

Frontline Workers' Perceived Administration Support and Attitudes towards Tasks Imposed by the Administration

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Abstract

This paper explores the ability of the organizational support theory, propounded by Eisenberger et al. (1986), to explain variation in public frontline workers' attitudes towards tasks imposed by higher-level administration. The paper thereby focuses on the effects of perceived organizational support on attitudes towards specific tasks, rather than the effects on general organizational commitment. It is argued, that the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration with regard to certain organizational tasks defined by the latter, the more they will adopt positive attitudes towards those tasks and to a greater extent regard them as relevant organizational tasks. The argument is tested empirically by a study of 451 childcare workers' perceived support from higher-level administration and their attitudes towards the task of language stimulation of immigrant children in childcare centers. The findings support the argument.

Introduction

Public organizations often face multiple goals, which change as society's goals change (Wilson 1989), and even if goals persist, the preferred ways to obtain these goals occasionally change. Politicians and higher-level administration are therefore frequently required to impose new tasks on frontline workers, who eventually implement policies. This poses a major challenge, as the frontline workers' attitudes towards such tasks have a strong effect on how, and to what extent, the tasks are carried out – and eventually on policy implementation (Lipsky 1980). Furthermore, such an influence on frontline workers' attitudes and behavior is often very difficult to obtain (see e.g. Brehm and Gates 1997; Meier and O'Toole 2006a, 2006b). However, an organizational support theory developed in the organization literature (see Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997, 2001; Shore and Shore 1995) may offer a part of the solution. The theory holds that when employees see themselves as supported by their employers, they reciprocate with an obligation to help the organization reach its objectives.

The purpose of this paper is to apply this general organizational support theory to the question of higher-level administration influence on public frontline workers' attitudes towards tasks imposed by the administration. First, an argument is developed claiming that the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration with regard to certain organizational tasks defined by the latter, the more they will adopt a positive attitude towards those tasks. The paper therefore focuses on support from higher-level administration as perceived by frontline workers. Frontline workers'

attitudes towards tasks concern the extent to which frontline workers accept a task imposed by higher-level administration as a relevant organizational task. Second, the argument is tested empirically by a study of 451 public frontline workers.

The next section outlines relevant prior research on influencing public frontline workers. Subsequently, the general organizational support theory is introduced and applied to the issue of influence of higher-level administration on public frontline workers' attitudes towards specific tasks. Before the empirical test is conducted, the case, data, method, and measures are presented. The findings are followed by a discussion of implications of the findings and possible further research steps. Hereafter, a concluding section is presented.

Influencing public frontline workers

According to Brehm and Gates (1997), public frontline personnel may either chose to "work", i.e. devote extraordinary effort to accomplishing a stated policy; to "shirk", i.e. maximize leisure or direct effort towards non-policy goals; or to "sabotage", i.e. deliberately undermine the official policy. Several potential sources of influence of higher-level administration on frontline workers' choice to work, shirk, or sabotage public policy are suggested in the literature (see Brehm and Gates 1997; Meyers and Vorsanger 2007 for overviews).

One potential source of influence is supervision, understood in terms of hierarchal control (i.e. monitoring) of the frontline personnel. On the basis of both theoretical developments and empirical findings, Brehm and Gates (1997, 196-197) conclude that supervision has some, although relatively little influence on frontline workers. Based on a survey of 199 public employment workers, Riccucci et al. (2004) and Riccucci (2005a, 2005b) demonstrate that monitoring has some influence on welfare workers' perceptions of employment goals stated by official employment policy. However, like Brehm and Gates (1997), she concludes that this influence of managers and politicians is generally limited (Riccucci 2005a, 115-122).

When explaining the limited effects of supervision on the actions of frontline workers, Brehm and Gates (1997) primarily emphasize that supervision demands a large amount of costly resources, which limits the possibilities for sufficient supervision as well as public supervisors' possibilities to reward and punish performance. Meier and O'Toole (2006a) point out another important constraint for hierarchal control, namely that policies are more often than not implemented in complex networks which cannot be controlled exclusively by superiors (whether politicians or higher-level administration). Thus, the capacity to coerce compliance is limited.

Another way for higher-level administration to influence frontline workers is by sending signals about official policy goals, and emphasizing relevant tasks associated with these goals. Riccucci (2005b) finds signals to have limited effects on welfare workers' priorities between a new "work first" goal and the traditional "human capital investment" goal in a study of Michigan employment officials. In contrast, a study by May and Winter (2007) of employment caseworkers finds that frontline workers' perception of municipal signals regarding a new national "getting clients into work quickly" policy has an effect on how caseworkers implement the policy. Additionally, Keiser and Soss (1998) conclude from their analysis of a federal child support program that "when legislators fail to communicate clear goals (...), they create openings for unsuccessful and inequitable implementation" (1152).

In general, the public administration literature is devoting more attention to potential positive effects of management (broadly understood, e.g. leadership style, human resource management, organizational culture) in public organizations. In a review of sources of public service improvement, Boyne (2003) finds that different management aspects play important roles in determining public service improvement, although he concludes that the body of evidence is far from complete. Several studies by Meier and O'Toole (2001, 2002, 2003; O'Toole and Meier, 2003, 2004) focusing on network management and manager quality in general also support the "management matters" claim.

As pointed out by May and Winter (2007, 4), much of the broader public administration literature examining the relationship between management and performance does not address the frontline worker behavior or investigate if and how management influences frontline workers' attitudes and actions. An exception is Brewer's (2005) large-n analysis of federal employees, which demonstrates that management variables, such as satisfaction with higher management, supervisory proficiency, and organizational culture, have significant impacts on performance. On the basis of his results, Brewer (2005) concludes that management works through motivation and empowerment of employees, organizational culture, perceived fairness of employees and commitment. Therefore, the study indicates that at least part of the management influence on performance works through frontline workers' attitudes and actions.

Studies that examine the potential effects of support from superiors on subordinates' attitudes and actions in public administration contexts are quite rare. An exception is Yang and Pandey (2009), who examine and find effects of political support, i.e. support from elected officials, on agency managers' commitment. Studying frontline workers, Winter (2002, 2003) finds indications of a positive effect of adequate professional and technical support on coping behavior among immigration case workers, although the analysis showed somewhat mixed results. All in all, the few public administration studies that

focus on support from superiors point to possible positive effects of such support on subordinates' attitudes and actions. The following section applies theoretical developments from organizational literature to the question of a potential influence of higher-level administration on public frontline workers.

Frontline workers' perceived support and attitudes towards tasks imposed by the administration

For quite a long time, parts of the organizational theory literature have dealt with employer-employee relationships, and how employers or managers can improve these relationships and thereby improve organizational performance. An important contribution of this literature is the organizational support theory, primarily developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The next section introduces the organizational support theory. Then, the theory is applied to the question of influence of higher-level administration on public frontline workers' attitudes towards specific tasks.

Organizational support theory

The organizational support theory is derived from the more general social exchange theory developed by different contributions from the fifties and sixties. Homans (1958), March and Simon (1958), drawing heavily on Barnard (1938), Thibault and Kelly (1959), Gouldner (1960), and Blau (1964) are among the main contributors. Basically, social exchange theory concerns exchanges of resources (tangible or intangible) that generate obligations among participating actors (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005, 874). When an actor receives a valued good, an obligation to repay with a good valued by the donating actor is generated (Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2004; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). This is often referred to as a norm of reciprocity (see e.g. Gouldner 1960; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005).

Organizational support theory focuses specifically on exchange relationships between employers and employees (Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997; Coyle-Shapiro and Conway 2004). According to Eisenberger et al. (1986, 1997, 2001), employees form beliefs concerning how much the organization (employers, managers, superiors) values their contribution and well-being. According to organizational support theory, such perceived organizational support (POS) is valued by employees and therefore reciprocated with care about the organization's welfare and effort to help the organization reach its objectives (Eisenberger et al. 2001). In turn, this is expected to improve employee performance.

The basic mechanism of the theory, i.e. the positive relationship between POS, felt obligation and commitment towards the organization, is supported by a large number of empirical studies (Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997, 2001; Eisenberger, Fasolo and Davis-

LaMastro 1990; Wayne et al 2002; Orpen 1994; Armeli et al. 1998, see Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002 for an overview). The studies include both private and public organizations, although none of the studies address differences between private and public organizations or specific circumstances of bureaucratic organizations and public frontline workers. These studies usually focus on the psychological mechanisms of employer-employee relationships in a general sense.

In their review of research on POS, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) outline three general types of treatment received by employees and donated by the organization that are expected to increase POS: Fairness, supervisor support, and organizational rewards and job conditions. Each category holds a number of subdimensions. Fairness concerns the formal and informal ways resources are distributed among employees. These include adequate information and voice when implementing decisions, ways of promoting and treating employees with dignity. Supervisor support concerns the degree to which supervisors value the employees' contributions and care about their well-being. From the perspective of a floor-employee, supervisors are representatives of the organization and their actions contribute to shaping employees' views of the organization. Organizational rewards and job conditions include recognition of an employee's contribution to the organization, performance pay, job security, autonomy and absence of role stressors (environmental demands with which individuals feel unable to cope). According to prior research, all three types of treatment strongly affect POS (Rhoades and Eisenberger 2002, 703). Fairness seems to have the strongest effect and supervisor support the second strongest effect.

Influence of perceived administration support on frontline workers' attitudes towards specific tasks

Politicians and higher-level administration are from time to time required to impose new tasks on frontline workers (or change the content or priority of existing tasks), who eventually implement policies. Furthermore, a successful implementation of such new or changed tasks is highly dependent on what the frontline workers think of those tasks. The more frontline workers comply with the new or changed tasks, the better chances of a successful implementation. Several contributions have demonstrated that influence of higher-level administration on frontline workers' attitudes and behavior through hierarchical control is very difficult (Brehm and Gates 1997; Meier and O'Toole 2006a, 2006b). The question is therefore: What other strategies can higher-level administration use to influence frontline workers' attitudes towards tasks imposed by the administration and thus increase the chances of successful implementation?

According to Simon (1997), the relationship between superiors and subordinates can be seen as reciprocal. The more subordinates accept organizational tasks imposed on them, the better performance of those tasks. Thus, interaction between superiors and sub-

ordinates goes both ways. Theories that incorporate reciprocal relationships can therefore be particularly useful when we look for successful strategies for implementing tasks defined by higher-level administration.

Organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al. 1986) holds that when employees are supported by their employers, they reciprocate. The broader organization literature (Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997, 2001; Wayne et al 2002; Orpen 1994; Armeli et al. 1998) often assumes that such support is reciprocated with hard work and affective commitment towards the organization in general. However, applying the basic mechanisms of social exchange theory and organizational support theory to the question of influence on public frontline workers' attitudes towards certain tasks produces an additional argument: the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration with regard to certain organizational tasks defined by the latter, the more they will adopt a positive attitude towards those tasks.

Organizational support theory holds that employees reciprocate support from superiors with a good valued by the superiors. When politicians or higher-level administration are trying to define or redefine frontline workers' tasks, positive attitudes towards those tasks among the implementing frontline workers are of high value to the former. Therefore, a way for the implementing frontline workers to return the support is by adopting positive attitudes towards the tasks in question. Higher-level administration may provide different types of support to frontline workers. Turning to organizational support theory, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) identify three broad categories of support: (1) fair treatment; (2) supervisor support, and (3) organizational rewards and job conditions. Furthermore, when focusing on attitudes towards specific tasks, it is relevant to distinguish between professional or technical support of tasks (see e.g. Winter 2002, 2003) and task support that has to do with cooperation, information, voice and recognition of frontline workers' contributions. These two types of support are, however, expected to be positively correlated as frontline workers are expected to see professional support as cooperation and concern for their well being.

Testing the argument

Case selection

The strategy of analysis in this study is to isolate the effect of perceived administration support on frontline workers' attitudes by holding constant as many alternative factors potentially influencing the attitudes as possible and reducing noise due to differences in measures. This requires a test case with a large number of similar public frontline workers and access to data containing relevant control variables with regard to both individual characteristics of the frontline workers and organizational characteristics. Thus, using

similar frontline workers makes it possible to use similar indicators to measure the theoretical concepts across subjects. The use of a large-n study makes it possible to control for a variety of individual characteristics of the frontline workers (e.g. gender, age, wage, sickness absence). Furthermore, the frontline workers included in the study must be expected to vary with respect to the key explaining variable: perceived administration support. In addition, the test case should contain a task imposed on frontline workers by higher-level administration, e.g. a new task or a change in the priority or content of an existing task.

The task of performing special language stimulation of immigrant children in The Municipality of Aarhus, Denmark, offers a test case that takes the above-mentioned requirements into account. In Denmark the municipalities are responsible for a large share of the public service, such as public schools, public childcare centers, and public nursing homes for elderly (Christensen, Christiansen, and Ibsen 2006, 111-129). As a consequence of a national law all Danish municipalities are required to provide language stimulation of immigrant children. The language stimulation is provided through public childcare centers (3-5 year-old children) by the regular childcare workers. 85 percent of all childcare centers in this context are owned and organized by the municipality, 13 percent are privately owned but organized in cooperation with the municipality, and 2 percent are both owned and fully organized by private organizations. The study includes childcare centers both owned and organized by the municipality. The public childcare centers are organized in connection with the organization of public schools, after school centers, and child dental care.

First, the context offers a large number of similar frontline workers as over 900 childcare workers are employed in the 190 public childcare centers (childcare assistants and students are not included in the survey). In addition, reliable data on relevant control variables regarding both individual childcare workers as well as childcare centers is available. Second, including a large number of childcare centers ensures that the different childcare workers and childcare centers are in contact with different parts of, and officials from, the administration. Therefore, childcare workers are expected to vary in their perceived administration support. This is tested empirically by observing the actual variation on this variable (see subsequent section on measures). Third, as the municipality is responsible for the language stimulation, this task has been imposed on childcare workers by the council administration (i.e. higher-level administration). Furthermore, the administration is at present looking for ways to intensify childcare language stimulation of immigrant children, thus placing more responsibility and work regarding language stimulation on childcare workers.¹

¹ Information from interviews with administration officials.

In each childcare center, one of the workers is appointed as unit language worker and coordinates the language stimulation in that childcare center. In some childcare centers, the language worker does most of the language stimulation, whereas the workers share the task in others (this variation is controlled for in the empirical analysis). Furthermore, some childcare workers (approximately one for every three childcare centers) are appointed as language counselors attending courses on and advising co-workers regarding language stimulation. Typically, between twenty and sixty children are enrolled in each childcare center, with a mean of approximately forty. Each childcare center has a day-to-day manager, i.e. a childcare worker who coordinates the daily activities of his or her co-workers. A childcare center usually employs between three and ten childcare workers, with a mean of approximately six, as well as a number of childcare assistants (the latter are not included in the study).

Data and method

Data consists of: (1) a survey of 639 childcare workers from 133 childcare centers, (2) objective background data on the childcare workers (e.g. age, gender, wage, sickness absence), and (3) objective information about the childcare centers (e.g. socioeconomic characteristics of children and their parents enrolled in the childcare centers, size, resources for language stimulation). The survey of childcare workers was conducted in the second half of November and early December 2008. A questionnaire was sent to all childcare workers employed in childcare centers with at least one immigrant child enrolled. 639 workers returned the questionnaire, corresponding to a response rate of 68 percent. Background data on childcare workers and childcare centers has been provided by The Danish Civil Registration System and The Municipality of Aarhus. The empirical examination uses regression analyses including childcare workers as subjects to test the argument. The regression analyses include 451 childcare workers (workers with missing values were removed from the analysis) from 130 childcare centers. The regression analyses use cluster-robust standard errors to take this hierarchical data structure into account (see Williams 2000; Cameron and Trivedi 2005).

Measures

An important aspect when discussing the issue of measurement is objective versus perceptual measures (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006). As pointed out by Yang and Pandey (2009, 337) two questions need to be addressed in this regard. First, is either an objective or a perceived measure better, or do they possess different strengths and weaknesses with regard to the measured concept? Second, are there underlying theoretical reasons for choosing either objective or perceptual measures?

The “detachment from the unit of analysis” is often seen as a major advantage of objective measures (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006). That is, objective measures do not reflect the discretion of actors involved in the process. In some circumstances results may be seen as inflated if such an influence of the unit of analysis on the measure is present. On the other hand, objective measures are often limited in their ability to capture different internal processes in organizations contingent on attitudes and actions of individuals. This is, however, a major strength of perceptual measures. Thus, Yang and Pandey (2009)² point out that an important advantage of perceptual measures is the ability to capture internal psychological processes salient to the analysis of individual behavior. In general, we cannot conclude that either objective or perceptual measures are always better (Andrews, Boyne, and Walker 2006). The usefulness of objective and perceptual measures is contingent on the empirical aspects of the study and the relevant theoretical arguments (Brewer 2006; Yang and Pandey 2009).

This emphasizes the importance of the second question, to which the answer in the present study is quite clear. Since the theoretical argument focuses on *perceived* organizational support, a perceptual measure of support is required and can be considered the main explanatory variable. Thus, the perceptual aspect is built into the theoretical argument, as it is in organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al. 1986). Therefore, in accordance with the theoretical argument, a perceptual measure of administration support is used as explaining variable. In addition, the study makes no claim to measure the link between objective administration support and the administration support perceived by frontline workers.

The primary explaining variable of the analysis is the childcare workers’ perceived organizational support regarding the task of language stimulation of immigrant children (labeled *POS language stimulation* in the following). Thus, organizational support refers to support stemming from the council administration. *POS language stimulation* is measured by an index consisting of four items from the childcare worker survey. The respondents indicated the extent of their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*). The full wording of the four questions is available in the appendix. Three of these items were originally designed by Eisenberger et al. (1986, 502) to measure organizational support, and have been well tested for their reliability (see Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997, 2001; Eisenberger, Fasolo, and Davis-LaMastro 1990; Wayne et al 2002; Armeli et al. 1998). These items are designed to measure POS in general, and have therefore been adjusted to focus on POS with regard to language stimulation. In addition,

² In relation to this argument Yang and Pandey (2008: 338) quote Simon (1953, 236), who notes that “environmental forces mold organizations through the mediation of human minds”.

a fourth item concerning the working relationship with the administration concerning language stimulation has been included.

A factor analysis of the four items reveals one factor (the first factor has an eigenvalue of 2.76, the second and third factors have eigenvalues of 0.52 and 0.42, respectively). The four items have a *Cronbach's Alpha* of 0.84, and are added up to construct *POS language stimulation*, which is rescaled to 0-10, where 10 indicates the highest degree of perceived organizational support. As mentioned, the perceived support is expected (and required) to vary across the childcare workers. This is tested empirically by observing a simple histogram of *POS language stimulation* (see figure A1 in the appendix), which shows that childcare workers vary a great deal with regard to *POS language stimulation*, thereby satisfying the requirement.

The dependent variable is the childcare workers' attitudes with regard to language stimulation as a childcare task (labeled *language stimulation attitude*), i.e. extent to which the workers accept language stimulation as a relevant childcare task. Two questions from the survey are used to measure *language stimulation attitude*. One concerns whether or not language stimulation should be a childcare task at all, the other concerns whether or not childcare centers to a greater extent than today should perform and be responsible for language stimulation of immigrant children (this is in line with the council administration's stated preference that childcare workers focus more on this task). The two questions and their frequencies are portrayed in table 1.

As expected, the majority of the answers fall either on or above the diagonal (i.e. above the broken line in table 1). Many respondents see language stimulation as a childcare task, but do not necessarily agree on intensifying language stimulation in childcare centers. A few respondents are inconsistent in their answers, e.g. agree both with the statement that language stimulation is *not* a childcare task and with the statement that childcare centers should be *more* responsible for language stimulation (see underneath the broken line in table 1). The two items are added to construct a formative measure of *language stimulation attitude*. The measure is rescaled to 0-10, and 10 indicates the highest degree of positive attitude towards the task of language stimulation, i.e. language stimulation is as a very relevant organizational task. In the later empirical examination of the argument, additional regression analyses using each of the two items separately as dependent variables are performed to check the robustness of the results.

[Table 1 around here]

A number of controls are included in the analysis (see table 2). First, several characteristics of the individual childcare workers are included: Gender (female = 1, male = 0), age,

appointed language worker (yes = 1, no = 0), appointed language counselor (yes = 1, no = 0), unit manager (yes = 1, no = 0), and wage adjusted for number of working hours. Factors that potentially influence *language stimulation attitudes* may be childcare workers' stress level, sickness and personal mood. Workers, who are generally positive, less stressed and less sick may easier adopt a positive attitude towards tasks defined by higher-level administration than workers with the opposite characteristics.

Personal mood is often difficult to measure directly. However, prior studies relying on comprehensive examination of the link between personal mood, stress, and sickness find personal mood to be highly correlated with stress and sickness, respectively (see Bolger et al. 1989; DeLongis, Folkman, and Lazarus 1988). The study therefore includes a subjective measure of childcare workers' stress level and an objective measure of their absence due to sickness. The stress level is measured by three items (see appendix) designed and tested by Agervold and Kreiner (2008). The three items have a *Cronbach's Alpha* of 0.75. Sickness absence is measured by a record of the number of days off due to sickness in 2007-2008.

Second, several characteristics of childcare centers are included as relevant controls: Share of children who are immigrants from non-western countries (1st and 2nd generation), size (measured as number of children), share of parents with higher education (more than high school), parents' mean household income (in DKK 1000), organizing language stimulation (the task of language stimulation is shared among all childcare workers = 1, the task of language stimulation is delegated to childcare's language worker = 0), and language stimulation resources allocated by council administration in 2008 (measured in DKK 100). Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, and ranges of the variables included in the empirical analysis.

[Table 2 around here]

Findings

Table 3 presents the empirical test of the argument. The regression analysis, examining the effect of perceived administration support on attitudes towards language stimulation, includes 451 childcare workers (after deleting subjects with missing values) from 130 childcare centers. The reported regression coefficients are unstandardized. Cluster robust standard errors as well as t-values are presented in brackets. T-values are based on two-tailed significance tests.

First, observing the control variables, table 3 shows that both individual characteristics as well as childcare center characteristics influence the language stimulation attitudes of the examined childcare workers. Age, which has a negative effect on attitudes towards

language stimulation, is one of the more notable individual control variables. Thus, older childcare workers are on average less likely to accept language stimulation as a relevant childcare task than younger childcare workers are. This result is expected based on prior research studying the relationship between age and resistance to different types of organizational change (see e.g. Cordery et al. 1993). Furthermore, language counselors are more positive towards the task of language stimulation. This is no surprise either as childcare workers interested in language stimulation will seek the position as counselor. On the contrary, every childcare center has to appoint a unit language worker, even though none of the workers show any particular interest in language stimulation. Therefore, whether or not a worker is appointed unit language worker is not expected to exert the same amount of influence on *language stimulation attitude*, which is confirmed by the results in table 3.

Two important control variables consist of the (subjective) stress measure and the (objective) sickness absence measure. The two measures are internally correlated (*Pearson's* $r = 0.24$), thus confirming their validity. Both stress level and sick days are weakly correlated with *POS language stimulation* (*Pearson's* $r = -0.08$ for each of the two variables in correlation with *POS language stimulation*). Neither variable shows direct significant effects on *language stimulation attitude* after inclusion of control variable (see table 3), and therefore only exerts little influence on the effect of *POS language* on *language stimulation attitude* (the latter effect decreases from 0.14 to 0.13 when including the two control variables).

Among the childcare center control variables the share of non-western immigrant children shows the most notable effect on *language stimulation attitude*. Thus, childcare workers employed in centers in which the share of non-western immigrant children is 0.2-0.39 or 0.4-0.59 see language stimulation as a relevant organizational task to a greater extent than workers employed in centers with a share of 0-0.19 (reference category). This effect decreases, however, when the share of non-western immigrant children is 0.6-0.79 or 0.8-1. This is probably a consequence of a heavily increased workload on childcare workers caused by language stimulation when the share is 0.6-0.79 or 0.8-1. Signs of multicollinearity are detected, as the share of non-western immigrant children is highly correlated with *language stimulation resources, 2008*. However, since ability to precisely separate the effects of these control variables is of minor interest, this is not regarded as a problem for the analysis. Additionally, a test without *language stimulation resources, 2008* does not change the effect size or significance level of *POS language*, nor are any effects of the control variables changed when *language stimulation resources, 2008* is excluded.

Second, focusing on the main explaining variable, *POS language stimulation*, the result in table 3 demonstrates a significant ($p < 0.01$) effect of this on *language stimulation attitude*. Thus, the more the childcare workers see themselves as supported by the council administration with regard to language stimulation, the more they adopt a positive attitude to-

wards the task. The regression coefficient shows an unstandardized effect of 0.13 after controlling for the other independent variables. An increase in *POS language stimulation* by 1 thereby causes a 0.13 increase on *language stimulation attitude*. Therefore, an increase in *POS language stimulation* from 0 to 10 increases *language stimulation attitude* by approximately 1.3, corresponding to about 0.7 standard deviations. Thus, the effect can be characterized as being of medium strength. The bivariate effect of *POS language stimulation* on *language stimulation attitude* is 0.17, and the inclusion of control variables thereby reduces the effect by approximately one quarter.

Two regression analyses, using each of the items included in *language stimulation attitude* as dependent variables, has been performed (not presented in table) to estimate the effect of *POS language stimulation* on each of the two items. Using the first item³ as dependent variable, the effect of *POS language stimulation* is 0.10 ($p < 0.01$) after controlling for the same variables as in table 3. The effect of *POS language stimulation* is 0.15 ($p < 0.05$) after controlling for the same variables as in table 3 when the second item⁴ is used as dependent variable. Thus, the two regression analyses confirm the robustness of the effect of *POS language stimulation* on *language stimulation attitude*.

To sum up, the empirical test supports the stated argument claiming that the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration with regard to certain organizational tasks defined by the latter, the more they will adopt a positive attitude towards those tasks.

[Table 3 around here]

Implications and future studies

Influence on attitudes and behavior of public frontline workers has proven difficult to obtain through traditional hierarchical means (Brehm and Gates 1997; Meier and O'Toole 2006a, 2006b). However, as indicated by the findings presented above, a way to influence frontline workers' attitudes towards specific tasks seems to exist. This strategy follows a view that perceives the relationship between higher-level administration and frontline workers as reciprocal rather than one way. The findings support this, and thereby reinforce Simon's (1997) view of the relationship between superiors and subordinates as reciprocal. By supporting frontline workers, higher-level administration can benefit from

³ Item 1: "The way I see it, it should not be a childcare task to perform language stimulation of immigrant children". The item is scaled from 0 to 10, and 10 indicates a positive attitude towards the task of language stimulation.

⁴ Item 2: "Childcare centers should to a greater extent than now be responsible for language stimulation of immigrant children". The item is scaled from 0 to 10, and 10 indicates a positive attitude towards the task of language stimulation.

positive attitudes towards tasks defined by the latter among the implementing frontline workers.

This should not be interpreted as a claim that higher-level administration should renounce or tone down its leadership responsibilities. What the result does imply is that both higher-level administration and frontline workers can benefit from exchanges in which higher-level administration offers support and frontline workers reciprocate with a certain attitudes towards specific tasks. The empirical test supports the potential and useful features of this reciprocal mechanism, even in a setting in which higher-level administration and frontline workers are geographically separated. Furthermore, according to social exchange theory, series of positive exchanges have a high potential to generate trusting, loyal, and mutual commitments (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005, 875). Both administration and workers may therefore experience long-term benefits from series of positive exchanges.

Another important implication of the result is the reinforcement of the overall claim that “management matters”. Furthermore, it can shed light on how management matters, i.e. how management affects different parts of public organizations. It is well known that the attitudes and actions of frontline workers influence the implementation of policies and organizational performance (Lipsky 1980; Brehm and Gates 1997). Thus, finding management factors that influence attitudes and actions of frontline workers helps clarify how management affects performance when implementing policies.

Below, four suggestions are made with regard to future studies. First, the argument of this paper is phrased in task-specific terms, that is, the organizational support theory has been modified to develop an argument concerning administration support with regard to certain tasks. The focus of the argument in this paper therefore differs from the focus on general perceived support in the broader organization literature (see Eisenberger et al. 1986, 1997, 2001, Shore and Shore 1995). Using this focus on overall support perceived by employees, a more general argument about perception of perceived administration support can be considered: the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration (in general), the more they will adopt a positive attitude towards organizational tasks defined by the latter. Such perceived general support can be expected to influence perceived administration support and specific task attitudes. However, correlations between specific task support and task attitudes are expected to be stronger than the correlation between general support and the attitudes a specific task as general support concerns many other aspects than the specific task in question. Further theoretical developments and empirical investigations are needed to clarify such mechanisms.

Second, the strategy of analysis in this paper has been to hold as many factors as possible constant, thereby isolating the effect of perceived administration support. Thus, the latter is the main advantage of this design. Testing the argument on the social service area, however, limits the possibilities of concluding across policy areas. Therefore, further studies are needed to examine potential differences.

Third, establishing an effect of POS with regard to certain tasks and the task attitudes of frontline workers is only the first step when considering a potential channel of influence of upper administrative levels on frontline workers. Even though perceived support from upper administrative levels influences frontline workers' attitudes and actions, higher administrative levels do not necessarily exert sufficient influence on perceived organizational support to have an actual effect on attitudes and actions. Thus, a second step is required, which can be phrased by the question: How is it possible (if possible at all) for higher administrative levels to influence perceived administration support of frontline workers? Here, it is necessary to consider (objective) changes in management style and the organization of given public agencies to establish the potential effects of different management styles and instruments. Thus, it is plausible that perceived administrative support is not (only) dependent on objective management style or institutional settings, but also on personal or group characteristics. A consequence of the latter would be that upper administrative units cannot, in fact, influence attitudes and actions through changes or original settings in management style. Therefore, in addition to the need for more theoretical development and empirical studies of management effects in public administration (Boyne 2003), more studies including objective changes and differences in management styles are considered relevant to establish the relationship between objective differences and changes in management style and frontline workers' perception of management.

Fourth, it is necessary to conduct thorough studies of the causal mechanisms. The present study has been using non-experimental cross-section data to examine the argument. However, the correlation between perceived support and attitudes may be caused by other unobservable characteristics of the frontline workers (i.e. the relationship is spurious). Thus, a positive personality may cause a worker to see him- or herself as supported by the administration, and cause the worker to adopt a positive attitude towards a given task. Furthermore, the frontline workers' attitudes are also expected to affect the support from the administration. This two-way causation makes it impossible with the data used in this study to obtain a precise estimate of the effect of perceived support on attitudes. Therefore, addressing these issues concerning endogeneity must be of high priority.

Conclusions

Frontline workers' attitudes have a strong effect on policy implementation. Furthermore, public organizations often have to impose new tasks on frontline workers or change the priority or content of existing tasks, which places high demands on higher-level administration influence on frontline workers' attitudes towards those tasks. However, such influence is often very difficult to obtain through traditional hierarchical control (Brehm and Gates 1997; Meier and O'Toole 2006a, 2006b). Based on the organizational support theory developed by Eisenberger et al. (1986), the argument outlined offers a different approach to influence on frontline workers' attitudes. It is argued that the more public frontline workers see themselves as supported by higher-level administration with regard to certain organizational tasks defined by the latter, the more they will adopt a positive attitude towards those tasks.

The empirical test supports the argument. After controlling for a number of important alternative independent variables, perceived administration support with regard to language stimulation has a significant positive effect on frontline workers' attitudes towards language stimulation as a relevant childcare task. Taken together, the findings reinforce Simon's (1997) claim of the relationship between superiors and subordinates in public organizations being reciprocal, rather than one-way. Furthermore, the findings support the "management matters" claim and thereby clarify a part of how management matters – by influencing the frontline workers' attitudes, that is. This study focuses on how management is perceived by frontline workers. Thus, future research can build on this study by examining the potential effects of objective management characteristics on perceived administration support. Here, it is necessary to consider objective differences and changes in management style in order to access its influence on perceived support. In addition to this, further studies of the causal mechanism are necessary to gain a deeper insight into the effects between administration support and attitudes of frontline workers.

Appendix

Survey questions included indexes used in regression analyses. The respondents indicated the extent of their agreement with each item on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *slightly agree*, 4 = *neither disagree nor agree*, 5 = *slightly disagree*, 6 = *disagree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*).

POS language stimulation (0-10, 10 = high degree of POS language stimulation)

The council administration highly values our contribution to language stimulation of immigrant children.

Help and support are available from the council administration regarding language stimulation of immigrant children.

The council administration is willing to extend itself to help me perform language stimulation of immigrant children to the best of my ability.

We have an extensive working relationship with the council administration regarding language stimulation of immigrant children.

Language stimulation attitude (0-10, 10 = positive attitude towards language stimulation)

The way I see it, it should not be a childcare task to perform language stimulation of immigrant children. (reversed)

Childcare centers should to a greater extent than now be responsible for special language stimulation of immigrant children.

Stress (0-10, 10 = high degree of stress)

It is often so difficult for me to push away thoughts of work when I get home that it affects my spare time.

I often need rest when I get off work.

I often feel stressed at work.

[Figure A1 around here]

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Table 1. Frequencies of the two survey questions included in measure of language stimulation attitude (percent of total in parentheses)

		1. The way I see it, it should not be a childcare task to perform special language stimulation of immigrant children							
		Strongly agree	Agree	Slightly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Slightly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	
2. Childcare centers should to a greater extent than now be responsible for language stimulation of immigrant children	Strongly disagree (7)	1 (0.2)	2 (0.3)	4 (0.7)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	3 (0.5)	11 (1.9)	23
	Disagree (6)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.3)	8 (1.4)	1 (0.2)	8 (1.4)	33 (5.7)	32 (5.5)	84
	Slightly disagree (5)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	1 (0.2)	10 (1.7)	16 (2.8)	15 (2.6)	43
	Neither agree nor disagree (4)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.3)	4 (0.7)	6 (1.0)	11 (1.9)	44 (7.6)	60 (10.3)	127
	Slightly agree (3)	0 (0.0)	3 (0.5)	6 (1.0)	2 (0.3)	9 (1.6)	52 (9.0)	55 (9.5)	127
	Agree (2)	0 (0.0)	1 (0.2)	3 (0.5)	0 (0.0)	8 (1.4)	46 (7.9)	61 (10.5)	119
	Strongly agree (1)	1 (0.2)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (0.3)	10 (1.7)	44 (7.6)	57
Total		2	10	26	11	49	204	278	580

Table 2. Variables included in analysis, descriptive statistics

	Mean	S.d.	Range
<i>Explaining and dependent variables</i>			
POS language stimulation	5.13	2.27	0-10
Language stimulation attitude	7.15	1.86	0-10
<i>Childcare worker variables</i>			
Gender (female=1)	0.92	0.27	0-1
Age	43.93	9.68	24-65
Childcare language worker (Yes=1)	0.24	0.43	0-1
Language counselor (Yes=1)	0.11	0.32	0-1
Unit manager (Yes=1)	0.16	0.37	0-1
Number of sick days, 2007 and 2008	22.97	42.3	0-537
Wage before taxes (DKK 1000), adj. for number of working hours	28.3	3.2	20.5-44.2
Stress	6.73	2.19	0-10
<i>Childcare center variables</i>			
Share of children who are immigrants from non-western countries (1st and 2nd generation)	0.26	0.29	0-1
Size of childcare center (no. of children)	50.03	13.6	14-94
Share of parents with higher education	0.42	0.19	0-0.80
Mean household income per year of parents (in DKK 1000)	511	124	253-887
Organizing language stimulation (task shared among all childcare workers=1)	0.74	0.44	0-1
Language stimulation resources, 2008 (DKK 1000)	66.7	86.7	0-377.9

Table 3. Regression analysis. Effect of POS language stimulation on language stimulation attitude of childcare workers. Unstandardized regression coefficients, cluster robust SE

	Coefficient	Cluster robust SE	T-value
Explaining variable			
POS language stimulation	0.13***	(0.041)	(3.20)
Childcare worker variables			
Gender (female=1)	-0.41*	(0.22)	(-1.83)
Age	-0.024**	(0.009)	(-2.53)
Unit language worker (yes=1)	0.27	(0.19)	(1.47)
Language counselor (yes=1)	0.48**	(0.21)	(2.27)
Unit manager (yes=1)	0.22	(0.25)	(0.86)
Number of sick days during 2007 and 2008	-0.0016	(0.0024)	(-0.68)
Wage before taxes (DKK 1000) adjusted for number of working hours	0.071*	(0.039)	(1.84)
Stress	-0.01	(0.042)	(-0.24)
Childcare center variables			
Share of non-western immigrant children in childcare center			
0 – 0.19 (ref.)	0		
0.2 – 0.39	0.53**	(0.24)	(2.18)
0.4 – 0.59	0.89**	(0.40)	(2.21)
0.6 – 0.79	0.56	(0.48)	(1.16)
0.8 – 1	0.21	(0.63)	(0.33)
Size of childcare center (number of children)	0.0049	(0.0052)	(0.94)
Share of childcare parents with higher education	-0.34	(0.75)	(-0.46)
Mean household income of childcare parents (in DKK 1000)	0.0006	(0.0014)	(0.43)
Organizing language stimulation			
(task shared among all childcare workers=1)	0.37*	(0.20)	(1.89)
Language stimulation resources, 2008 (DKK 1000)	-0.00038	(0.0021)	(-0.18)
Constant	5.01***	(1.32)	(3.78)
N	451		
Number of groups	130		
R ²	0.11		
Adjusted R ²	0.07		

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$. Two-tailed significance tests.

Figure A1. Histogram of POS language stimulation

