

**How to Influence the Professional Discretion of Street-level Bureaucrats:
Transformational Leadership, Organizational Learning, and Professionalization
Strategies in the Delivery of Social Assistance**

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Abstract

Developing professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) is not only an important strategy for bridging the gap between public service rules at policy level and sophisticated individual service needs at practical level, but it also has recently become a hot topic in public management. This study advances the SLB theory by providing empirical evidence that organizational learning capability and organizational type buffered the impact of transformational leadership on professional discretion in a sample of 595 Chinese professional social workers. This research showed that establishing an internal professional learning mechanism in public service agencies was conducive to improving SLBs' professional discretion.

KEYWORDS Professional discretion; street-level bureaucrats; transformational leadership; organizational learning; social assistance delivery

Introduction

Discretion has been a central and enduring issue in the field of public administration and public services, since Lipsky's (1980) seminal work proposed the key role of street-level bureaucrats in the frontline of public services. Lipsky (2010) defined street-level bureaucrats as the public service workers who interact face-to-face with citizens or public service clients in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the delivery of public services. The discretion of street-level bureaucrats comes from the inevitable and challenging conditions of delivering public services in contemporary public service systems, such as

inadequate resources, increasing demand for services, ambiguous or conflicting goal expectations, hard-to-measure performance, and non-voluntary clients (Lipsky 2010). Thus, discretion is necessary for public service. In fact, the management of discretion is always at the heart of the problem of how street-level bureaucrats deliver social welfare services (Lipsky 2010). In particular, discretion has been a dominant characteristic in the practice of social welfare services in Western countries (Evans 2010; Gilbert and Terrell 2013). Therefore, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats is more critical and beneficial when the public service system is more massive and complicated (Evans and Harris 2004; Hardy 2015).

Because in theory social work professionals are committed to a service orientation and to self-monitoring and accountability through sufficient autonomy and self-policing, professionalism provides street-level bureaucrats with a good balance of discretion and a way to improve their performance of social welfare services (Evans 2010; Lipsky 2010). Both the nature of the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and clients and that of the relationship between street-level bureaucrats and managers can be influenced by professionalism (Freidson 1994). Therefore, professional discretion, rather than simply discretion, becomes a more valuable concept for understanding and controlling how street-level bureaucrats deliver social welfare services more effectively (Cheraghi-Sohi and Calnan 2013; Evans 2010; Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen 2012; Wallander and Molander 2014). However, the best way to achieve professionalism is still not clear. For that reason, professionalization of street-level bureaucrats requires long-term systematic efforts and should be carefully evaluated. Professional discretion can be seen as a direct outcome of professionalization.

China is building a huge social welfare system. Social assistance, for example, has grown from a small program¹ that began in 1999 to a huge system that delivered more than RMB 400 billion Yuan in annual aid to more than 230 million beneficiaries in 2018². That large social assistance delivery system, which includes many street-level bureaucrats, also needed to be established within 20 years. Professionalization has been a primary strategy for building China's social assistance services delivery system. However, the extreme complexity of the nation's social assistance system makes the process of professionalization fragmented and its coverage uneven. The system comprises more than a dozen different assistance programs, involving 23 ministries and agencies, and its rules for implementation are determined by local governments. In order to ensure the effective delivery of social assistance services, the professional discretion of service deliverers, rather than simply their discretion, is even more critical. In this context, it is more interesting to discuss how the strategy has affected the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats.

This article aims to contribute to public administration and policy science by examining ways to influence the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats, especially in the context of professionalism and professionalization. Moreover, it contributes to the evaluation of professionalization strategies, focusing on China's social assistance delivery system.

Literature review

¹ Urban subsistence allowance was officially established in 1999 and was the first national social assistance program. It only provided subsistence allowance to 5.3 million poor urban people with RMB 2.37 billion Yuan in 1999. It was indeed a small program, compared with the huge needs of hundreds of millions of poor people in China at the end of the 1990s.

² The authors estimated the amounts by accumulating six major national social assistance programs.

Discretion and professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats

Since Lipsky (1980, 2010) first proposed the ‘street-level bureaucrat theory’ in the 1980s, discretion has been an important focus of discussion and research in the field of public administration and public services. Discretion refers to a certain degree of freedom or space for street-level bureaucrats to make decisions and act independently when implementing policies or delivering social welfare services (Hupe 2013; Hupe and Hill 2007; Lipsky 2010; Meyers and Vorsanger 2003; Tummers and Bekker 2014). What’s important is that accessing such freedom and space usually requires street-level bureaucrats’ judgment capability as professionals or based on occupational standards. Lipsky (2010) emphasized that discretion is not only a necessary characteristic of street-level bureaucrats’ jobs, but it also is an inevitable result of real situations. In traditional views of discretion, there is a tight top-down control of street-level bureaucrats in the implementation-control-discretion narrative (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012). However, minimizing discretion in a bureaucracy or public-administrative system is neither easy nor worthwhile (Hupe 2013; Lipsky 2010).

Discretion should be beneficial, and managing or controlling discretion is often more welcomed than the formal demands of the rule of law or a top-down perspective (Molander, Grimen, and Eriksen 2012). First, discretion can increase the meaningfulness of policy for clients because it gives street-level bureaucrats the space in which to provide services according to their clients’ needs (Tummers and Bekkers 2014). Second, discretion can increase street-level bureaucrats’ willingness to provide services because it gives them the autonomy to implement policy (Meyers and Vorsanger 2003; Sandfort 2000; Tummers and Bekkers 2014). Third, because discretion enhances street-level bureaucrats’ responsibility and

accountability, it can help them cope better with uncertainty and unexpected policy outcomes (Hardy 2015). Finally, discretion can improve policy design and social equity because it turns street-level bureaucrats into agents and pragmatists (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2012), policy entrepreneurs (Lavee and Cohen 2019), and street-level leaders (Vinzant and Crothers 1996).

Professional discretion provides a more elaborate perspective from which to enlarge the benefits of simple discretion, especially in delivering social welfare services. Everts (2002) expanded Freidson's concept of autonomy (Freidson 1970) using the term 'professional discretion' to reflect the modern professional organizational environment (Cheraghi-Sohi and Calnan 2013). Compared with discretion, professional discretion requires street-level bureaucrats to have a greater capability for professional judgment. Such a capability enables street-level bureaucrats to make more professional decisions that are 'not based solely on the needs of individual clients, but on clients' needs in the wider corporate, organizational and economic context' (Evetts 2002, 345).

Professionals and professionalism have long been seen as ways to control and influence public servants or bureaucrats (Hodges and Durant 1989; Kearney and Sinha 1988; Mosher 1968). Typical professionals possess three identifying characteristics: (1) having specialized knowledge, (2) professional autonomy, and (3) an ethical code that is specific to the profession (Trappenburg, Kampen and Tonkens 2019). Frontline social workers are always depicted as street-level bureaucrats who are professionals in the social welfare delivery systems (Tummers et al. 2015; Nordesjö 2020). Social workers are a professional group that has been characterized by 'their discrete technical skill sets, standardized educational fields,

high levels of internal organization, and protection by the nation-state over licensure' (Ruit 2017). Therefore, professional discretion is the autonomy of professionals in their fields of work.

Many studies have shown that professions are inextricably linked by trust, competence, discretion, and professionalism (Evetts 2006; Coulson 1998; Ding-wall 2008). Lipsky (2010) also discussed the importance of professionalism for street-level bureaucrats and their discretion. Evetts (2009) discussed professionalism as an ideal that is defined as the norms or values of an occupation and that is used to promote efficient organizational management. Professionalism also provides street-level bureaucrats with a peer-to-peer self-monitoring substitute for or supplement to top-down control. Therefore, professional discretion is not only a kind of autonomy, but it also includes certain constraints on street-level bureaucrats in their implementation of policy or their delivery of services.

Professional discretion requires professionals to use professional judgment, which includes organizational, economic, social, political, and bureaucratic conditions and constraints (Cheraghi-Sohi and Calnan 2013; Evetts 2002). In fact, professional discretion is more valuable than simple discretion is, and it is required in conjunction with the increase in management's control of discretion in New Public Management (Cheraghi-Sohi and Calnan 2013; Evans 2010; Ponnert and Svensson 2016). Professional discretion also plays a key role in the construction of social welfare delivery systems.

Transformational leadership and professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats

If discretion is to be seen as the 'hole of a doughnut' (Dworkin 1978, 31), leadership is clearly an important part of the belt surrounding the hole, especially in social welfare services.

Professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats requires that their supervisors' leadership be committed to client-oriented services (Lipsky 2010). New public service theory puts citizenship and the public interest first and also emphasizes the importance of using 'shared, valued-based leadership in helping citizens articulate and meet their shared interests, rather than attempting to control or steer society in new directions' (Denhardt 2015, 42-43). Leadership, especially value-based leadership, is a highly useful concept for understanding and interpreting street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion (Henderson and Pandey 2013; Vinzant and Crothers 1996).

The most influential category of value-based leadership is transformational leadership. Transformational leaders not only propose higher values and ideals in order to achieve group goals, but they also are able to motivate followers to seek high-level needs beyond their own self-interest, in order to achieve group goals (Burns 1978). In that process, both leaders and followers improve their intrinsic motivations and raise their awareness of moral values and inspiring visions (Bass 1985).

Transformational leadership is manifested and measured through four leadership behaviors (Bass et al. 2003): (1) Idealized influence (Birasnav 2014; Nemanich and Keller 2007), (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) Individualized consideration. At present, Bass's four-dimensional structure is widely recognized to be a valuable approach, and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire compiled by Bass is a relatively comprehensive questionnaire that measures transformational leadership behavior. In China, Li and Shi (2005) combined Bass's four-dimensional structure with the Chinese cultural background and determined four dimensions of transformational leadership—virtues,

inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and idealized influence—and compiled the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ) with 26 items. The TLQ's validity and reliability in China has been verified (Li and Shi 2005).

A meta-analysis found transformational leadership to be more common in the public sector and among firstline managers than in the private sector (Lowe, Kroeck, and Sivasubramanian 1996), and it revealed that transformational leadership has been proved to have a positive effect on various behaviors of public employees and on performance in the public sector (Bellé 2014; Campbell 2018; Campbell, Lee, and Im 2016; Caillier and Sa 2017; Moynihan, Pandey, and Wright 2012; Paarlberg and Lavigna 2010; Sun and Wang 2017; Van der Voet, Kuipers, and Groeneveld 2016; Wright et al. 2012; Sun and Henderson 2017). Transformational leaders are more likely to achieve common professionalism with street-level bureaucrats (Evans 2011). Their common professionalism and mutual agreements in turn bridge the values gap between the street-level bureaucrats and their leaders in how to use professional discretion and how to increase the street-level bureaucrats' opportunities to use professional discretion (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2020; Vinzant and Crothers 1998).

Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership positively influences their professional discretion.

Organizational learning and professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats

Professional discretion requires street-level bureaucrats to make decisions according to professional values and knowledge, and it is conditional on a supportive organizational

culture (Cohen 2018; Isett, Morrissey, and Topping 2006; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Riccucci 2005; Sandfort 2000). By those criteria, not only should street-level bureaucrats go through professional training in universities, they also should constantly learn and develop new knowledge and skills during their careers. Delivering services is ‘a constantly developing interactive process, where reformation and learning are based on information, experience, and in-process learning’ (Virtanen, Laitinen, and Stenvall 2018). In that context, evidence-based policies and practices have been emphasized and valued in the implementation of New Public Management (Hardy 2015).

The effective exercise of professional discretion by street-level bureaucrats also requires and benefits from peer supervision and peer support, which of necessity is provided by their colleagues, not by outside specialists. It is important and necessary for street-level bureaucrats to develop both the processes for professional staff growth and development and the processes for small group decision-making (Lipsky 2011, 207). Thus, organizational culture is also an important determinant of street-level bureaucrats’ discretion (Cohen 2018; Isett, Morrissey, and Topping 2006; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Riccucci 2005; Sandfort 2000). Therefore, the organizational culture of learning and group learning should be considered in studies of professional discretion.

An aspect of organizational culture that is important in facilitating continuing professional development is its ‘organizational learning capability’, or its ‘ability to learn from its experiences and pass them on through time and borders’ (Brandi and Elkjaer 2012; Chiva et al. 2007; Hult and Ferrell 1997; Senge 1990; Goh and Richards 1997; Tohidi and Jabbari 2012). Organizational learning capability is likely to enhance the effective exercise of

professional discretion by street-level bureaucrats by improving the learning culture and environment in organizations (Lavee et al. 2018). Chen (2009) developed and validated the Organizational Learning Capability Questionnaire (OLCQ), with nine capabilities and 27 items, based on an integrated model of organizational learning and adapted to the Chinese context. We propose the following hypothesis:

H2-1: Organizational learning capability positively influences street-level bureaucrats' profession discretion.

Transformational leadership plays a pivotal role in organizational learning (Bass 2000; Johnson 2002; Meier and O'Toole 2002; Unsworth, Darja, and Amber 2018), and particularly in organizational learning capability (e.g., Gardiner and Whiting 1997; Goh and Richards 1997; Imran 2014; Megheirkouni, 2017; Mirkamali, Thani, and Alami 2011). Under common professionalism, transformational leaders can rely on their own organizational learning capability to stimulate a more positive and supportive attitude that enhances the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2020). Hence, the capability for organizational learning should play a mediating role between transformational leadership and the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats. We propose the following hypothesis:

H2-2: The positive influence of street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership on their professional discretion is mediated by organizational learning capability.

Professionalization strategy for social assistance services in China

Social assistance is one of the most basic and important components of social welfare. Social assistance was also the first piece of the system that the Chinese government established when it embarked on a social welfare system in response to the social problems that followed market economy reform in the 1990s. To date, China's social assistance system may be the largest in the world, even though it is fragmented (Yang and Bao 2018; Zhang and Wu 2014). China's social assistance system includes eight major national social assistance programs: urban and rural subsistence allowance, urban and rural special poor people support, disaster relief, medical assistance, educational assistance, housing assistance, employment assistance, and temporary assistance, along with many other small-scale assistance programs. Together, the assistance programs involve at least 23 departments and institutions, as well as all levels of government, from central to local (Lin 2018). However, the frontline service delivery of almost all assistance programs is basically concentrated in subdistrict (towns/townships) offices and communities (villages). In fact, part-time community staff, who mainly undertook the administrative work of the local government, delivered almost all of the frontline assistance services in the 1990s and the early 2010s. Those community staff employees were usually low-education, middle-aged women who had not received any professional training in the social services. Furthermore, because their community work took up a lot of time, the time they could devote to social services was very limited. At the time, this not only severely reduced the quality of social assistance services, it also limited the quantity of those services. The authorities also found it very difficult to control community staff in an effort to prevent abuses of discretion, as well as corruption and incompetence. With that background,

professionalization strategies, with the goal of building a team of professionals for delivering social services, became a natural and universal choice.

The strategy for professionalization has three primary elements. The first element is expansion of the number of frontline full-time service delivery professional social workers to replace community staff. Over the past 10 years, local governments have increased frontline service positions, gradually established many social service agencies in communities, and hired professional social workers instead of community staff to deliver social welfare services full-time. For example, by 2008, 1,797 community service stations covering 70% of communities in Beijing had been established to deliver social welfare services, but they only employed 588 full-time professional social workers. Subsequently, 2,027, 2,100, and 2,958 people respectively were hired each year from 2008 through 2010 as full-time social workers at community service stations to deliver frontline services (Wang, Zhang, and Liu 2018). However, those community service stations are controlled and managed both by subdistrict (town/township) offices and social welfare departments. Many social workers at community service stations still must undertake administrative tasks assigned by local government officials in addition to delivering social services. Furthermore, many social assistance services are still delivered nationwide by community staff.

When administrative practices differ greatly from clients' needs, workers often are easily caught in an ethical dilemma (Gilbert and Terrell 2013, 172). Moreover, the degree of bureaucracy in an organization can influence officer power, authority, decision-making, and discretion (Eitle 2005; Mastrofski et al. 1987; Virtanen et al. 2018). The more bureaucratic an organization is, the greater the number of administrative tasks its workers will have to

undertake (Eitle 2005). That suggests that when workers are faced with a moral dilemma, the administrative practices are quite different from the clients' needs, and if the workers undertake additional administrative tasks, organizational constraints often limit their ability to make corresponding judgments and execute their professional discretion. On the contrary, if the street-level bureaucrats are fully devoted to service delivery, they can concentrate more on improving their professional discretion. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3-1: The influence of street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion is moderated by whether they deliver services full-time. Specifically, when street-level bureaucrats deliver services full-time, the positive influences of transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion will increase.

The second element for building professionalization is an increase in the professional background of street-level bureaucrats who deliver frontline social welfare services. That element has two parts: to recruit more street-level bureaucrats with a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, and to encourage street-level bureaucrats to obtain a social worker qualification certificate by taking the national professional examination. In 2006, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China announced its intention to develop a large team of highly qualified social workers.³ In 2010 the Chinese central government set the social work system development goals of reaching a total number of two million social workers by 2015 and three million by 2020.⁴ Then, in 2011, 18

³ The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, *The Decision of Construction of a Harmonious Socialist Society*, approved by the Sixth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, 2006.

⁴ The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & the State Council, *The Outline of the National Medium- and Long-Term Human Resources Development Plan (2010-2020)*, 2010.

ministries jointly issued *Opinions on Strengthening the Development of Professional Teams for Social Workers*. That policy clearly requires vigorous development of professional education in social work, increases in recruitment of professional social workers with a social services function in the public sector, and support and encouragement of workers engaged in social services delivery to prepare for and take the professional level social workers examination to obtain a social worker qualification certificate.

The BSW educational program in China was rebuilt in 1988, and the nation's MSW program was initiated in 2009. However, after 30 years of development, the social work professional education program in China still is unsatisfactory in cultivating professional social workers (Wang, Guo, and Zeng 2018; Wang, Yuen-Tsang, and Shi 2014; Wu et al. 2016; Zeng et al. 2016).

China's professional level examination for social workers was launched in 2008. By the end of 2017, a total of 326,574 people had obtained the social worker qualification certificate (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2018). However, the professional knowledge and competence of social workers who have earned that certificate is questionable, because the examination requires only a very low level of expertise (Yan 2016; Zeng, Li, and Chen 2019).

Still, professional education and professional qualification certificates are important aspects of professionalism and professionalization, especially in occupational professionalism. The common and lengthy educational program and vocational training system, as well as strong professional identities, together form the basis for street-level bureaucrats to gain authority (Evetts, 2009). Professional education is a necessary process and offers the experience of acquiring professional knowledge and training in order to build

professional skills, both of which lead to better professional performance and higher productivity (Assadi and Lundin 2018; Lipsky 2010; Sturman 2003). The professional qualification certificate can be regarded as a kind of peer recognition and entry into the profession. Therefore, professional education and the professional qualification certificate are advantageous to street-level bureaucrats for earning their professional discretion. We propose the following two hypotheses:

H3-2a: The influence of street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion is moderated by whether they have a social work educational background. Specifically, when street-level bureaucrats have a social work educational background, the positive influences of transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion will increase.

H3-2b: The influence of street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion is moderated by whether they obtain a social worker qualification certificate. Specifically, when street-level bureaucrats obtain a social worker qualification certificate, the positive influences of transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion will increase.

The third element in the strategy for professionalization involves purchasing social assistance delivery services from social organizations. Since the early 1980s, social services delivery has increasingly relied on privatization or contracting out, and the role of government has turned from producer to provider of public services (Salamon 1995). Private agencies have more advantages than government entities do for delivering social services (Gilbert and Terrell 2013, 155), one of which is that social service organizations prefer to use a professional approach rather than an administrative approach to managing social workers.

Thus, working in social service organizations gives street-level bureaucrats greater freedom to exercise professional discretion than working in government agencies does (Zarychta, Grillos, and Andersson, 2020).

With China's dramatic increase in social welfare responsibilities, beginning in the 1990s the government faced the serious challenge of a lack of social service delivery resources (Wang and Salamon 2010). As early as 1995, some local governments in China began to purchase social services from social service organizations. The general office of the State Council issued *Guidance on the Government's Purchase of Services from Social Sector* in 2013 and announced the *Interim Measure for Social Assistance* in 2014, which together led to a dramatic increase in the purchase of social welfare services from social service organizations. Furthermore, the Ministry of Civil Affairs, together with another three ministries, issued *Opinions on Actively Promoting Government Purchase of Services to Strengthen the Capability of Social Assistance Delivery at the Basic Level* in 2017. That publication shows the importance and urgency of the government's purchase of social assistance delivery services from social service organizations in China. A high level of professional competence of the social organization whose services are purchased is more clearly required in this policy. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3-3: The influence of street-level bureaucrats' perception of their supervisors' transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion is moderated by whether they work in social service organizations. Specifically, when street-level bureaucrats work in social service organizations, the positive influences of transformational leadership and organizational learning capability on their professional discretion will increase.

Based on the above six hypotheses, we constructed the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1.

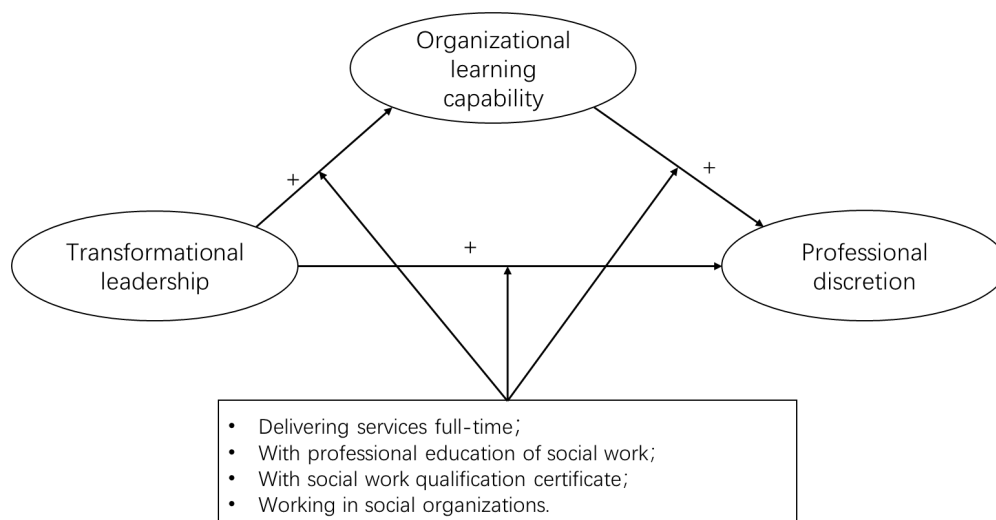


Figure 1: Proposed conceptual framework

Methods

Participants and procedures

This study used a subset of the China Social Workers Survey (CSWS) conducted at the end of 2018. The CSWS, the first nationally representative survey of social workers in China, had a sample size of 5,620, representing about 0.5% of the nation's total of 1,025,757 social workers (Ministry of Civil Affairs 2018). We adopted specific procedural remedies to minimize the common method variance, following the recommendation of Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and Podsakoff (2012). We ensured that the questionnaires were anonymous, and we emphasized in the introduction of the questionnaire that there were no good or bad answers. All three latent variables were measured with different descriptions and were separated randomly by other variables. The order of items for the variables was disrupted, and

the wordings of items were varied. Five-point and seven-point Likert scales were used for different variables.

Five hundred ninety-five respondents selected social assistance as their primary service area and, in our analyses, we took those respondents to represent the street-level bureaucrats delivering social assistance. A majority were female (76.0%), their average age was 33.7 years, and they had worked in social work for an average of 6.1 years (Table 1). Their mean annual salary after taxes (2017/8) was CNY 45,170 (approximately USD 6,400).

In terms of the three key elements leading to professionalization, professionalization in China's social assistance services was still a work in progress. First, only 57.8% of the respondents fully devoted themselves to service delivery. Second, only 36.3% of the respondents had an educational background in social work, although 77.5% were certificated. Third, 278 (46.7%) of the respondents worked in social service organizations.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N = 595)

Socio-demographic variables		Frequency (%)
Gender	Male	143 (24.0)
	Female	452 (76.0)
Age	Mean (SD)	33.7 (8.25)
Social work tenure	Mean (SD)	6.1 (5.30)
Salary after tax of last year (RMB)	Mean (SD)	45,170 (21,220)
Work task	Including administrative tasks assigned by local government	251 (42.2)
	Delivering services full-time	344 (57.8)
Social work educational background (SWEB)	Without SWEB	379 (63.7)
	With SWEB	216 (36.3)
	Without SWC	134 (22.5)

Social worker qualification certificate (SWC)	With SWC	461 (77.5)
Organizational type	Government agency	317 (53.3)
	Social organization	278 (46.7)

Measures

All scales used in the survey were validated Chinese versions or had been carefully translated into Chinese.

Professional discretion

Professional discretion is the autonomy of professionals in their fields of work (Evetts 2002; Freidson 1970; Sosin 2010; Trappenburg, Kampen, and Tonkens 2019). We used the autonomy scale taken from the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman and Oldham 1975; Idaszak and Drasgow 1987) to assess the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats. The scale included the following three items: “My job leaves me on my own to do my own work,” “My job provides me the opportunity of self-directed flexibility of work hours,” and “I am able to act independently of my supervisor in performing my job function.” All items used a seven-point Likert response scale (1 = low; 7 = high). The internal consistency was acceptable (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.715$).

Transformational leadership

TLQ (Li and Shi 2005) was used to assess transformational leadership. The questionnaire comprised four dimensions: six items that measured vision motivation, six items that measured idealized influence, six items that measured individualized consideration, and eight items that gauged moral modeling. All items used a five-point Likert response scale (1 =

strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The internal consistency was high (Cronbach's alphas were 0.969, 0.965, 0.973, and 0.970, respectively).

Organizational learning capability

Organizational learning capability was assessed using the OLCQ (Chen 2009), which measures nine capabilities: discovery capability, invention capability, selective capability, executive capability, promotion capability, reflective capability, capability for acquiring knowledge, capability for outputting knowledge, and capability for establishing an organizational knowledge system. Each capability was assessed with respect to three items measured on a seven-point Likert response scale (1 = strongly disagree and 7 = strongly agree). The internal consistency again was high (Cronbach's alphas were 0.968, 0.961, 0.973, 0.973, 0.965, 0.973, 0.955, 0.967, and 0.970, respectively).

Data analysis strategy

Our analyses followed a conventional two-step strategy associated with structural equation modeling (SEM) (Kline 2011). First, we used confirmatory factor analysis with maximum likelihood estimation to test a measurement model for examining the construct validity of the latent variables proposed. Second, we built a structural equation model and tested it to examine the direct and indirect relationships among the three latent variables and thereby to consider the mediation hypotheses. The moderating effects of having a social work education background were further tested using multiple-group analyses (Arbuckle 2006).

The analyses were conducted using SPSS 24.0 and AMOS 24.0 software and conventional indices employed to assess model fit. The skewness and kurtosis of the variables (the coefficients ranged from +1 to -1) conformed to a normal distribution.

Results

Common method variance and confirmatory factor analysis

Although we applied procedural remedies to address potential issues with common method variance, we also conducted a marker variable technique (Lindell and Whitney 2001) to determine whether common method variance threatened the results. We used a variable of “You have much art interest” (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) as the marker variable. That variable was theoretically unrelated to all the latent variables used in our study. Correlation analyses between the marker variable and all latent variables showed that correlation coefficients were 0.012 ($p = 0.779$), .032 ($p = 0.439$), and .002 ($p = 0.970$), respectively. The fact that the correlations were weak and nonsignificant suggests that there was not a substantial amount of common method variance in this study (Lindell and Whitney 2001).

The confirmatory factor analysis, performed using inter-item variance-covariance matrices, demonstrated that the three latent variable models fitted the data well ($\chi^2/df = 3.188$; SRMR = 0.0301; GFI = 0.941; CFI = 0.983; RFI rho 1 = 0.969; RMSEA = 0.061).

Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations, reliabilities, validities, and correlations of the three latent variables. In addition, composite reliability (CR) indicated that the reliability of the three constructs was good (> 0.7). The average variance extracted (AVE) and maximum shared variance (MSV) of all the variables were acceptable, except for the AVE of discretion ($0.469 < 0.5$), which indicated that generally there were no problems of discriminant or convergent validity in the constructs of the three variables.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, validities, and inter-correlations

	Mean (SD)	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	1	2	3
1. Professional discretion	4.664 (1.17)	0.723	0.469	0.370	0.284	<u>0.685</u>		
2. Organizational learning capability	5.281 (1.03)	0.980	0.847	0.483	0.426	0.608***	<u>0.920</u>	
3. Transformational leadership	3.968 (0.74)	0.937	0.788	0.483	0.341	0.446***	0.695***	<u>0.888</u>

Note: (1) CR = Composite Reliability, AVE = Average Variance Extracted, MSV = Maximum Shared Variance, ASV = Average Shared Variance. (2) Good: CR > AVE > MSV > ASV, AVE > 0.5, CR > 0.7. (3) The underlined figures are the square roots of the AVE. (3) *** $p < 0.001$.

Structural equation modeling

An initial structural model was tested for the effects of transformational leadership on street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion, without adding the mediator of organizational learning capability and while controlling for gender. The initial model fit was good ($\chi^2/df = 3.060$; SRMR = 0.041; GFI = 0.968; CFI = 0.977; RFI rho 1 = 0.954; RMSEA = 0.059). The results showed that street-level bureaucrats perceived transformational leadership as being significantly and positively associated with their ability to exercise professional discretion ($\beta = 0.45^{***}$). Gender was significantly associated with professional discretion, thus indicating that women tended to have less professional discretion than men did.

Second, a theory-based structural model was developed and tested to explore whether the influence of transformational leadership on street-level bureaucrats' use of professional discretion was affected by organizational learning capability, while controlling for gender. The model fit was good ($\chi^2/df = 2.758$; SRMR = 0.0374; GFI = 0.936; CFI = 0.980; RFI rho 1 = 0.962; RMSEA = 0.055). The results showed that transformational leadership was

significantly and positively associated with organizational learning capability ($\beta = 0.69***$) and also was significantly and positively associated with professional discretion ($\beta = 0.56***$). However, the significant relationship between transformational leadership and street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion became insignificant in the theoretical model (declining from $\beta = 0.45***$ in the initial model to $\beta = 0.07$ in the theoretical model), indicating that there might be a partial or full mediation effect in the theory-based model. Gender was still significantly associated with professional discretion (female = 1, $\beta = -0.16***$). Street-level bureaucrats' perceived transformational leadership of their supervisors and perceived organizational learning capability explained a total of 39% of the variance in their professional discretion.

The results are shown in Figure 2.

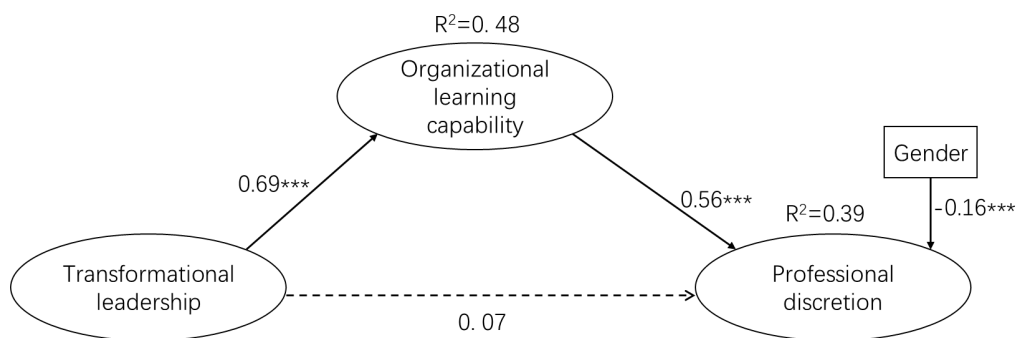


Figure 2. The results of the street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion model

Note: *** $p < .001$.

Because the direct effect of transformational leadership on professional discretion changed from significant to insignificant, we used bootstrapping in AMOS 24.0 to test the potential mediating effect. We used the recommended 95% confidence interval and 2,000 bootstrap samples (Hayes and Preacher 2010).

Table 3. Mediation effect

	Point	Product of coefficient		95% Confidence interval		<i>p</i>
	estimate	SE	<i>z</i>	Lower	Upper	
Direct effect	0.066	0.062	1.065	-0.06	0.184	0.343
Indirect effect	0.572	0.054	10.593	0.474	0.688	0.001
Total effect	0.638	0.053	12.038	0.536	0.742	0.001

The results listed in Table 3 indicate that organizational learning capability served as a full mediator buffering the effects of transformational leadership on professional discretion. The indirect effect was statistically significant. The result indicates that the effect of transformational leadership on professional discretion was totally mediated by organizational learning capability. Thus, *H1*, *H2-1*, and *H2-2* were supported.

Analyses of moderating effects

Structural models were tested by adding four moderators respectively in order to explore the impact of each of the three elements of the professionalization strategy on street-level bureaucrats' exercise of professional discretion. We used a multiple-group analysis with Amos 24.0 software to examine potential moderating effects.

Work task was defined with respect to whether the street-level bureaucrats were devoted full-time to service delivery. Therefore, a binary "work task" variable (delivering services full-time, *n* = 344 vs. including administrative tasks assigned by local government, *n* = 251) was tested as a moderator, and the model fit proved to be good (X^2/df = 2.652; SRMR = 0.0286; GFI = 0.928; CFI = 0.981; RFI rho 1 = 0.961; RMSEA = 0.037). However, the multiple-group analysis showed that there were no significant moderating effects in the model as indicated by the *z*-score (total effect: 0.586 vs. 0.683). Thus, *H3-1* was not supported.

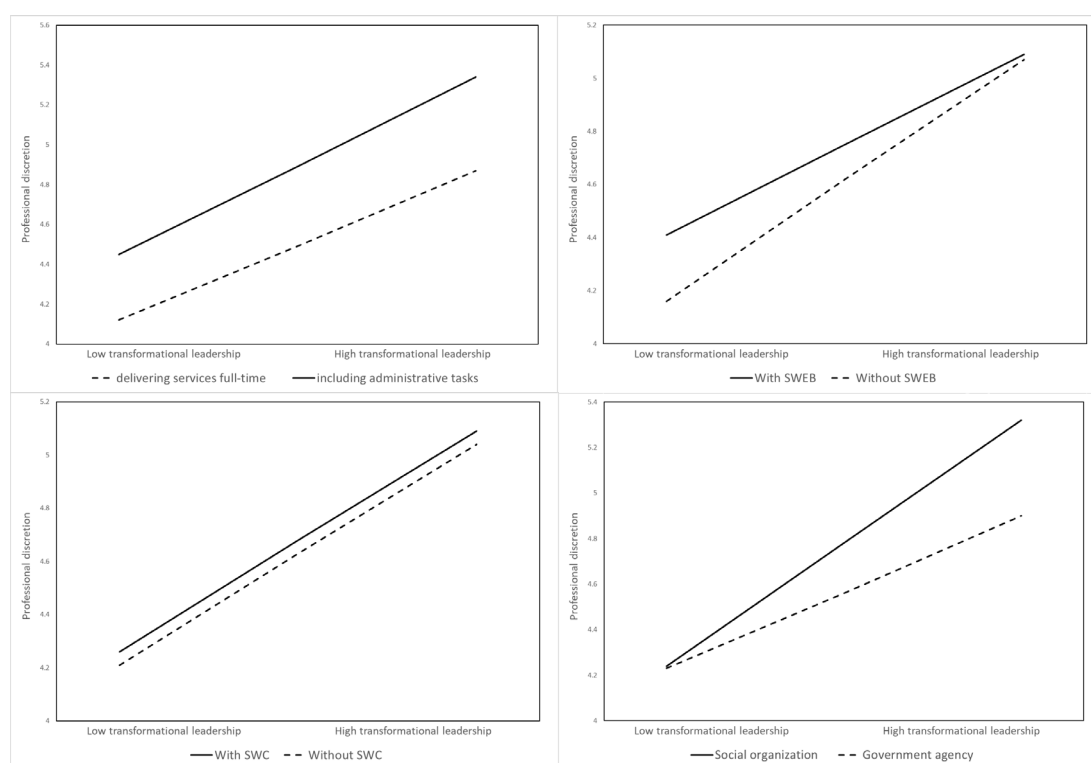
Similarly, the multiple-group analysis showed that, as indicated by the z -score, there were no significant moderating effects in the model with respect to either social work educational background (with education, $n = 216$ vs. without education, $n = 379$; total effect: 0.526 vs 0.696) or the social worker qualification certificate (with the certificate, $n = 461$ vs. without the certificate, $n = 134$; total effect: 0.673 vs 0.539). The model fits were good (with a social work educational background: $\chi^2/df = 2.617$; SRMR = 0.0280; GFI = 0.929; CFI = 0.981; RFI rho 1 = 0.962; RMSEA = 0.037; with a social worker qualification certificate: $\chi^2/df = 2.777$; SRMR = 0.0290; GFI = 0.925; CFI = 0.980; RFI rho 1 = 0.959; RMSEA = 0.039). Thus, $H3-2a$ and $H3-2b$ were not supported.

The multiple-group analysis showed that a significant moderating effect existed, as indicated by the z -score, in the model with organizational type as the moderator (working for a government agency, $n = 317$ vs. working for a social service organization, $n = 278$). The model fit was good ($\chi^2/df = 2.922$; SRMR = 0.0301; GFI = 0.923; CFI = 0.978; RFI rho 1 = 0.958; RMSEA = 0.040). The results given in Table 4 show that all of the significant z -scores indicated the significant differences in the relationships between transformational leadership, organizational learning capability, and professional discretion between street-level bureaucrats employed by government agencies and those working in social organizations. Overall, transformational leadership and organizational learning capability had a higher impact on street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion for those working in social organizations than for those employed in a government agency (total effect: 0.614 vs. 0.366). Thus, $H3-3$ was supported.

Table 4. Moderating effects of organizational type

		Government agency	Social organization	z-score
Transformational leadership	to			
	Organizational learning capability	0.671***	0.730***	2.697***
Organizational learning capability	to			
	Professional discretion	0.642***	0.401***	-2.062**
Transformational leadership	to			
	Professional discretion	-0.065	0.321*	2.164**

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

**Figure 3.** Moderation effects

To facilitate our interpretation, we plotted the moderating effects of the four moderators in Figure 1, and the plot shows a significant moderating effect from organizational type. The

simple slope between transformational leadership and professional discretion was steeper in the social service organization group than in the government agency group. In comparison, the simple slopes of the two groups were almost parallel for work task and social worker qualification certificate. For social work educational background, although the simple slope of workers without a social work educational background (SWEB) was steeper, the difference was not significant. In addition, street-level bureaucrats who worked in social service organizations generally had significantly higher professional discretion than those who worked in government agencies did (mean = 4.785 in social organizations vs. mean = 4.558 in government agencies) in a *t*-test ($t = 2.380^*$).

Discussion

This study was based on two broad contexts. The first was the predicament of the conflicting needs and demands among public services agencies, street-level bureaucrats, and their clients (Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017). Public agencies that set public service goals and make policies for the delivery of public services are not only reliant on street-level bureaucrats who are endowed with discretionary power under limited and concise principles and rules, the agencies also pay the price of the street-level bureaucrats' failures. Clients who usually only experience public policies and services through street-level bureaucrats are vulnerable and not well-equipped to insist on their rights—on the one hand, they demand fair and consistent public services, while on the other hand, they want street-level bureaucrats to fully understand and effectively respond to their individual needs. Street-level bureaucrats, who are both frontline workers and occupy the lowest ranks of their public agencies, must try their best to

bridge the gap between rigid public service rules at the policy level and sophisticated individual service needs at the practical level. The key challenge of this predicament is how to manage street-level bureaucrats' discretion, while at the same time acknowledging that street-level bureaucrats' discretion is both inevitable and desirable for public agencies and their clients (Lipsky 2010; Zacka 2017). Although there are still many disputes, professional discretion has become an important way to cope with this predicament in both its theoretical and practical aspects (Evans 2010; Lipsky 2010).

The second context was the rapid transformation that has been achieved in China within the last 20 years, moving from the absence of social welfare services to the provision of complex and diverse social welfare services for hundreds of millions of people. Delivery of these massive social welfare services is one of the most difficult social policy challenges facing the Chinese government. In any case, for the authorities, direct control of service delivery is neither possible nor desirable. Professionalization has in fact become a common strategy for governments at various levels as they seek to build or reform social assistance service delivery systems in China. The purpose of a professionalization strategy is also to improve the performance of street-level bureaucrats by developing their professional discretion.

Based on those two contexts, this research focused on investigating the mechanisms affecting professional discretion in public administration. The first theoretical contribution of this study is to construct and verify a theoretical model in which transformational leadership influences street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion, with full mediation of organizational learning capability in the social service delivery team. Our results show that

this model indeed adequately explained professional discretion ($R^2 = 39\%$). The model provided an internal mechanism that affected professional discretion inside the social service delivery system.

The internal mechanism was first based on professionalism. Professionalism is always an important way to control and influence street-level bureaucrats' discretion (Lipsky 2010; Vinzant and Crothers 1996), and the basic principle of professionalism is peer-review: "Who will watch the watchmen? The watchmen will watch themselves" (Lipsky 2010, 201).

Traditionally, external peer-review mechanisms, such as standardized formal training in universities, professional qualifications certification, and professional evaluation, have been the main ways to promote the professionalization of street-level bureaucrats. However, the results of this study, demonstrating that transformational leadership significantly positively impacted professional discretion, suggest another internal peer-review mechanism.

Leadership normally is based on a hierarchical ordering of authority relationships in public agencies. However, transformational leadership is a value-based leadership—transformational leaders manage and control street-level bureaucrats by altering their attitudes, values, and beliefs (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2020; Rafferty and Griffin 2004). Therefore, transformational leaders can also be professional supervisors of street-level bureaucrats. In the process of service delivery, the relationship between transformational leader and street-level bureaucrats is no longer a relationship of authority between superior and subordinates, it is instead a professional-peer relationship. In that relationship, an internal mechanism is formed within the service delivery team that is based on the professionalism that transformational leaders promote to enhance the professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats.

The research further indicates that the internal mechanism affecting professional discretion is also a kind of learning mechanism. The foundation of professionalism comprises professional knowledge and skills that have practical value, along with professional ethics and values developed on that basis (Kearney and Sinha 1988). Thus, professionalization ultimately depends on the acquisition and accumulation of professional knowledge and skills through continuous learning. For that reason, the learning mechanism of street-level bureaucrats is not only important but indispensable, although external mechanisms, such as professional training in universities, professional qualifications certification, and evaluation, also provide necessary conditions for professionalization. Professional discretion is a practical competence that develops only with continuous learning. In particular, the challenges faced in the delivery of public services, such as goal ambiguity, conflicting goals, limited resources, fuzzy boundaries, uncertainty, soft evidence, unpredictability, entangled ends, and information asymmetry (Zacka 2017), require learning from practice. Our finding that organizational learning capability significantly positively influenced professional discretion not only confirmed other findings that organizational learning is an effective learning mechanism for street-level bureaucrats (Cohen 2018; Isett, Morrissey, and Topping 2006; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Riccucci 2005; Sandfort 2000), but it also demonstrated that organizational learning capability plays a full mediating role in the relationship between transformational leadership and professional discretion. Our results further emphasize that for the professionalization of street-level bureaucrats, the internal mechanism may be more important than the external mechanisms of standardized formal training in universities or professional qualifications certification. Furthermore, these results also reflect the reality of

rapid social development and change. Organizations have “a variety of subcultures aligned around various poles or ‘worlds’” (Broughton 2019), and effective managers need to orchestrate such diversity in an effort to encourage street-level bureaucrats to attend to a “plurality of normative considerations” (Zacka 2017, 220-221).

The second theoretical contribution of this research is to further show, through moderation effect analyses, that the internal mechanism of professionalization had more significant effects on the street-level bureaucrats’ professional discretion than the external mechanism did. Based on the theoretical model we proposed in this study, and using our analyses of moderating effects, we evaluated three elements in the professionalization strategy of social assistance delivery systems in China. First, work tasks had no significant moderating effect. Contrary to our expectations, the total effect that transformational leadership exerted on professional discretion in the group of workers who delivered services full-time was slightly smaller than that in the other group. Apparently, the street-level bureaucrats who devoted themselves full-time to service delivery did not experience significant advantages in their professional learning and the development of their professional discretion. Such a lack of advantages in association with full-time delivery of services may have been due to an insufficiently high professional learning efficiency in the individual street-level bureaucrats. In that case, even if they had more opportunities and time, their professional discretion would not increase significantly. Second, the research indicated that neither an educational background in social work nor a social worker qualification certificate provided a significant advantage toward professional discretion for street-level bureaucrats. Although the total effect from transformational leadership on professional discretion in the SWC group was not

significant, it was slightly higher than in the without-SWC group, as expected. However, the total effect from transformational leadership on professional discretion in the without-SWEB group was even slightly higher than it was in the with-SWEB group. Those effects may be attributed to the low level of social work education in China and the low threshold of the professional level examination of social workers. Such an explanation is indeed in line with the reality of the development of social work in China (Wang, Yuen-Tsang, and Shi 2014; Zeng, Li, and Chen 2019; Wang, Zhang, and Liu 2020). However, another possible reason could be that the organizational environment of public service delivery made it difficult for street-level bureaucrats with a social work background to gain an advantage in professional learning for social assistance delivery.

Third, organizational type had a significant moderating effect. The mechanism proposed in this study was more effective in social service organizations, although it was significant in both government agencies and social service organizations. At the same time, the mean for professional discretion in street-level bureaucrats working in social service organizations was also significantly higher than that for those working in government agencies. These results suggest that social service organizations do have an advantage over government agencies in terms of the process of professionalization of public service delivery. Therefore, social service organizations should have a more effective internal mechanism for affecting street-level bureaucrats' professional discretion than government agencies do.

An even more interesting finding was that a significantly lower proportion of street-level bureaucrats working in social service organizations (47.5% vs. 66.9%, Pearson $\chi^2 = 22.844^{***}$) were devoted full-time to service delivery than those working in government

agencies were, a higher proportion working in social service organizations had a social work educational background (56.8% vs. 18.3%, Pearson $\chi^2 = 98.125^{***}$), and a lower proportion working in social organizations had a social worker qualification certificate (66.9% vs. 86.8%, Pearson $\chi^2 = 33.426^{***}$) than those working in government agencies did. Those findings, in conjunction with the fact that neither a social work educational background nor a social worker qualification certificate had a significant moderating effect, further suggest that the external mechanisms of professionalization, such as professional training in universities and professional qualification certification, may be inefficient in China.

Social service organizations have multiple advantages over government agencies when it comes to improving public service delivery performance, such as being more flexible, more responsive, more meticulous, and more humane (Gilbert and Terrell 2013; Salamon 1995; Wang and Salamon 2010). This study showed that social service organizations also tended to have a better internal mechanism for developing professional knowledge and skills than government agencies did, as a result of the organizations' advantageous organizational culture. When an organizational culture is conducive to the learning and accumulation of professional knowledge and skills, service delivery should be more likely to achieve professionalization. In contrast, in an organizational culture that does not encourage professional learning, professionals may be more likely to follow their nonprofessional colleagues than the professional requirements. The organizational culture in social service organizations is more innovative in devising solutions to the sorts of intractable problems that are always emerging in the predicaments of public service delivery than the culture in government agencies is (Salamon 2002). In addition, an innovative organizational culture

provides favorable conditions for fostering transformational leadership and improving organizational learning capability.

Our moderation effect analyses found that the professionalization strategy of purchasing delivery services from social service organizations was more successful than other elements, but the strategies of increasing the number of frontline street-level bureaucrats and improving their professional backgrounds did not seem to have a significant effect on the social assistance system in China. This result also indicated that the internal learning mechanism was more important and valuable than the external obtaining mechanism was for the professionalization of public services when the services and clients were complicated. Our findings also suggested that for China, a professional learning mechanism in practice should be established when the entire field of social work is still in the initial stage of professionalization.

In addition to the theoretical discussions above, our results also have interesting practical implications for the delivery of public services and even for the implementation of public policies. For public services and social welfare services, it is more important to establish internal professional learning mechanisms than it is to rely on external professional mechanisms to improve service delivery performance. Transformational leadership is also essential to assist service delivery teams of street-level bureaucrats in establishing internal learning mechanisms (Keulemans and Groeneveld 2019; Vinzant and Crothers 1998). Those internal mechanisms also rely on a high organizational learning capability driven by an organizational culture and transformational leaders. For facilitating the delivery of social assistance in China, a professionalization strategy should pay more attention to the

professionalization of service delivery organizations than to the professionalization of street-level bureaucrats. Organizational professionalization then could effectively promote the professionalization of street-level bureaucrats. However, the professionalization of street-level bureaucrats is hard to sustain in a nonprofessional organization. For that reason, purchasing services from professional social organizations is a more effective strategy of professionalization and improving the performance of service delivery than strengthening and reforming the government service delivery agencies is. Indeed, that implication may also be beneficial in other public services and in other regions.

Finally, this study had limitations and offers suggestions for future research. First, the study did not directly measure the performance of the delivery of social assistance services. However, due to the inherent contradictions in public service delivery, such as ambiguous goals, conflicting values, fuzzy boundaries, and so on, measuring its performance is complex and difficult and is fraught with disputes (Zacka 2017). Therefore, as an effective antecedent to more acceptable performance, professional discretion is important and valuable for the theory and practice of both public service delivery and policy implementation. Second, this study used a subset of national cross-sectional data, and therefore the results also had the limitations of the subset and cross-section data. The overall delivery system of social assistance in China, including professionalization, is fragmented. This study's research on the mechanisms and the evaluation of a professionalization strategy was on the overall macro level, and that is a contradiction. However, the nationally representative data on street-level bureaucrats delivering social assistance services provide a general and holistic understanding of and insight into the theory and practice of those bureaucrats. Because social assistance

delivery in China depends primarily on local governments below the county level, it would be valuable for a future study to research and evaluate public service delivery of social assistance program within a single locality. Third, this study had a risk of common method variance because a single respondent was used to measure the latent variables. However, we applied both procedural and statistical remedies to minimize the potential effect of common method variance. Fourth, the Cronbach's alpha values were high in measuring transformational leadership and organizational learning capability, signifying that there was redundancy in our measurement tools. Fifth, both the social assistance system and the delivery system for public services in China are somewhat unique. One should be careful and critical when applying the results of this study to other regions. Still, the professionalization and professional discretion of street-level bureaucrats are receiving renewed attention (Assadi and Lundin 2018; Lavee et al. 2018; Paanakker 2019; Virtanen et al. 2018; Zacka 2017). Our theoretical and empirical study of street-level bureaucrats in the fast-paced development of social welfare and public services in China produces unique insights and theoretical contributions.

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