nurse).

This impact on decision-making at critical moments is foreshadowed by the broader impact of relationships, an interpersonal context that contributes to the exercise of judgment at later stages. Emphasized among all three professional groups is the significance of "knowing" their client, pupil, and patient, and how this capacity has been reduced and because of time restrictions imposed by bureaucratic methods of governance:

I can't remember when I last got properly round to see patients and say hello to them and ask if everything is ok. I physically just don't get that time anymore. I do a quick on the ward check, but I don't get time to say "hi" to the patients as often as I should or would like to. (Emma, nurse)

According to one of the other nurses, Jenny, this lack of knowing applies also to the extended family: "Years ago you knew the patient and relatives, we knew all sorts about them and we just don't get that anymore. It's sad really." And while teachers may have extended periods over the child's educational career, there is also a sense that their time to "know" their pupil is under threat:

There is no depth or quality in the interactions anymore because you have no time to develop quality relationships with the children and the focus on their particular strengths and weaknesses, which is what you're supposed to do as a teacher. We have not got time to develop and nurture a child. (Laura, teacher)

The amassing of this situated and personal knowledge is mostly hidden from view, forms of "soft" knowledge that professionals often rely on to help them exercise judgment, discretion, and most importantly to make the "right" decision. Without sufficient amounts of this soft knowledge, however, the implications can be profound for both professional and nonprofessionals:

Sometimes families are offended when you give them copies of the assessments … and they say, "yes but you didn't know about blah, blah" and that really affects things. I then think, had I have known, then I would not have taken such a strict line on a family way of working, but then I had to work on what I had. Sometimes this can be damaging. I think we get it right most of the time [working with families], but there are definitely cases if you are sticking to timescales, you miss key points and this damages working relationships. (Brian, social worker)

### The presence of trust

The quantity of time available to the professional in their dealings with the public impact on the amount of "quality time" that can be spent on each individual case. This inevitably must intersect with the capacity to develop relations of *trust* between the parties. Adequate levels of trust allow for a deeper grasp on the nuances and complexities of people's lives, without which professional judgment loses its grounding. Most significantly, it impacts on the quality of communication between them, the delicate nature of such work demanding a complex form of communicative interaction:

There needs to be that level of trust especially if we are hoping that people will open up to us - expecting children to tell us some of their deepest darkest secrets and sometimes we don't have time to build up that relationship. We may only see a child once or twice and then [they're] gone. (Carmen, social worker)

Without adequate time to allow clients to trust those in authority, it then becomes a situation in which street-level bureaucrats are pressured to make judgments based on partial information—the lack of communication a barrier to a reasonable conclusion:

You have seven days to do a first assessment – well families are naturally guarded, reserved, shy, terrified, all these negative things which puts a block on sharing information. So how really in depth is your assessment going to be in seven days when that trust just isn't there. (Brian, social worker)

The space within which street-level bureaucrats have traditionally functioned provides a natural environment in which adequate relationships can be established. But the pressure on time has the effect of distorting this space as it becomes occupied by administrative demands for accountability. Combined with a decreasing capacity to accumulate situated knowledge of people in their care, this can lead to professional encounters that indicate what can happen when judgment is undermined:

I had a relative ranting and raving down the corridor because her husband was in theatre and we didn't know who he was. The relative called us "useless" and thick and she was literally ranting down the corridor. It was simply because he had been in theatre for so long and she was frightened. All the other patients were aware of it. This is all because you don't know the patient. In this particular case he had a cardiac arrest during another surgery – unfortunately he was just a faceless patient to us. When you were a ward sister in the past you would have had all the information and you would know your patients and this made relationships and respect much easier. We just don't have time … there is too much to do. (Katy, nurse)

## DISCUSSION

What do the findings mean, then, for the capacity of street-level bureaucrats to make policy? The evidence suggests that, while these particular street-level bureaucrats can in theory exercise some

form of professional autonomy in their daily working lives, in practice the ability to make professional judgments and prioritize tasks based on those judgments is to some extent circumscribed. The need to account for one's actions on a regular basis, alongside the proximity of middle management to the accounting process, has the effect of blanching out this professional middle ground, where the capacity to prioritize moves ever closer to the center. Whether or not prioritizing judgments were ever fully devolved is open to question, but nevertheless, the current research suggests that the capacity to make choices is restricted in the modern public-sector frontline.

It could be argued that the findings of this research broadly corroborate other work done on accountability and its consequences, in the sense that the pressure to account for one's actions has consequences for the actions themselves. While this is true, the current study raises other questions about forms of regulation generally that have implications for how we understand the nature of street-level bureaucracy, accountability, and democracy. The study highlights the fact that professional judgment and decision-making is unavoidably couched in a world of multiple regulatory mechanisms: as well as political regulation, street-level bureaucrats must also negotiate time and the intersubjective world—as indicated in this study, the capacity of people to regulate each others' behavior impacts on the frontline. Attempts to regulate the public sector and ensure its accountability to the public will have to negotiate these other forms of regulation, explicitly or implicitly.

While this take on the nature of regulation in the public sector does reflect the main findings of this study, a few caveats should be made. First, it is difficult to separate off time compression as the effect of new bureaucratic mechanisms and compression resulting from work pressures generally. It also should be pointed out that the focus here is on time spent reporting on work, rather than the core work itself. While acknowledging that public-sector frontline is a "dual-aspect" activity (Blaug, 1995, p. 425), in that it involves administrative as well as face-to-face activity, responding to accountability in the forms of inspection and evaluation is a subsequent layer on top of traditional administrative loads (such as case paperwork, exam moderation, etc.). Given the inevitably blurred lines between these two types of activity in the context of everyday professional practice, it would be something of a challenge for researchers and also for the researched to differentiate between the two (including differentiating between their consequences for professional practice).

The findings of the study also raise questions over how we understand discretion in the first place. Judging from the responses in our study, it can all too easily be inferred that discretion at the street level is an all or nothing game; but just as with the compression/dilution distinction, it should not be overlooked that in any professional practice, there are, as Evans and Harris put it (2004, p. 878) "gradations of discretion" between weak and strong. It should also not be overlooked that these gradations will be affected by the type of street-level bureaucrat under discussion—a fact that itself raises important questions about the generalizability of the findings presented here. To be fair, even Lipsky admits that the work patterns he describes are not applicable to all street-level bureaucrats, but the questions that Schachter and Kosar (2011, p. 301) direct to Lipsky in response—i.e., "how generalizable are these truisms?"; and "in which contexts do they apply?"—are just as relevant in the current study and should add a note of caution to the findings presented here.

Another note of caution should be added regarding the quality or otherwise of intersubjective relationships between the public and the public sector. Given that the study was framed around the impact of accountability mechanisms on these relationships, it was understandable if not inevitable that professionals such as nurses would tend to focus on the more negative consequences. While

their responses may raise concerns over particular implications of the new bureaucracy, this does not mean that relationships have deteriorated generally. Nor does it mean that the professions in question have untroubled histories when it comes to the delivery of care; Jones (1999, p. 47), for example, argues that social work, before or after the advent of the new bureaucracy, "as a whole has never taken its clients seriously." It would therefore be wise to steer clear of a "politics of nostalgia" (Newman & Clarke, 2009, p. 180) when it comes to the subjective retelling of professional practices, narratives that can be affected as much by selective recollection of events as they can by critical reflection on professional practice. Historical comparison is a notoriously difficult enterprise to validate successfully.

One final point that should be raised in relation to the realities of the frontline relates to working practices established among public-sector professionals. Hupe and Hill (2007, p. 280) discuss how street-level bureaucrats generally develop as part of their labor process, standard operating procedures, i.e., "certain situations are handled in a way similar to how corresponding situations have been handled." Indeed, Lipsy himself (in the preface to the 30th anniversary edition) made the claim that street-level bureaucrats "manage their difficult jobs by developing routines of practice and psychologically simplifying their clientele and environment in ways that strongly influence the outcomes of their efforts" (Lipsky, 1980/2010, p. xii). Judging from discussions with workers on the frontline, there could be a danger that characteristics of working practices such as risk avoidance and impression management become established and embedded in the labor process, making them more difficult to shift, i.e., they become as much part of professional identity as do other more notable aspects such as judgment and decision-making. After all, deciding to avoid risk and to cover one's tracks is, in the end, discretionary.

## CONCLUSION

The research detailed in this article set out to examine the impact of accountability mechanisms on public-sector workers and their capacity to fulfill their professional duties. In particular, the research focused on how time pressures mediate the relationship between accountability demands and the exercise of professional discretion. The findings of the study suggest that the new bureaucracy of quality assurance contributes to forms of time compression across professional areas such as education, health, and social work, such time compression having a range of consequences for the exercise of professional judgment at the street level. These consequences revolve around the significance of the intersubjective dimension in street-level bureaucracy, the role of situated knowledge and relationships of trust being highlighted as key variables in the effective exercise or otherwise of professional judgment.

This article, then, is a contribution to research exploring accountability and its (unintended) consequences, adding task suppression to an ever-growing list of side effects of the new bureaucracy. The emphasis on temporal regulation as a mediating factor, however, should be seen as a novel contribution to this specialized subfield, given that this factor has been relatively neglected in the literature. The article also makes a strong contribution to the developing field of research exploring professional discretion more generally (e.g., Tummers & Bekkers, 2014), offering what Brodkin (2008, p. 337) calls a "street-level approach to accountability" which has the potential to highlight aspects of policy delivery "that other analytic strategies do not capture" (Brodkin, 2008, p. 327).

Alongside these contributions, the research detailed in this article should also be viewed as an addition to the recent research focus on intersubjectivity and its impact on social relations, much of

which revolves around applying the insights of Axel Honneth (2007) in specific settings such as child welfare and workplace organization (Thomas, 2012; Voswinkel, 2012). This theoretical shift toward the affective turn (at least in its critical theory dimension) is a development that should be taken more seriously in research on street-level bureaucracy—the world of intersubjective relations is arguably why street-level bureaucrats—nurses, teachers, and social workers—are such a strong force in policy making in the first place: the fact that they work with, and make decisions on, *other people*. This is where time compression starts to take on greater significance on the frontline. The impact of time compression on the development of trusting relationships in professional contexts, alongside the increasing challenges faced when "getting to know" someone, effectively means that the capacity to deliver "measured" or "seasoned" judgments, in Pollit's words, should be scrutinized more closely at both the theoretical and policy levels.

This is all the more important because there is a politics attached to time that is too often overlooked. It tends to be overlooked because the consequences of time as a function of professional practice can easily be ignored at the organizational level, the level that lies at the center of accountability modes. Trying to understand time as a variable in the context of professional practice runs into the difficulty that time is both measurable (in the ideal sense) and impervious to quantification (in the real sense). This means that the consequences of time and the lack of it tend to be felt in the context of interpersonal relations, which shelters them from direct observation.

This context also shelters time from becoming a greater part of discussions over the benefits and drawbacks of accountability. If this study suggests anything, it is that temporality needs to be removed from the shadows of intersubjective work practices and placed in the glare of debate over the delivery of frontline services. This is significant as accountability, for all its drawbacks, is a necessary and vital part of democratic life. As Bovens argues, "there is no accountable governance without accountability arrangements. Accountability mechanisms keep public actors on the virtuous path and prevent them from going astray" (Bovens, 2010, p. 963). This is because accountability generally is an "essential requirement of public management in the democratic state" (Brodkin, 2008, p. 317). Without taking into account the power of time, however, these mechanisms run the risk of producing effects they were intended to rectify in the first place.

## Notes

[1] There are numerous other cases of unintended consequences detailed in the literature, which illustrate the kinds of challenges faced by political regulation—for example the kind of risk avoidance in Prendergast's research (2003) which suggests that some organisations will more often than not accede to consumer demands purely in order to avoid a complaint. One particularly damaging set of consequences are identified by Diefenbach (2009, p. 900), who argues that the negative effects of performance management and measurement systems include the neglect of "intangible assets and traditional values" such as "fairness, dignity, equality, justice, quality of life, security, freedom, representation, participation, commitment [etc] …". According to him, these are "devaluated and discredited, portrayed as being unimportant, only of instrumental use, ignored, or treated as constraints and obstacles that organizations have to overcome" (Diefenbach, 2009, p. 900).

[2] A useful example of such concerns is provided by Walsh (2006, p. 114), who rails against what he calls the "new educational bureaucracies," the consequences of which are to be measured in the "demoralisation of teachers, the rapidly growing bureaucratisation of schools and the concomitant, and depressing impoverishment of educational policy discourse."

³ See for a range of examples across the professions, Blomgren and Sahlin (2007); Exworthy and Halford (1999); Harrison and McDonald (2008); Hoyle and Wallace (2005); Murphy and Skillen (2013).

⁴ The study was funded by a university small grant and was conducted over several months in 2012.

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