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REGIONAL REFERENCE GROUPS IN THE SPREADING OF OCCUPATIONAL LICENSING  
POLICIES AMONG THE STATES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the diffusion of state licensing policies, particularly the role of regional cuetaking in the adoption of new policies. Five such networks are suggested, along with the states most likely to serve as models for those reference groups. Findings have several implications for social work lobbying efforts.

Social workers have participated in state policy debates throughout professional history. However, the organization for coordinated involvement is quite new. It emerged in the mid-seventies with an expanding record of legislative action by the state chapters of the National Association of Social Workers (Lause, 1979). These associations enable the profession to pursue various social reforms at the state level and that capacity is most timely in its development. The nineteen eighties have begun with an empowerment of designs for social welfare which seem archaic and hostile to an extent unprecedented in modern history. Certainly, the first "state of the union" address of the Reagan administration calls for significant shifts in the roles of federal and state governments in the amelioration and solution of many social problems. In form and content, the "reforms" of the first part of this decade pose strong challenges to social work action in the fifty statehouses as well as in the national congress. Given the historic stability of our federal system, however, the statehouses will continue to be major arenas for policy development even when a national administration asserts again a progressive agenda for social welfare. This study of regional diffusion in the spreading of policy innovations is designed to suggest ways that social work might improve its effectiveness in legislative action in both the worst and best of times. Moreover, it illustrates the need to develop an understanding of policy-making in the states which is at least partially distinguishable from the bases of knowledge used for professional action in local or national arenas.

Several models of policy innovation are well suited to decisionmaking in the states. First, the diffusion model holds that change results typically from the borrowing of ideas rather than from independent invention and that those patterns of exchange are patterned, not random (Rogers, 1962). Second, the organizational model directs attention to legislative norms or informal rules which guide state deliberations and decisions (Lindblom, 1959; Wildavsky, 1974). Third, the regional model looks to underlying similarities in state economics, culture, and political organization as explanations for their policy decisions (Sharkansky,

1968, 1970; Garreau, 1981). These three models combine to suggest scenarios for the adoption of reforms by individual states and for the overall spreading of policy innovations among them.

The cornerstone of the scenario for individual states is a tendency of officials to view the policy innovations of nearby states as potential guides or models for their own decisions (Walker, 1973: 1187). In contrast, distant states are likely to be discounted as appropriate models if they are seen as operating under different cultural, political, or economic circumstances. The perceptions of shared histories and current conditions may be expressed as legislative norms which lie somewhat hidden in established patterns of consultation and cuetaking between states. For example, officials in Louisiana may look to Texas or Arkansas as potential models but not even consider seriously Michigan or California in such a role.

From a nationwide perspective, the same models suggest another related scenario for the overall spreading of new policies among the states. First, a relatively few may gain nationwide reputations as pioneers or originators of bold reforms. However, that same reputation may make them too different from most states to serve widely as direct models in cuetaking. Instead, regional models and reference groups seem to structure cuetaking for most states (Walker, 1969: 892). In brief, innovation tends to begin with adoptions by one or more national pioneers, followed by enactments in other states which then serve as regional models for the remaining states.

State policy diffusion research, therefore, has two types of applications in social work's approach to legislative action. The first involves action in individual states, based upon knowledge of which neighbors tend to be viewed as comparable and reasonable guides for policy innovation. The second application involves strategies for promoting rapid nationwide adoptions of preferred policies. In this case, both national pioneers and regional models would be targeted as priorities in lobbying efforts. While knowledge of reference patterns between states in no way ensures success in these efforts, it would serve as a definite aid in overcoming inertia and uncertainty about policy reform in the states.

#### Evidence of Cuetaking Between States

State officials have taken note of policy developments in other states since the first days of constitutional ratification. Today, a great variety of special organizations promote exchanges of information about new policies. They include organizations of state officials, such as the National Legislative Conference which encourages cuetaking through written reports, regional meetings, and national assemblies (Ross and Millsap, 1966: 40). In addition, the state funded Council of State Governments serves as an interstate clearinghouse on the performance of policy innovations. The regional offices of many federal departments are also active in the dissemination of information among state agencies which, in turn, may model their legislative proposals on policies adopted by other states. Finally, special interest groups may promote cuetaking between states in subtle ways. Their lobbying may be intensified as policy decisions in other states demonstrate the feasibility of success in their own efforts, particularly when those models are neighboring states. All the above organizations provide the states

with ample opportunity for taking cues from each other in the adoption of new policies.

A number of studies provide direct evidence of interstate cuetaking. Over 90 percent of the heads of 67 state agencies in four southern states reported that they had consulted with counterparts in other states for ideas on how policy issues might be approached in their own state (Sharkansky, 1968: 103). Three quarters of these contacts involved southern states. Nationwide surveys add documentation of the practice of cuetaking (Light, 1978; Wright and Peddicord, 1974). Officials view other states as more useful sources of new ideas than the federal government, even when their agency depends heavily on federal funds (Light, 1978: 151-152). Case studies in Missouri (Masters and Salisbury, 1964) and in Illinois (Anton, 1966) also found cuetaking between states in the deliberations of legislative bodies. However, they seemed to view only certain other states as reasonable comparisons and useful models for their own decisions.

Evidence of regional cuetaking is not limited to surveys and field studies. Walker (1969: 894) concludes that a number of regional networks influence the spreading of policy innovations, based on a Q factor analysis of relations between states in the timing of their policy enactments. He suggested that such networks operate in the south, mountain-northwest, Great Lakes, Middle Atlantic, border, and New England areas (Walker, 1969: 884). New York, Massachusetts, California, and New Jersey are identified as likely national pioneers in the adoption of new policies (Walker, 1969: 884). Unlike the other nationwide studies, Walker (1969) proposes boundaries for the various regional networks of states. This study shares that objective and it adopts the same methodology. However, its focus is limited to diffusion within one field of state policy rather than diffusion patterns which might apply to all fields of innovation.

#### General vs. Selective Diffusion Networks

There is some indication that state officials may adjust their regional orientations when proposed innovations involve different fields of policy. New ideas are usually borrowed from others when conditions related to a change are similar. What happens when the strength of similarities which underlie a particular regional orientation vary as different types of similarities are being considered? Missouri officials, for example, might identify with their southern and western neighbors for cuetaking in the field of education because of similarities in tax bases and public opinion. In terms of cuetaking in the field of energy or natural resources, however, these similarities are less relevant than they are for education innovations. Indeed, differences in climate, fuel reserves, and economic organization may lead Missouri officials to discount their southern and western neighbors as reasonable models for their own energy policies. Those types of characteristics might prompt a northern or eastern orientation in energy related policies. This variable or dynamic view of regionalism is supported by Sharkansky's (1970) analysis. He found that different variants of regional boundaries are most useful for predicting different sets of social, political, economic, and state policy variables (Sharkansky, 1970: 33-37). This study focuses on a single field in order to avoid the problematic assumption that regionalism is a mono-

lithic phenomenon which supports, in turn, use of the same regional orientations regardless of field distinction. Sharkansky's (1970) research is far more convincing than the implications of a long series of earlier studies which adopted preconceived boundaries for the areas of their studies (Donnelly, 1940; Fenton, 1957; Jones, 1961; Key, 1949, 1961; Lockhard, 1955). In addition to Sharkansky's (1970) work, the uneven currents of modernizations support a less simplified view of regionalism and regional cuetaking. While this study does not test the importance of field distinctions, its findings may be compared tentatively with Walker's (1969) conclusions about the likely boundaries of general diffusion networks.

The selection of the occupational regulation field, per se, has no special theoretical importance. Study of diffusion in the field of transportation would serve the same function vis a vis the literature and reforms in such fields as housing or income security have greater impact on the quality of life than occupational licensing. It is a practical consideration which prompts this particular focus. Social work licensing has been a more common legislative priority of state professional associations than any other single issue (Lause, 1979: 272). No drastic change in those priorities would be required for use of research conclusions given the selection of this field.

#### Research Design and Methodology

This study draws its conclusions from analyses of the timing of policy adoption by the 48 continental states. A purposive sample of 33 state licensing policies ranges across a wide variety of occupations. The dates of adoption were gathered from the statute collections of the individual states, housed at St. Louis University. Each adoption was then scored according to the speed of enactment relative to the total period involved in the spreading of a given policy. A total of 1,584 of these standard measurements provided the data base for this study.

Alaska and Hawaii were excluded from this study because of their distance from any other state, given the focus on regional cuetaking. Similarly, five policy innovations were dropped from an earlier sample because they had been enacted in only several states. Given the focus on patterns in the spreading of new policies, there was little value in the inclusion of novel policies or those which had not yet been adopted by a substantial number. Figure 1 lists the sample of policies which had been adopted by at least five states. Two-thirds of the policies had been adopted by over half of the states.

Figure 1.

#### Subjects of Selected Licensing Policies

Architect	Engineer	Physician
Attorney	Funeral Director	Pharmacist
Accountant	Insurance Agent	Practical Nurse
Barber	Librarian	Real Estate Agent

Beautician	Midwife	Recorder
Chiropracist	Naturopath	Registered Nurse
Chiropractor	Osteopath	Social Worker
Contractor	Optician	Solicitor
Dental Hygienist	Optometrist	Surveyor
Dentist	Plumber	Veterinarian
Embalmer	Psychologist	Watchmaker

### State Policy Innovation Scores

The most important measurement in this study is the policy innovation score. As developed by Walker (1969), they are standard measures of the speed of enactment relative to the percentile of the total diffusion period which had elapsed. A score of .5, for example, means that half of the period had elapsed by the time of a particular adoption. Enactments during the first year of a policy's appearance on the national scene were scored at 1.0 and those adoptions during the final year of enactment by any state were scored at 0.0. When one or more states had not yet adopted a reform, 1975 was used as the terminal point for the diffusion period and those states were scored at 0.0. The state means for the 33 scores, page 12, provide comparable measurements of the timing of state policy reforms and the sample of individual scores permits an inductive analysis of relations between states in the timing of those policy adoptions.

### Analytic and Statistical Techniques

Conclusions about likely model states and the boundaries of regional reference groups are drawn from two types of analysis. As suggested, the comparison of state means represents a straightforward indication of which states tend to initiate new policies or adopt them rapidly and which states tend to lag in the occupational regulation field. A more complex form of analysis is needed to infer regional cuetaking from a matrix of data which correlates the scores of each state to those of all other states. Since regional models cannot be suggested before reaching conclusions about the composition or boundaries of these networks, the less familiar statistical results appear before state means are presented.

As in Walker's (1969) study, regional networks are suggested by the results of a Q-type factor analysis. This approach avoids dependence upon preconceived notions of regional boundaries and permits a nationwide scope but it has its own limitations. Unlike the more popular forms of factor analysis, the Q-type simplifies a matrix of correlations between states in terms of their respective innovation scores for the 33 policies. Rather than analyzing the data to indicate sources of common variance among policy innovations, this factor method suggests possible sources of relations among states in the timing of their policy adoptions in this field. When bordering states have substantial loadings on the same independent factor, regional cuetaking is inferred as that source of common variance for those states. While such inferences flow from the grouping of states across the factor results and are supported generally by the literature on state politics,

these conclusions are presented tentatively. As indicated, their sole empirical basis is the relations between states in the timing of their policy adoptions.

Introduction to Factor Results

Four factors combine to account for about 81 percent of the common variance in the matrix of correlations between states in the timing of their policy adoptions. The factors described in Table 1 are limited to those having eigenvalues greater than 1.0. This "Kaiser's criterion" is most reliable, given the 48 state variables included in the analysis (Child, 1970: 43). It halts the extraction of factors at a point when additional factors might account for only inconsequential proportions of the common variance in the relations between the states. Beyond this point the factors consist of secondary state loadings. The four common factors of this study are interpreted by the groups of states which are correlated to each at the level of .40 or above. Since the varimax calculation of factors makes the interpretation of state loadings identical to parametric correlations, a loading of .40 indicates that as much as sixteen percent of a given state's correlations with others might be attributed to an hypothesized source. Although moderate, this standard is somewhat more rigorous than the recommended .30 criterion (Child, 1970: 45).

The data analysis was programmed to extract factor variance, beginning with the largest and followed by independent factors which accounted for shares of the remaining common variance.

Table 1  
Factor Eigenvalues for Analysis of Occupational  
Regulation Policies  
N = 33

Factor Number	Eigenvalues	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage
1	24.4	63.6	63.6
2	2.6	6.9	70.5
3	2.2	5.8	76.3
4	1.8	4.6	80.8

Findings and Conclusions

The factor results do include some regional groupings from which cuetaking networks may be inferred. Five networks are suggested by the state loadings listed in Table 2. Twenty five states belong to groups in the plains, New England, mountain, Great Lakes, and north central regions. Eleven states have primary loading on one of these factors but do not share boundaries with the regional cluster formed by the other states. The remaining states either had very low loadings on a number of factors or formed a unique factor below the 1.0 Kaiser criterion. This section begins with the interpretation of the first four factor



results and the suggested cuetaking networks, mapped in Figure 2. It concludes with a comparison of state mean innovation scores to suggest the likely national pioneers and regional models for this field of policy.

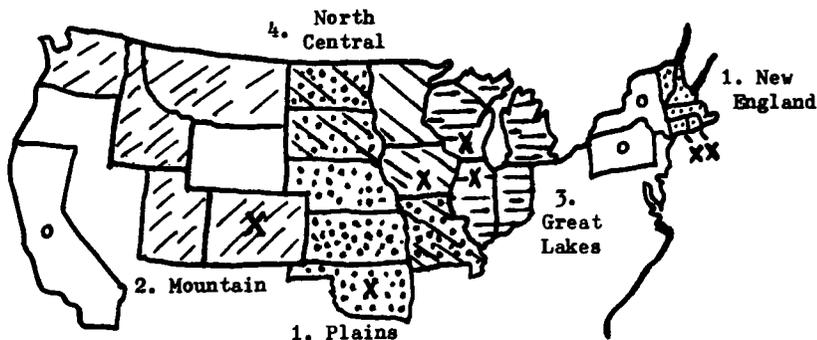
Two distant regional clusters are formed by the states of the first factor. Of these thirteen states, only two fell outside New England and a plains group. Six create a line from Oklahoma in the south to North Dakota, while five form a tight group in the core area of New England. (See code 1, Figure 2.) Since the first factor had been programmed to be the one which might account for the greatest possible variation in the relations between states, the appearance of two regional groups is not too surprising. Dual groups are present in Walker's (1969) results as well. Nonetheless, the suggested boundaries of these plains and New England groups are offered tentatively.

A group of mountain states are grouped on the second factor. However, the indicated boundaries are irregular, given substantial loadings by Colorado, Utah, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. Nearly half of the first factor states are scattered across the map. Therefore, tentativeness marks conclusions about the boundaries of this mountain network. (Code 2, Figure 2)

Figure 2.

Map of Regional Groups in Factor Results  
for a Field of Occupational Regulation Policies

(N = 33)



Notes. Numbers designate factor order. National models are marked with circles and regional models with an "X." The grouped states have common factor loading at the .40 level or above.

The third factor includes the smallest of the suggested networks. (See code 3.) Strictly speaking, a "western" Great Lakes label is more accurate than the above designation, given the Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana cluster. Finally, a fifth group in the north central region appears in the state loadings for the fourth factor. (See code 4.) Iowa and Minnesota are loaded exclusively on this factor, while Missouri and the two Dakotas have complex loadings. They are clustered with Iowa and Minnesota in the north central group but they have slightly higher loadings on the first factor with the plains group. There are several possible interpretations of this overlap between the plains and north central groups. One interpretation might involve the historical process of either consolidation or disintegration of a larger midwestern network which encompasses both the plains and the north central regions. Another interpretation of this overlap is simply that a small group of states serves as a bridge between the two suggested networks and that Missouri and the two Dakotas do not limit their regional orientations to either one of the groups.

The mean policy innovation scores for the individual states are presented in Table 3, along with their ranks. The means range from .23 for Alabama to .57 for California. The likely national models for the occupational regulation field include California, New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Ohio, Illinois, and Wisconsin. These states tend to adopt policy innovations in this field more rapidly than the mass of states. Therefore, they are in the best position to serve as models for reform beyond their immediate regions. The 25 states grouped within one of the five suggested regions, however, did not seem to model their decisions directly after these national pioneers. It is more likely that they took cues from states within their respective regional orientations which tended to adopt innovations first within the region. In some cases these probable regional models are laggards from a nationwide perspective while the lead in their own areas. The suggested regional models are marked by an "x" in Figure 2. They include Iowa for the north central group; Colorado for the mountain; Oklahoma for the plains; Illinois or Wisconsin for the western Great Lakes; and Connecticut or Rhode Island for the suggested New England network. In the latter two regions, two states are identified as likely models since the differences in mean scores are quite marginal.

The above findings refer exclusively to diffusion in the occupational regulation field. In contrast, Walker's (1969) study focuses on regional networks and model states which apply to cuetaking between states regardless of distinctions among policy fields. Therefore, a comparison of the conclusions of these two studies provides some indication of the possible importance of field distinctions in the cuetaking orientations of the states. The field of policy innovation, for example, does seem relevant to the regional orientations of plains and north central states. These regions are suggested networks for the occupational regulation field but no counterparts for them are reported in Walker's (1969) study of general diffusion networks. In the latter study policies are included from twelve policy fields. Three additional networks are reported in this earlier study but absent in the results reported here. They include suggested networks in the south, the mid-Atlantic, and border areas. It seems that states in these areas may take cues from each other in some fields of policy but are not in-

Table 3.  
Mean Innovation Scores of 48 States  
and Their Ranks\*  
(N = 33)

State	Mean	Rank	State	Mean	Rank	State	Mean	Rank
AB	.23	48	ME	.33	38	OH	.51	5
AZ	.36	29	MD	.47	10	OK	.38	24
AK	.29	44	MA	.33	37	OG	.45	12
CA	.57	1	MC	.42	16	PN	.51	3
CO	.40	21	MN	.44	14	RI	.43	15
CN	.44	13	MS	.26	47	SC	.38	27
DL	.40	20	MO	.31	43	SD	.33	36
FL	.41	17	MT	.32	40	TN	.38	25
GA	.34	34	NB	.32	41	TX	.34	35
ID	.39	23	NV	.28	46	UT	.38	28
IL	.56	6	NH	.28	45	VT	.35	32
IN	.41	18	NJ	.51	4	VA	.47	9
IA	.48	8	NM	.32	39	WA	.38	25
KS	.35	33	NY	.53	2	WV	.36	29
KT	.41	19	NC	.40	21	WC	.49	7
LA	.47	11	ND	.36	29	WY	.31	42

\*Ranks are based on three digit innovation scores in some cases.

clined to the same orientation within the occupational regulation field.

While contrasts in the above regions are marked, somewhat similar regional groups are indicated in other regions. In each of these regions, however, the networks suggested for the occupational regulation field appear smaller or less inclusive than the networks which Walker (1969) characterizes as general or multi-field regional orientations. The mountain group suggested in this study, for example, did not include the two Dakotas or Oregon. Instead, the Dakotas are grouped with plains and north central groups in this study. Similarly, the Great Lakes groups for the field studied here does not include Ohio, New York, or Pennsylvania. The latter two states, along with Maine, are also absent from the New England network suggested in this study but included in Walker's (1969) general networks.

In general, these comparisons indicate that those regional orientations which seem to influence the borrowing of policy innovations in one field do not necessarily apply to cuetaking in other fields. The possible importance of field distinctions is also suggested by a comparison of the states which are identified as probable national pioneers or models in the above studies. Iowa, Virginia, Maryland, Louisiana, and Oregon, for example, rank in the top quarter of states in the rapid adoption of occupational regulation policies. They lack such a high rank in Walker's (1969) multi-field composite scores. On the other hand, it

seems that a few states may serve as rather general national models in the adoption of new policies. Such states as California, New York, and New Jersey have high ranks in both this study and Walker's (1969). Because of the noted differences in the suggested regional groups for those two studies, regional models cannot be compared in a systematic fashion. Where comparable regional networks are suggested, the likely models differ in some cases and repeat themselves in others.

### Research and Professional Practice Implications

The findings of this study indicate that regional orientations do have some influence upon the spreading of policy innovations in the occupational regulation field. Twenty-five of the 48 states are included in the five regional networks suggested by this analysis. The boundaries of these networks do not fit such popular designations as the "sunbelt," midwest, or northeast. Therefore, future researchers are cautioned against use of preconceived regional boundaries in their approaches to state policy diffusion.

The contrasts noted between the findings of this study of diffusion in the occupational regulation field and Walker's (1969) general study of state policy diffusion imply that officials may adjust their regional orientations toward cue-taking when different fields of policy innovations are involved. Therefore, future studies should be designed to accommodate the possible influence distinctions even if their impact is not the prime research focus. Where future studies do focus upon field distinctions as a factor in regional cue-taking, field studies would seem to be the most appropriate methodology. Such an approach would also offer opportunities to explore other contingencies which may shape the diffusion of policies among states. Given the protracted campaign of the state chapters of the National Association of Social Workers for social work licensing, such field studies might be combined with their participation in legislative debates.

As suggested in the introduction of this article there are two types of uses of diffusion research in social work lobbying at the state level. From a nationwide perspective, both national and regional models should be targeted as priorities for legislative action. Many of the states which seem to fill the role of models have not yet adopted social work licensing and this fact may have retarded the spreading of this innovation after a number of early successes in other states during the mid-seventies. Of the national models suggested by this study, only California has adopted multi-level licensing. This leaves New York, New Jersey, and Ohio as recommended target states. Suggested regional models include Oklahoma, Illinois, Colorado, Connecticut, and Iowa. Therefore, lobbying efforts within the mountain group of states might be strengthened by the presentation of supporting evidence from the suggested model, Colorado, which has adopted social work licensing. States within the plains, north central, New England, and Great Lakes groups may be approached with evidence of the feasibility and desirability of social work licensing from other network members, even when those states are not normally regarded as innovators within their regions. In this sense, knowledge of regional orientations may be used in lobbying for licensing even when the sug-

gested regional models have not adopted a preferred policy. The findings of this study, therefore, may be applied in social work lobbying in at least the 25 states identified as members of one of the suggested regional networks. In the remaining states, social workers who are active in the legislative process may explore cuetaking patterns as participant-observers. As state chapters expand their legislative agendas beyond social work licensing, the relevance of particular regional orientations will need to be reassessed.

This study, as a whole, illustrates the need to adjust conceptual frameworks to the special circumstances of policymaking at the state level. While the familiarity of social workers with various perspectives of policymaking at the local or national levels has general relevance to intervention in state politics, those perspectives do not direct attention to such dynamics as interstate consultations and regional cuetaking. Unless work begins to develop a special knowledge base for social work participation in state legislation, it seems likely that such a phenomenon as regionalism will be neglected and the effectiveness of lobbying efforts limited accordingly. It has been noted that regional coalitions of state chapters have become important power centers in the delegate assemblies of the National Association of Social Workers (Alexander, 1981). However, consciousness of regional differences need not threaten a common professional identity. Instead, those same coalitions might explore the potential advantage of developing regional strategies to advance shared positions in state policy debates. Optimal use of diffusion research would include that capacity. Perhaps the initiatives and "reforms" of the Reagan administration will inadvertently direct social work attention to the pervasive importance of state policy decisions and to the need for basic research to complement practice in these legislative arenas. Despite the tentativeness of the conclusions reached in this study, they represent one beginning point for such a professional knowledge base.

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