

# Innovation, Voice, and Hierarchy in the Civil Service:

Evidence from a Productivity Intervention in Ghana

Martin J. Williams (Oxford) and Liah Yecaló-Teclé (SOAS)

24 October, 2018 · GIMPA, Accra

# Motivation

Research on innovation and productivity in government often takes top-down approach

But lower- and middle-level officers also have knowledge, ideas

- ▶ Autonomy positively associated with performance in Ghana & Nigeria (Rasul, Rogger, and Williams 2018)

# Motivation

Research on innovation and productivity in government often takes top-down approach

But lower- and middle-level officers also have knowledge, ideas

- ▶ Autonomy positively associated with performance in Ghana & Nigeria (Rasul, Rogger, and Williams 2018)

We undertake mainly qualitative research embedded in a large RCT in Ghana, asking:

- ▶ What ideas do civil servants have to improve their team's performance?
- ▶ What determines whether they voice these ideas and get them implemented?
- ▶ How does a government intervention to promote innovation and productivity affect ideas and their voicing/implementation?

## Key empirical finding

Civil servants have lots of ideas, but typically **don't voice them** because they perceive that their **supervisors are hostile to new ideas from below**

Puzzle: why would supervisors be actively hostile to new ideas that could enhance performance of whole team?

## Four potential explanations

Material: supervisors afraid that subordinates' ideas could reduce benefits/rents

## Four potential explanations

Material: supervisors afraid that subordinates' ideas could reduce benefits/rents

Structural: supervisors afraid subordinate innovation will break rules & lead to sanction

## Four potential explanations

Material: supervisors afraid that subordinates' ideas could reduce benefits/rents

Structural: supervisors afraid subordinate innovation will break rules & lead to sanction

Cultural: innovation goes against organizational culture

## Four potential explanations

Material: supervisors afraid that subordinates' ideas could reduce benefits/rents

Structural: supervisors afraid subordinate innovation will break rules & lead to sanction

Cultural: innovation goes against organizational culture

Psychological: innovation from subordinates threatens supervisors' psychological understanding of their superior position in the hierarchy



## Context and method

### Training for Productivity project in Ghana Civil Service

- ▶ Collaboration between OHCS, CSTC, Oxford, UCL
- ▶ New productivity and innovation training
- ▶ Delivered by CSTC as part of Scheme of Service training
- ▶ Individual- and team-based arms, randomized
- ▶ Large scale: 1400 civil servants

# Context and method

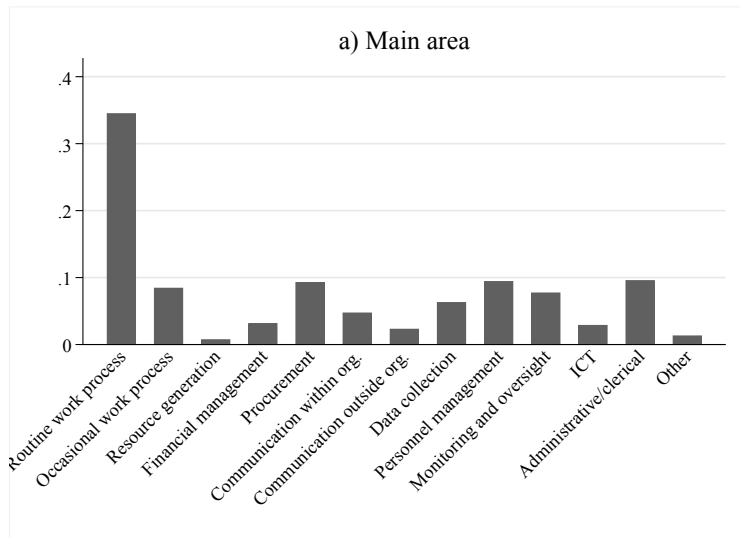
## Training for Productivity project in Ghana Civil Service

- ▶ Collaboration between OHCS, CSTC, Oxford, UCL
- ▶ New productivity and innovation training
- ▶ Delivered by CSTC as part of Scheme of Service training
- ▶ Individual- and team-based arms, randomized
- ▶ Large scale: 1400 civil servants

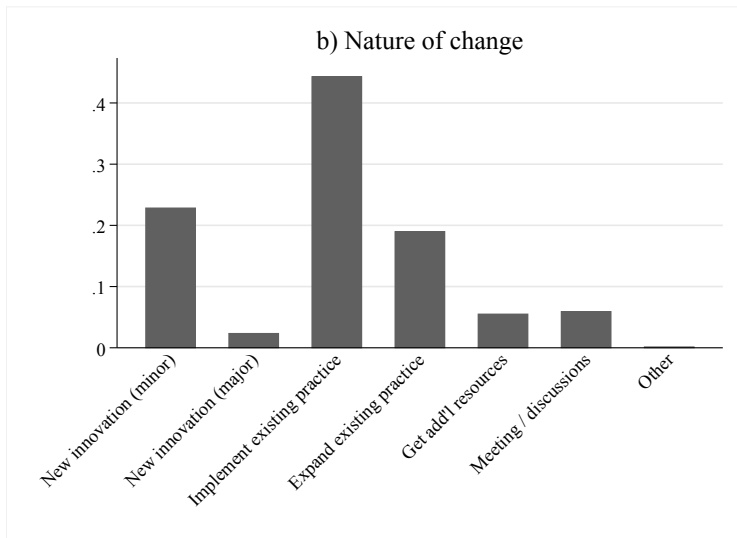
## Anonymous semi-structured interviews with 51 officers, analyzed 700+ Action Plans

- ▶ Policy, Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation divisions from nine ministries
- ▶ Stratified selection across treatment cells

Types of ideas: routine work processes are most common focus area. . .



... and nature of change is usually implementing existing practices, or minor innovations



## Hostility from supervisors

*Supervisors “do not want to accept or welcome ideas from people that are below them” (Interview M68)*

*As director they are the gods and so for you to suggest things, they will think ‘Who are you?! What have you seen?’ (Interview M59)*

*One director warned us in a meeting to never speak out at such meetings. (Interview L39)*

*Once we were having a team meeting and my colleague suggested an idea and our director said “I am the boss and you cannot decide”. In our informal little meetings, which we have without the director present, my colleague told us they were not going to talk again at meetings and has not done so since. (Interview U10)*

# Why supervisory hostility? Not material or structural

## Types of ideas not consistent with material explanation

- ▶ Few proposed ideas pertained to restricting potential sources of rents, e.g. through improved financial management
- ▶ If anything, opposite: e.g. auctioning vehicles

# Why supervisory hostility? Not material or structural

## Types of ideas not consistent with material explanation

- ▶ Few proposed ideas pertained to restricting potential sources of rents, e.g. through improved financial management
- ▶ If anything, opposite: e.g. auctioning vehicles

## Also not consistent with structural explanation

- ▶ No examples of ideas that might contravene civil service regulations
- ▶ If anything, opposite: actually implementing existing practices, strengthening compliance

## Psychology of hierarchy, not org. culture

Organizational culture explanation implies shared anti-innovation norm

- ▶ But supervisors and subordinates alike agree innovation is good; hostility only occurs in specific hierarchical direction

Instead, evidence consistent with theories of psychological attachment to hierarchy (Fast *et al* 2014)

- ▶ *This is an ego problem; seniors may think 'why did I not think of this?'. They won't take the idea on board. If they did not come up with the idea, they feel that they are not smart enough. . . The hierarchy is eating the issue up. (Interview B71)*
- ▶ *100% that seniors are more accepting of an idea that comes from a colleague of equal or higher ranking than from a junior officer. This is the nature of the system. . . You think to listen to someone higher even if the idea isn't good versus someone lower with good ideas. (Interview U37)*



# Reactions to supervisory hostility

## Disengagement

- ▶ *When the big man speaks, the juniors should not speak. . . This depresses you as you wonder what is your presence? Is it just to occupy space and time? I do not have an option. You keep the idea to yourself and then you go along singing the same tune and at the end of the month take your salary. (Interview L39)*

## Framing as the supervisor's idea

- ▶ *as a junior you can massage the issue and make it look like the idea comes from them. . . Your change will be implemented but this is not a good process. (Interview H91)*

## Waiting for suggestion from external source

- ▶ *I am not pursuing the data science idea I have, I would rather wait for a development partner to suggest it. Change coming from the outside is more receptive than [ideas coming from] here. (Interview U15)*

## (If time) Hierarchy and a voice-promoting intervention

How did these dynamics affect TFP program?

- ▶ Not a full impact evaluation; quantitative RCT results coming

Group-based treatment arm had supervisor present in about half of cases; mixed results

- ▶ *With your superior [present] it was not beneficial. You have to be cautious about the superior-subordinate relationship. . . I could not voice my feelings.* (Interview D47)
- ▶ Action Plans: T2 more likely to propose anodyne changes (e.g. accessing resources, provide training) than individual-based treatment arms

# Contributions

Supervisory hostility to employee voice a key obstacle for “bottom-up” innovation

- ▶ Explanation is psychological, not material, structural, or cultural

Extend study of public administration innovation beyond OECD contexts

- ▶ Different focus of ideas

Potential for qualitative research embedded in quantitative studies

- ▶ Common in health, education; less so in public administration