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# Creaming among Caseworkers: Effects of Client Competence and Client Motivation on Caseworkers' Willingness to Help

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## Abstract

Frontline employees cope with high workloads and limited resources by directing their work attention and efforts toward particular clients. Yet, the role of client attributes in the frontline employees' efforts to help the clients remains undertheorized and empirically understudied. Using a survey experimental vignette design (2x2 factorial) among 1,595 Danish caseworkers, this article provides new knowledge on how two generic non-demographic client attributes—competence and motivation—shape frontline employees' willingness to help their clients. We find that both the competence and motivation of the clients affect the caseworkers' willingness to exert extra time and effort helping the clients. Specifically, caseworkers are most willing to help a client appearing both competent and motivated. Moreover, our data suggests that client motivation is more important than client competence for caseworkers' willingness to help. We end the article with a discussion of policy implications and directions for future research.

**Key words:** coping, creaming, frontline employees, client attributes, survey experiment

## Evidence for practice

- Non-demographic client attributes—competence and motivation—affect the frontline employees' willingness to exert extra time and effort to serve a particular client.
- Client motivation has a larger effect than client competence on frontline employees' willingness to spend extra time and effort helping clients.
- For ensuring that citizens receive fair and equitable public service, public managers must be cognizant of the various client attributes influencing frontline employees' behavior and decision-making.

A large group of public employees are “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980); frontline employees interacting directly and frequently with citizens and having substantial discretion in the execution of their work (Gofen 2013; Hupe and Hill 2007; Thomann, Van Engen, and Tummers 2018). The frontline employees operate in the context of cross-pressure. They face the challenge of having limited available resources to perform their work while, at the same time, experiencing interminable client demands for services. To obviate insurmountable workloads and psychological exhaustion, the frontline employees are therefore compelled to use what Lipsky (1980) calls “coping mechanisms.” In particular, the frontline employees may resort to a coping strategy involving “cream-skimming” (Lipsky 1980; Tummers 2016; Verdung 2015; Winter and Nielsen 2008). Using this strategy, the frontline employees selectively focus their attention and efforts on those of their clients who exhibit the best prognoses for achievement of substantive policy goals (e.g., the greatest likelihood of rapid recovery, successful rehabilitation, or high performance).

Although the frontline employees’ focus on particular clients serves as a means to cope with high workloads and limited resources, the exercise of more help to particular clients constitutes an issue of scholarly attention and societal concern. In some policy areas, the frontline employees have formal authority to direct their attention and efforts at particular clients, such as those most in need or first in line. Yet, “creaming” does not form a legitimate basis for helping some client more than others. Except for rare cases (e.g., triage), differences in willingness to help the clients based on creaming considerations constitute a break with administrative principles of equity and impartiality that is not supported by formal rules and

regulations, and which may result in unequal treatment of citizens (for recent discussion, see Battaglio and Hall 2018; Gooden 2015).

This article expands our knowledge about the factors shaping the frontline employees' willingness to help particular clients. In line with public administration research on how client race and ethnicity affect behavior and decision-making (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016; Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rys 2018; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018), creaming among caseworkers may ensue based on the demographic characteristics of the clients. However, more research into the attributes of the clients who frontline employees choose to help over other clients is needed. In particular, the role of non-demographic client attributes, such as competence and motivation, in the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients remains undertheorized and empirically understudied (for an exception, see Jilke and Tummers 2018). This is striking, as competence and motivation are broadly recognized as key determinants of individual behavior and performance (Marin-Garcia and Tomas 2016). Achieving a more complete understanding of what and how client attributes shape the frontline employees' willingness to help their clients is both of scholarly relevance and practical importance. Ultimately, the frontline employees' behaviors add up to the agency policy (Lipsky 1980).

At least two strands of research touch upon the question of how frontline employees' willingness to help may differ across clients, but the two strands yield conflicting theoretical expectations. One strand of research suggests that frontline employees seek to reduce caseloads or improve performance ratings by prioritizing "easy" clients, that is, those with the highest likelihood of policy success (Tummers 2016; Van Berkel and Knies 2016).

Say that the behavior of caseworkers working with unemployed clients is rooted primarily in such creaming considerations. We may then expect the caseworkers to expend more effort toward helping the clients who they perceive as competent (as these clients are more likely to find employment quickly). Another strand of research suggests that the frontline employees' assessment of clients' deservingness is the primary determinant of their decision-making (Schram et al. 2009). In contrast to the former perspective, this research expects that the behavior of the caseworkers is driven mainly by deservingness considerations. We may then expect the clients' competence to be of lesser importance, whereas other client attributes, such as their motivation, may be of greater importance. Although studies show that frontline employees cream in some instances (e.g., Tummers 2016) and rely on deservingness heuristics in others (e.g., Schram et al. 2009), we lack research examining the role of non-demographic client attributes for the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients.

This article examines how clients' competence and motivation, as well as the interplay between these client attributes, influence the frontline employees' willingness to exert extra time and effort helping the clients. Our inquiry builds on recent research demonstrating that the frontline employees' perception of a client's effort (related to motivation) and performance (related to competence) influences the employees' decision to prioritize helping that client (Jilke and Tummers 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Expanding on these insights, this article theorizes and tests how the interplay of clients' attributes affects frontline employees' willingness to help their clients. In real-life, clients exhibit attributes related to both their competence and motivation, and the interplay of the two attributes may affect how the frontline employees perceive and treat the clients. This article theorizes that the frontline

employees' decisions to exert extra time and effort to help particular clients is a product of a potential interplay between different client attributes. When caseworkers interact with and assess a client, the article argues that they do consider individual client attributes, but that their assessments are shaped also by general impressions of that client—an overall mental picture in which one client attribute may affect the influence of another.

The article derives theoretical expectations from research suggesting how frontline employees can be considered either as “citizen agents,” where behavior is guided mostly by perception of client deservingness, or as “state agents,” where behavior is guided more by rule-following and self-interest (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; 2003). Integrating the two perspectives, the article builds a theoretical model emphasizing how the interplay of client attributes may shape the frontline employees' willingness to help particular clients. Although frontline employees may pay extra attention to less competent clients or less motivated clients, incompetent clients exhibiting low motivation do not align with neither the citizen agent nor the state agent narrative. Therefore, we theorize that a client perceived as both incompetent and unmotivated is seen neither as deserving of receiving extra help nor as more likely to succeed. Relative to the incompetent and unmotivated client, the frontline employees will therefore tend to prioritize clients who they perceive either as competent but unmotivated or as incompetent but motivated. Similarly, based on both the citizen-agent and the state-agent narratives, we expect the frontline employees to be more willing to help competent and motivated clients over other types of clients. In the mixed cases, we recognize how the caseworkers' willingness to help a particular client depends on whether the frontline employees act primarily as citizen agents or state agents (Wenger and



Wilkins 2009). Still, because the state-agent perspective ascribes relatively greater importance to motivation than the citizen-agent perspective does to competence, the article theorizes that the frontline employees will tend to prioritize incompetent but motivated clients over competent but unmotivated clients.

The article tests the theoretical model using a 2x2 factorial survey experimental design among a sample of 1,595 unemployment caseworkers in Denmark. Using this design, we examine how variation in a client's competence and motivation affect caseworker willingness to exert extra time and effort to help that client back into employment (at the expense of time to help other clients). The analysis shows that both competence and motivation affect caseworkers' inclinations to help a client in line with the theoretical model and expectations. The article provides novel evidence showing that caseworkers are more willing to help a motivated than an unmotivated client irrespective of the client's job competence. However, whereas the caseworkers are more willing to help the incompetent but motivated client compared to the competent but unmotivated client, they are even more willing to help the client who is both competent and motivated.

The article proceeds as follows. First, the article develops a theoretical model integrating knowledge about street-level bureaucratic behavior and willingness to help particular clients. The article uses the model for deriving hypotheses about the role of clients' competence and clients' motivation in how frontline employees are willing to expend extra time and effort helping clients. Second, the article discusses the empirical setting and the research design. Third, the results of the analyses follow. Finally, the article discusses the

limitations before concluding on implications of the findings for how we may understand citizen-state interactions and the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients.

## **Theory**

According to Lipsky (1980), the frontline employees must navigate in organizations facing higher demands for services than can realistically be delivered with the available resources. Consequently, the frontline employees use coping strategies that facilitate the decision-making process and help them manage their workloads. One important strategy, "rationing of output," entails that the frontline employees selectively choose particular clients or tasks on which to focus their time and energy at work. Studies show that frontline employees are inclined to cream, that is, prioritize the clients that they perceive as the most likely to succeed. Tummers (2016) finds that frontline employees who report higher levels of creaming behavior receive higher performance ratings by their managers—indicating that frontline employees are creaming clients to improve performance ratings. Similarly, other research suggests that the implementation of accountability measures in public organizations may have further incentivized creaming among caseworkers (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). Also, van Loon and Jakobsen (2017) show that higher levels of perceived work pressure correlates with higher levels of client-oriented coping behavior. Although creaming may serve instrumental purposes that are "necessary to maintain the organization, even though the procedures may be contrary to agency policy" (Lipsky 1980, p. 19), creaming often entails that the strongest clients are prioritized at the expense of the weaker clients; those who are less likely to succeed. However, to what extent and how do clients' non-

demographic attributes, such as competence and motivation, induce the frontline employees to exert extra time and effort helping some clients at the cost of deprioritizing others? This question remains largely unexamined in the literature.

An emerging experimental literature demonstrates how client attributes—in particular, race and ethnicity—affect frontline employees’ treatment of clients (Andersen and Guul 2019; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen, 2018; Petersen 2019), prioritization of response to clients’ requests (Einstein and Glick 2017; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015), and the quality of answers they provide (Hemker and Rink 2017). However, other studies find no difference in treatment for race and ethnicity in public agency setting (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016; Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rys 2018). The mixed findings may be a function of multiple factors, including differences in incentives to discriminate across study settings. We argue, however, that one potentially contributing factor relates to the interdependency between client characteristics. Frontline employees’ reaction to one client characteristic may depend on other client attributes that modify the perception of clients (Hemker and Rink 2017; Schram et al. 2009). Taking account of how frontline employees’ behavior is shaped by the interplay between client attributes is thus important<sup>2</sup>. More complete and nuanced understanding of how client attributes influence the frontline employees’ decision-making must consider how caseworkers’ client perception and assessments are shaped not only by individual client attributes, but also by a general impression of that client—an overall mental picture in which one client attribute may affect the influence of another.

While our understanding of racial and ethnic biases has expanded in recent years, few studies have examined how non-demographic client attributes, such as competence

and motivation, influence the frontline employees' behavior and decision-making. Despite the lack of research, some studies argue that these non-demographic client attributes might be a main underlying explanation for differential treatment of clients. For example, Jilke and Tummers (2018) theorize that frontline employees' perception of clients' effort (motivation) and performance (competence) influences the employees' prioritization of clients. Jilke and Tummers (2018) propose that the frontline employees' decision to prioritize is derived from the clients' exhibition of high effort ("earned deservingness"), exhibition of low performance ("needed deservingness"), or exhibition of high performance ("resource deservingness"). However, their theoretical model and hypotheses suggest that frontline employees prioritize both the lowest performing clients, as these clients have the highest potential for improvement ("needed deservingness"), and the highest performing clients, who are most likely to succeed ("resource deservingness"). Moreover, their model does not consider the potential interplay between client attributes.

In the following, the article draws on the state-agent and citizen-agent perspectives (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000) and theorize on how different client attributes condition the effect of other client attributes and, thereby, how the interplay of client attributes may be a component for understanding the effects of client attributes on the frontline employees' willingness to help particular clients.

### **Theoretical Model**

Frontline employees have different guides of behavior. According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), frontline employees can be perceived as state agents, that is, agents whose

behavior is guided primarily by rule-following and self-interest that induce them to use their discretion for making their work “easier, safer, and more rewarding” (339). Frontline employees do so by “focusing on easier clients, and by avoiding, dismissing, or reducing contact with the unpleasant or impossible cases” (ibid.). This state-agent guide of behavior stands opposite to a citizen-agent narrative. From this perspective, the frontline employees choose their work and profession based on a profound interest in delivering high-quality public services to people in need. According to the citizen-agent perspective, the primary guide of behavior concerns whether the client is deserving of extra help (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Both perspectives ground theoretical expectations emphasizing that the behavior of the frontline employees depends on the clients’ attributes. In the following we first consider the two perspectives separately—the approach of previous studies (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Tummers 2016)—before moving on to theorize about the combination of the two perspectives.

Following the first logic, the two perspectives suggest that the client attributes of competence and motivation are important and assessable in interactions between frontline employees and clients. According to the state-agent perspective, however, the clients’ competence affects the likelihood of policy success. Clients’ competence is viewed, therefore, as more important than their motivation. In contrast, the citizen-agent perspective emphasizes the importance of the perceived deservingness of the clients, with deservingness perceptions often based on assumptions about the clients’ motivation (Cosmides and Tooby 1992; Gilens 1999; Hauser et al. 2003; Petersen et al. 2011). Regarding the latter, Jilke and Tummers (2018) show how frontline employees are more likely to prioritize motivated

clients because these clients are perceived as more deserving. Although client motivation is mostly associated with the concept of deservingness (Petersen 2012; Schram et al. 2009), we also expect that the frontline employees' self-interest (and, thus, their state-agent-guided behavior) makes them more willing to help motivated clients, as motivated clients are also more likely to succeed. Looking at the attributes separately, as has so far been the primary approach in the literature, thereby leads to expectations about the relationship between clients' attributes and the frontline employees' willingness to help particular clients: Frontline employees tend to be more willing to help competent clients and motivated clients depending on whether they are considered state or citizen agents.

This article argues that frontline employees act following a combination of state-agent and citizen-agent guides of behavior rather than one of the two narratives at a time. Because the frontline employees' perceptions of clients are formed by a multitude of client attributes, focusing on single attributes can be necessary in order to reduce complexity. However, research indicates that some attributes are activated by others. For example, Schram et al. (2009) find effects of client race on the frontline employees' decision-making, but only when the respondents are exposed simultaneously to a negative cue verifying stereotypes. Therefore, we expect the two perspectives to operate simultaneously, with the relative strength of each narrative potentially varying across individuals and policy contexts. In other words, when frontline employees interact with clients, they do not necessarily react to single attributes. Different client attributes may modify or condition perceptions of other client attributes. Consequently, we need to examine how the interplay of client attributes influences frontline employees' client perception, as the overall mental picture of clients'

likelihood of policy success and deservingness may be shaped by the combination of attributes. For example, when school teachers decide which students they should spend additional time on helping, they are not only assessing the students' competence, but also the students' motivation. Jilke and Tummer (2018) hypothesize that high client performance (earned deservingness) increases the likelihood that frontline employees prioritize a client—which may be true on the average. Adding to this insight, we theorize that whether the client achieved a high performance through hard work (motivation), talent, or sheer luck may condition whether the earned deservingness matters or not. In other words, for understanding how client competence affects the frontline employees' willingness to help clients, it may be relevant to simultaneously consider client motivation (and vice versa).

For the purpose of clarity, we conceptualize the possible constellations of variation in clients' competence and motivation in terms of four stylized client types: "lazy novice," "lazy expert," "diligent novice," and "diligent expert." As Figure 1 shows, lazy novice denotes a client exhibiting low competences and low motivation, while diligent expert denotes a client exhibiting high competences and high motivation. Lazy expert denotes high competences and low motivation, while diligent novice denotes low competences and high motivation.

[Figure 1 here]

Imagine a baseline situation in which a frontline employee perceives a client as a lazy novice (incompetent and unmotivated). According to the state-agent perspective, the frontline employee is expectedly more inclined to help lazy experts, as these clients are more competent and, therefore, more likely to succeed. Similarly, according to the citizen-state

perspective, we expect a frontline employee to be more inclined to help diligent novices, as these clients are more motivated and, therefore, more deserving of extra help. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

**H1:** Frontline employees are more willing to exert an extra effort helping clients who are competent but unmotivated (“lazy experts”) compared to clients who are incompetent and unmotivated (“lazy novices”).

**H2:** Frontline employees are more willing to exert an extra effort helping clients who are motivated but incompetent (“diligent novices”) compared to clients who are incompetent and unmotivated (“lazy novices”).

What is the most important client attribute of the two? As mentioned, the answer may depend on the relative strength of the two narratives among the frontline employees in the given context. Still, even state agents are likely reluctant of prioritizing lazy experts, as these clients’ lack of motivation decreases the likelihood of policy success. The citizen agents, however, are likely widely unaffected by the clients’ competence, as this attribute is not directly related to the clients’ overall level of perceived deservingness. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:



**H3:** Frontline employees are more willing to exert an extra effort helping clients who are motivated but incompetent (“diligent novices”) compared to clients who are competent but unmotivated (“lazy experts”).

Finally, clients may be both competent and motivated. Assuming that a combination of the state-agent and citizen-agent perspectives influences frontline employees’ behavior, we expect that frontline employees are most willing to help diligent experts, as these clients are more likely to succeed and seen as more deserving of help. This leads to our fourth and final hypothesis:

**H4:** Frontline employees are most willing to exert an extra effort helping clients who are both competent and motivated (“diligent experts”).

## **Methods**

### **Setting**

The article tests the hypotheses using a sample of public caseworkers working with unemployed citizens in Denmark. Similar to frontline employees in other public service organizations, the caseworkers face situations of high demands for service and limited available resources (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The Danish unemployment service is organized in 94 municipal job centers. To receive unemployment benefits, unemployed citizens are obligated to sign up at these centers. At the job centers, the caseworkers assist the clients in finding employment. For example, the caseworkers may assign the clients to

internships or job training programs that help the clients become more attractive job candidates. Whereas the job training programs are often expensive, assignments to the internships are rare but in high demand among the unemployed because they provide a better opportunity for future employment. Consequently, because of a limited amount of resources and a low supply of internships, caseworkers have to prioritize which clients to provide with job training programs and which clients to recommend for internships.

The central government partly compensates the municipalities (responsible for the job centers) for the costs of unemployment benefits through refunds. The compensation covers 80 percent of the costs for the first four weeks of unemployment. Afterwards, the size of the refund gradually drops towards 20 percent at the end of the first year of unemployment. However, although the municipalities are incentivized to getting unemployed clients into employment quickly, the incentive does generally not have a trickle-down effect to the payment of the caseworkers (as a group or individually).

## Research Design

Ideally, we would randomly assign the caseworkers to individual cases that are identical except for variation in client competence and motivation, and then observe how much time and effort the caseworkers spend on each case. However, because no two real-life cases are identical, this article tests the hypotheses using a 2x2 factorial survey experiment. This approach enables a test of the effects of client motivation and competence on caseworkers' willingness to help particular clients. Yet as in most survey experiments (e.g., Andersen and Guul 2019; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Pedersen, Stritch and Thuesen 2018; Schram et al. 2009), the design is limited by measurement of behavioral intent rather than actual behavior (we will discuss the limitations of our design in greater length later in a separate section).

The design involves a stylized description of an unemployed client.

Manipulating the client's job competence (low-high) and job motivation (low-high), we operate with four distinct treatment combinations, each signifying a hypothetical client exhibiting a distinct combination of competence and motivation. Referring to Figure 1, we henceforth refer to the four treatment combinations as "lazy novice," "lazy expert," "diligent novice," and "diligent expert."

We took several remedies for ensuring the realism of our approach. First, we use a between-subject design in which we asked each caseworker to evaluate a single client. We recognize the efficiency of within-subject designs in terms of power and for minimizing random noise. However, within-subject designs are also susceptible to potential learning bias and transfer across conditions. We presented the caseworkers to a single client (instead of asking them to, say, prioritize between two clients) as to best reflect how real-life

caseworkers work and interact with clients. In contrast to teachers who engage with a classroom of students, caseworkers engage with clients one at a time. We are essentially interested in how the caseworkers prioritize the time and effort spent on each client and not how they prioritize directly between clients. Second, when assessing clients, caseworkers have access to a multitude of relevant information about the clients. Therefore, we constructed a vignette describing an unemployed client on unemployment benefits that involved a relatively lengthy description of background information (e.g., the client's unemployment history, family situation, and personal challenges). The additional client information reduces the treatment intensity of our experimental manipulation of client competence and motivation—providing, in turn, for a tougher, more conservative, test. Third, we embedded the cues about the client's competence and motivation in an evaluation from an employer of a short internship; a realistic way for caseworkers to receive information about clients. We made tangible claims about how the client had fared during the internship, signaling competence or incompetence and a motivated or unmotivated attitude. In particular, our competence cues relate to variation in the clients' technical and cognitive skills (low vs. high) for accomplishing the designated internship work tasks. Ability-Motivation-Opportunity theory (Kellner, Cafferkey, and Townsend 2019) suggests that work performance is a function of an interactive relationship between an individual's work ability, work motivation, and the opportunities to enact their ability and motivation at work—with technical and cognitive skills constituting the key parts of the “ability” component. Our motivation cues relate to variation in the client's general work engagement and motivation (low vs. high). In terms of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 2000), our cues tap into

the conceptual difference between “amotivation” (i.e. a lack of intention and motivation) and regulation in the form of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (i.e., types of motivation both involving intentionality and motivation). The cues were formulated as to substantiate differences in the client’s competence and motivation while ensuring, at the same time, that the information was provided in a credible and realistic way. Supporting this notion, an experienced caseworker confirmed the contextual realism of the vignette. Table 1 shows the operationalization.

[Table 1 here]

To minimize the risk of bias caused by correlation of client names with ethnic or social status (Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rhys 2018), i.e., first names associated with stereotypes, we referred to the client as “X”. In addition, we randomized the gender of the client to minimize the risk of confounding due to gender interplay with the relevant attributes. The full vignette appears in Table 2.

[Table 2 here]

As our outcome measure, we asked the caseworkers to report the likelihood that they would use additional time and effort helping the client on a scale from 0 to 10. We reminded the caseworkers that providing extra help to the client would mean less time to help other clients.

We included two simple manipulation checks at the end of the survey (one for motivation and one for competence). Both checks support the finding that the treatment conditions affected the respondents’ perception of both the client’s competence and motivation in the expected direction (see the Appendix, Table A2, for more information)<sup>3</sup>.

## Data Collection

We embedded the survey experiment in an electronic survey. We acquired the caseworkers' email addresses through contact to all 94 job center managers in Denmark. In total, 44 job centers provided the requested email addresses<sup>4</sup>, while six job centers agreed to participate but asked for an "open link" for the distribution of the survey. Restricting the sample to the caseworkers of whom we received direct contact information does not change the results substantially.

We collected the data in November 2017 through January 2018. A total of 1,595 caseworkers participated. As we do not know the number of caseworkers in the six job centers not providing us with direct contact information, we are unable to calculate an exact response rate. The response rate is 47 percent among the job centers providing direct contact information. Because one (large) job center provided a full list of all employees (not only caseworkers), we consider the 47 percent to be a conservative estimate.

We carefully considered the ethics of our data collection approach. Importantly, the managers consented to the caseworkers' participation. We asked the managers to encourage their caseworkers to participate, but we did not inform the managers about which caseworkers actually participated, and the caseworkers could therefore choose not to do so. In addition, we informed the caseworkers (and enforced) that all results would be disclosed in an anonymous format, and we did not share the caseworkers' responses with their managers. Finally, we debriefed the caseworkers, emphasizing that the vignette was fictional and that the purpose of the study was to examine how caseworkers prioritize their time at work.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 shows that the respondents balance well on observable covariates across levels of the two treatments. One exemption is the gender of the client in the vignette. However, as we determined the status of client gender by randomization, this variable should not be associated with other relevant characteristics. Still, we run robustness analyses with control for client gender. Table 3 also shows the raw (unadjusted) outcome score for the full sample (mean = 7.36; SD = 2.03). Finally, the Table shows the pooled means (and standard deviations); “expert” (mean=7.51; SD=2.08), “novice” (mean=7.21; SD=1.96), “diligent” (mean=7.68; SD=1.95) and “lazy” (mean=7.02; SD=2.05).

[Table 3 here]

### Effects of Competence and Motivation

We test our hypotheses using a single statistical inferential framework: All main results are based on an OLS model specification regressing the respondents’ “willingness to help” on two binary variables, one for each factor (competence and motivation), and an interaction term variable (competence  $\times$  motivation).<sup>5</sup> In particular, based on this model specification, we use marginal linear prediction to estimate the *main effects* for each factor (i.e., the average effects both for “Novice” vs. “Expert” and for “Lazy” vs. “Diligent”), the *interaction effect* between the two factors, and the *simple effects* (i.e., the differences in outcome responses for each pairwise constellation of treatment combinations). Table 4, model 1, shows the results (the underlying OLS model specification appears in the Appendix, Table A1, model 1).

[Table 4 here]

We find that both factors have a significant main effect (at  $p < .05$ ). The main effect for competence is  $-0.28$  (Cohen's  $d = 0.14$ ), suggesting that caseworkers are less willing to help clients who are “novices” (relative to “experts”). Similarly, the main effect for motivation is  $-0.65$  (Cohen's  $d = 0.32$ ), suggesting that caseworkers are less willing to help clients who are “lazy” (relative to “diligent”). The difference in main effects is significant (at  $p < .01$ ). This result indicates support for H3; that motivation may be a more important client attribute than competence for caseworkers' willingness to help. Moreover, we find no evidence of an interaction effect between motivation and competence (at  $p < .05$ ), thus rejecting the notion that the effect of client competence on the caseworkers' willingness to help their clients is moderated by client motivation (and vice versa).

The simple effects provide direct tests of our four hypotheses. Figure 2 provides a graphical illustration of our findings and shows the average level of willingness to help across treatment combinations (means = 6.94-7.86; standard deviations = 1.87-2.09).

[Figure 2 here]

The simple effects estimates does not support H1: the caseworkers are thus not more willing to help clients that are competent and unmotivated (“lazy experts”) than clients that are incompetent and unmotivated (“lazy novices”). The difference in willingness to help is statistically insignificant (at  $p < .05$ ) and substantially negligible (Cohen's  $d = 0.08$ ). This finding is at odds with the state-agent narrative predicting prioritization of “lazy experts” at the expense of “lazy novices.”



In support of H2, we find that client motivation matters for the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients. The caseworkers are more willing to help the "diligent novice" relative to the "lazy novice" (Cohen's  $d = 0.28$ ). The caseworkers are also more willing to help the "diligent novice" at the expense of the "lazy expert" (Cohen's  $d = 0.19$ ). Similar to the observed main effects, this finding supports H3, suggesting that motivation is a more important client attribute than competence when frontline employees help their clients. As previously discussed, a viable explanation for this result is the salient role that client motivation plays in both the state-agent and citizen-agent perspectives. It also shows that the caseworkers are more willing to help the incompetent than the competent client when the latter is unmotivated.

Finally, we find support for H4. The caseworkers are most willing to help clients exhibiting competence and motivation ("diligent experts") across our four treatment combinations (Cohen's  $d = 0.47$  compared to the "lazy novice"). This finding indicates that frontline employees help the "easy to serve" clients at the expense of the other clients. The potential consequence of this behavior is that the clients in the least need of help to succeed are prioritized at the expense of those in most need of help. We will return to this point in the conclusion.

Our findings may appear to indicate that the effect of client competence differs depending on client motivation, thus corroborating the notion of an interplay between client attributes. Indeed, the caseworkers are more willing to help the competent client than the incompetent client when both are motivated (“diligent novice” vs. “diligent expert”), which contrasts with the findings concerning competence when the competent client is unmotivated (i.e., we find no effect of competence for “lazy novice” vs. “lazy expert”). In other words, competence have an effect when client motivation is high (at  $p < .05$ ), but not when client motivation is low (at  $p < .05$ ). As demonstrated by the (insignificant) interaction estimates, however, the difference between “diligent novice” and “diligent expert” is not statistically different from the difference between “lazy novice” and “lazy expert” (at  $p < .05$ ).

To test the robustness of our findings, we have conducted analyses including covariates, an indicator for the random assignment of client gender, and job center fixed effects. The results appear in Table 4, models 2-5 (and in Table A1, models 2-5, in the Appendix). We have also tried adjusting the standard errors for multiple hypotheses testing with Bonferroni adjustment. None of these robustness tests substantially alters the main results—supporting the robustness of our findings.

### **Discussion of Limitations**

The findings must be interpreted in light of limitations to our study’s research design. The analyses are based on caseworker responses to a survey-experimental vignette and, therefore, have a strong claim to internal validity. Still, the size and significance of the effects we observe might be underestimated because of stochastic measurement errors in the

caseworkers' responses. Moreover, we capture would-be responses to a stylized vignette; behavioral intent rather than actual workplace behavior. Caseworkers' willingness to help clients in real-life settings may differ from their reported survey answers—and real-life expenditure of extra help to clients occurs based on more information than what is possible to convey through text in a survey vignette. Although we designed the vignette to increase contextual realism, the effects of clients' competence and motivation in and across real-life casework may differ from our results. Several factors may help lessen this concern. First, survey-experiments are arguably less biased by social desirability than standard survey formats (Andersen and Guul 2019). Second, and in line with this notion, a recent study among the same population as ours shows that survey-experimental evidence provides results similar to analysis based on administrative data (Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018).

Finally, our sample may not fully represent the full population of Danish unemployment caseworkers. The caseworkers in our sample may differ from those who did not participate. Importantly, this concern does not diminish the internal validity of our study. However, it does raise questions about the generalizability of our findings. We have no substantive reason to suspect our general model to be largely non-generalizable to other groups of frontline employees, policy areas, and countries. However, the relative importance of the citizen-agent and state-agent narratives possibly differ, and, therefore, the exact caseworker behavior might differ as well. Thus, we recognize that whether our findings apply in other settings and situations is an empirically open question. Related to this latter point, we acknowledge that our specific operationalization of competence and motivation might affect our findings—as in all experimental setups. Specifically, our treatments may not be perceived

as having equal intensity. The ideal would be to examine a broad range of operationalizations. However, as caseworkers' time is a limited resource, we chose to prioritize a reasonably well-powered test of our most promising operationalization validated through a qualitative pilot study, rather than risking committing a type 2 error (i.e., failure to reject a false null hypothesis).

## Conclusion

This article expands our knowledge about how client attributes affect the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients. Using an experimental vignette design among more than 1,500 unemployment caseworkers, we show how two generic non-demographic client attributes influence frontline employees' willingness to exert extra time and effort helping a client. In line with Gilke and Tummers (2018), we find that client motivation (effort) and client competence (performance) both affect the frontline employees' willingness to help a client. Caseworkers are increasingly willing to help clients exhibiting high competence and high motivation. Moreover, but in contrast to Gilke and Tummers (2018), our findings also indicate that client motivation is a more important factor than client competence for the caseworkers' willingness to help a client.

We believe that our results differ from those of Gilke and Tummers (2018) for several reasons. First, the context of the decision is different. Gilke and Tummers (2018) study teachers who usually interact with students in classroom settings. Therefore, the teachers' time and effort prioritization often relates directly to the choice between two or more students. In contrast, caseworkers usually review and assess one client at a time, that is, interact with clients strictly in one-on-one meetings—a distinction suggested as important in previous studies (Guul 2018). Second, the nature of the policy goals is different. Whereas the policy goal for unemployment service—getting the client back in employment—is dichotomous, relatively singular, and unambiguous, the area of schooling is characterized by multiple, and potentially conflicting, goals (e.g., that all students achieve a sufficient level of academic skills, experience challenge and progression, thrive emotionally, develop into

democratic citizens). Finally, the difference may be a consequence of interplay between the two attributes. Indeed, we find that incompetent but motivated clients are prioritized over competent but unmotivated clients, and the estimated main effect for motivation is larger than that for competence.

Although we did not identify an interaction effect, we encourage more research to examine the interplay between client attributes in how frontline employees' judgements and decision-making is shaped. Our failure to reject the null is not the same as validation of the null, and more research on how different attributes may enlarge or reduce the effects of other attributes is needed.

In sum, our results have important implications for our understanding of how we should study coping mechanisms and deservingness heuristics at the frontline of public service delivery. Our results demonstrate how both creaming behavior and deservingness heuristics influence frontline employees' behavior and decision-making. Although the relative weight of the "state-agent" and "citizens-agent" perspectives may be context dependent, they are simultaneously at work, and both perspectives should be considered when examining frontline employees' behavior and decision-making.

The limitations of the study call for future research seeking to replicate our findings. In line with recent calls for increasing scholarly attention to replication endeavors (Pedersen and Stritch 2018; Walker et al. 2018), future studies should examine the extent to which our findings hold over variations in persons, settings, and situations. We also encourage further research into the interplay between particular aspects of a clients' competence and motivation. For example, are clients exhibiting high competence and

intrinsic motivation perceived as more deserving than comparable clients exhibiting more extrinsic motivation?

Another venue for future research relates to the implications for practice of our study. So what? Why should we care about the frontline employees' willingness to help the clients and the ways that clients' competence and motivation shape employee behavior? We contend that the frontline employees' willingness to exert extra time and effort helping a client based on the caseworkers' perception of clients' competence and motivation is not supported by formal policy rules and regulations, and may result in unequal treatment of individual citizens. In many areas of public service delivery, a client's competence and motivation do not constitute legitimate grounds for provision of extra assistance or benefit to the client. We recognize that prioritization of clients might be a feasible strategy for improving agency performance and that some policy areas are marked by procedures—formal or informal—allowing the frontline employees to help some clients more than others. However, these procedures will typically prescribe a prioritization of the clients who are most in need. In contrast to our findings, we are not aware of any areas of public service in which greater help to the clients who are most likely to do well or succeed is justified by policy rules or regulations.

Our study therefore encourages public decision-makers to be aware of the potential presence of client prioritization bias in their organization's services delivery and (inasmuch as an equal treatment of clients is desired) to actively seek to minimize the risk that the citizens "most in need" are deprioritized in favor of those who are "the least in need" (i.e., the competent and motivated). Research plays a vital role in the realization of this

agenda: Besides replicating our findings, future studies should seek to identify tangible interventions that effectively curb the occurrence of creaming. For inspiration, the limited but increasing body of debiasing research may serve as a useful starting point (Morewedge et al. 2015; Nasie et al. 2014; Schwartz et al. 2010; 2014; Petersen 2019). Ultimately, whether all citizens should be entitled to a fair and equal treatment in their dealings with government and the public services is a political question. However, concern about fairness and equity is often a main argument for delivering services in a public rather than private context (Boyne et al. 2003). According to core administrative principles of equity and impartiality, citizens who, for some reason or another, are more competent and motivated should not be receiving extra benefits or services at the expense of those who are less so.

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## Notes

1. These concepts are also linked to the broader justice concepts of ability (competence) and effort (motivation) (e.g., see Bénabou and Tirole 2006).
2. How, exactly, may interdependency between client characteristics help explain why the effect of a particular client attribute is found to differ across studies? We suggest that a partial reason for differing effects of a given client attribute  $X_1$  across studies may be due to an unobserved client attribute  $X_2$ . For example, say that two studies examine the effects of client attribute  $X_1$ . Client attribute  $X_2$  moderates the effects of client attribute  $X_1$ , but  $X_2$  is unobserved in both studies. Study 1 finds a positive effect; Study 2 does not. We note that this difference may refer to a difference in the distribution of the sample respondents' client

attribute X2 in the two studies. Taking account of the interdependency between client characteristics X1 and X2—e.g., by means interaction effects analyses—is thus appropriate.

3. The motivation treatment also significantly affected the perception of the client's competence. However, the effect appears small and negligible (the coefficient is only 1/20 in magnitude of the effect of the competence treatment on the perception of client competence).

4. One job center provided contact information on a subsample of their caseworkers.

5. Replication files are available on Harvard Dataverse:

<https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/ZUOSR8> All covariates are excluded for reasons of discretion.

Thus, the files does not allow for replication of Table 3 and model 3 and 5 in Table 4 and

Table A1.

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## Tables

**Table 1.** Operationalization of Competence and Motivation.

Competence (Low)	Competence (High)
X has to a <b>small</b> degree had the necessary competences to accomplish these tasks. For instance, X has found it <b>difficult</b> to operate the machine, has made <b>disproportionately many</b> mistakes and has found it <b>difficult</b> to keep track of what X had to get done before closing time.	X has to a <b>large</b> degree had the necessary competences to accomplish these tasks. For instance, X has found it <b>easy</b> to operate the machine, has made <b>very few</b> mistakes and has found it <b>easy</b> to keep track of what X had to get done before closing time.
Motivation (Low)	Motivation (High)
The employer also says that X has seemed very <b>unmotivated</b> throughout the entire trainee period. X has had <b>an uncommitted</b> approach to the tasks and has generally shown <b>little</b> interest in the work.	The employer also says that X has seemed very <b>motivated</b> throughout the entire trainee period. X has had <b>a committed</b> approach to the tasks and has generally shown <b>great</b> interest in the work.

*Notes:* Randomized cues in bold font.

**Table 2.** The Vignette.

X is a 33-year-old [man/woman]. X lives with his/her partner, who is enrolled in an education. They have two children together. X is assessed as job ready.

X left elementary school after the ninth grade and has not completed any further education since then. X has previously been a cleaner for several years but got a depression three years ago, which led to a long sick leave. After the sick leave, X has fallen out of the unemployment benefits system and now receives cash benefits. Because of the period of illness, X has experienced cognitive challenges maintaining concentration and control. X is now fit to return to work but has had difficulties finding a new job.

X has recently been in trainee placement four days a week for four weeks. The trainee period has taken place in a manufacturing company, where X has had to operate a machine and help stock up the warehouse. The employer from the company says that X has to a [large/small] degree had the necessary competences to accomplish these tasks. For instance, X has found it [easy/difficult] to operate the machine, has made [very few/disproportionately many] mistakes and has found it [easy/difficult] to keep track of what X had to get done before closing time. The employer also says that X has seemed very [motivated/unmotivated] throughout the entire trainee period. X has had [a committed/an uncommitted] approach to the tasks and has generally shown [great/little] interest in the work.

As a caseworker, you may be exposed to a considerable caseload. How likely is it that you would make an extra effort to help X get a job? Assume that an extra effort means that you have a little less time to help other clients.

**Table 3.** Descriptive Statistics, by Treatments and for the Full Sample.

	Competence				Motivation				Full sample	
	Expert		Novice		Diligent		Lazy		Mean	SD
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Female share [0;1]	.82		.81		.83		.81		.82	
Female share (missing) [0;1]	.02		.01		.02		.01		.02	
Age, years [natural coding]	44.72	11.74	44.43	11.27	44.49	11.41	44.67	11.62	44.58	11.51
Age, years (missing) [0;1]	.02		.01		.02		.01		.01	
Experience, years [natural coding]	7.54	6.81	7.63	6.79	7.59	6.72	7.58	6.88	7.59	6.80
Experience, years (missing) [0;1]	.02		.01		.02		.01		.01	
Caseload, no. of cases [natural coding]	61.86	51.75	62.91	56.57	63.62	58.89	61.10	48.83	62.37	54.14
Caseload, no. of cases (missing) [0;1]	.26		.25		.25		.25		.25	
Client female share [0;1]	.47		.51		.47		.51		.49	
Willingness to help[0;10]	7.51	2.08	7.21	1.96	7.68	1.95	7.02	2.05	7.36	2.03
Observations assigned to treatment	921		872		906		887		1,793	
Observations responded to treatment	813		782		823		772		1,595	
Response rate [0;100]	88.27		89.68		90.84		87.03		88.96	

*Notes:* Joint F-test shows no significant differences (at  $p < .05$ ) on baseline covariates or response rate (for those assigned to a survey experimental treatment), but significant differences for age missing (though the absolute difference is negligible), Client Female share and the outcome measure (Willingness to help).

**Table 4.** Main Effects, Interaction Effect, and Simple Effects of Treatments on Willingness to Help (0-10). Coefficients and Standard Errors (in Parentheses).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<b>Main effects</b>					
Competence (Novice)	-.28** (.10)	-.29** (.10)	-.27** (.10)	-.27* (.10)	-.26* (.10)
Motivation (Lazy)	-.65*** (.09)	-.66*** (.09)	-.65*** (.08)	-.64*** (.09)	-.63*** (.08)
<b>Interaction effect</b>					
Competence (Novice) × Motivation (Lazy)	.22 (.23)	.23 (.23)	.19 (.23)	.18 (.23)	.15 (.23)
<b>Simple effects</b>					
Lazy Novice vs. Lazy Expert	-.17 (.18)	-.17 (.18)	-.18 (.18)	-.18 (.18)	-.18 (.18)
Lazy Novice vs. Diligent Novice	-.54*** (.13)	-.55*** (.13)	-.56*** (.13)	-.55*** (.13)	-.56*** (.13)
Lazy Novice vs. Diligent Expert	-.93*** (.14)	-.94*** (.14)	-.92*** (.14)	-.91*** (.14)	-.89*** (.14)
Lazy Expert vs. Diligent Novice	.37** (.12)	.37** (.13)	.38** (.12)	.37** (.12)	.37** (.12)
Lazy Expert vs. Diligent Expert	-.76*** (.15)	-.77*** (.15)	-.75*** (.15)	-.73*** (.15)	-.71*** (.15)
Diligent Novice vs. Diligent Expert	-.39** (.12)	-.40** (.12)	-.37** (.12)	-.36** (.12)	-.33** (.12)
Client Female	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Covariates	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Fixed effects	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Notes: n = 1,595. Main effects, interaction effect, and simple effects based on marginal linear predictions of models (1-5) in Table A1 in the Appendix. Standard errors clustered at job center level (in parentheses). Labels in parenthesis indicate level of variable equal to 1. Client Female indicates whether Client Female indicator is included. Covariates indicates that the following caseworker characteristics are included: gender, age, experience and caseload as well as missing variable indicators. Number of groups in fixed effects estimation: 50. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

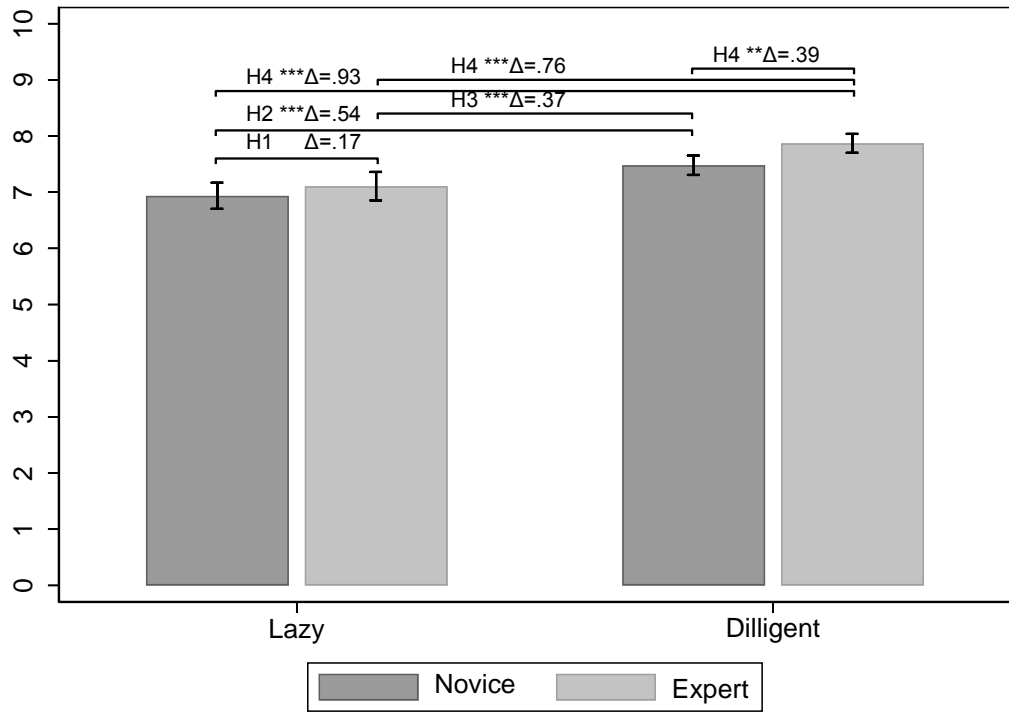
## Figures

**Figure 1.** Client Types.

		Client competence	
		Low	High
Client motivation	Low	Lazy novice	Lazy expert
	High	Diligent novice	Diligent expert



**Figure 2.** Mean Willingness to Help (0-10) Across Treatment Combinations (with 95% Confidence Intervals and Simple Effects).



Notes: n = 1,595. Δ = Simple effects. Absolut difference between treatment combinations. The average “willing to help” for each treatment combinations are based on the OLS model estimates reported in Table A1, model 1, in the Appendix. Similarly, all simple effects are based on marginal linear predictions of the OLS model estimates reported in Table 4, model 1. Descriptives for each treatment combination: Lazy Novice (mean=6.94; SD=2.01). Lazy Expert (mean=7.11; SD=2.09). Dilligent Novice (mean=7.48; SD=1.87). Dilligent Expert (mean=7.86; SD=2.00). \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Effects of Competence and Motivation on Mean Willingness to Help (0-10). OLS Regression. Coefficients and Standard Errors (in Parentheses).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Competence (Novice)	-.39** (.12)	-.40** (.12)	-.37** (.12)	-.36** (.12)	-.33** (.12)
Motivation (Lazy)	-.76*** (.15)	-.77*** (.15)	-.75*** (.15)	-.73*** (.15)	-.71*** (.15)
Competence (Novice) × Motivation (Lazy)	.22 (.23)	.23 (.23)	.19 (.23)	.18 (.23)	.15 (.23)
Client Female		.15 (.10)	.16 (.10)	.15 (.10)	.16 (.10)
Constant	7.87*** (.08)	7.80*** (.10)	6.72*** (.22)	7.77*** (.08)	6.74*** (.21)
Observations	1,595	1,595	1,595	1,595	1,595
Covariates	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
Fixed effects	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.03	.03	.05	.03	.05

*Notes:* Standard errors clustered at job center level (in parentheses). Labels in parenthesis indicate level of variable equal to 1. All reported variables are indicator variables. Client Female indicates whether the described client was either male or female. The effect of Client Female is insignificant across specifications. Included covariates are the following caseworker characteristics: gender, age, experience and caseload as well as missing variable indicators. Number of groups in fixed effects estimation: 50. \* p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001.

**Table A2.** Manipulation Check. OLS Regression.

	Competence Item	Motivation Item
Competence (Novice)	-1.79*** (.04)	-.10** (.03)
Motivation (Lazy)	.06 (.05)	-2.14*** (.04)
Constant	4.22*** (.04)	4.35*** (.03)
Observations	1,532	1,518
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.50	.62

*Notes:* Standard errors clustered at job center level (in parentheses). Measures based on two survey items: (1) “X seems to have the necessary competences to solve the tasks in the trainee placement” (Competence) (2) “X seems to be motivated to solve the tasks in the trainee placement” (Motivation). 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree. The questions were asked at the end of the survey. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .