

Article

The Relationship Between Coping and Job Performance

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Abstract

Workers on the frontline of public service, such as teachers and social workers, cannot provide unlimited support to all their clients, because of among else scarce time and money. To deal with this, they use various coping strategies. We analyze one important coping strategy such “street-level bureaucrats” can use: prioritizing *motivated* clients over *unmotivated* clients. We study the effect of this coping strategy on job performance, as rated by their supervisors. In other words, do street-level bureaucrats who especially help motivated clients get lower or higher job performance ratings? By studying this relationship, we can test two narratives in frontline work: the state-agent narrative versus the citizen-agent narrative. If supervisors follow a state-agent narrative, they would give street-level bureaucrats that prioritize motivated clients lower performance ratings. Supervisors could stress values like legality and equality: workers should follow governmental rules and should treat all clients equally. Contrary to this, if supervisors follow a citizen-agent narrative, they would give street-level bureaucrats who especially help motivated clients higher performance ratings. Motivated clients are the “deserving clients,” worthy of investment. “Pushing” unmotivated clients may also be a very inefficient use of scarce resources. Using a multisource study of social workers in one organization in the United States, we show that supervisors give *higher* job performance ratings to street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients. Implications of this finding and a future research agenda are shown.

Introduction

Working on the frontline of public services can be difficult. Street-level bureaucrats such as social workers, teachers, nurses, and police officers often face severe workloads and scarce resources (Hill and Hupe 2009). To understand how such street-level bureaucrats—also termed frontline workers or public service providers—deal with such stressors, Lipsky (1980) used the concept of “coping.” Inspired by Lipsky, many public administration scholars have studied coping during public service delivery (for instance, Brodtkin 1997; Gofen 2014; Kelly 1994; Knight and Trowler 2000; Møller 2016). A recent literature review by Tummers et al. (2015) on 35 years of coping studies summarized the results. Coping during public service delivery was

defined as “behavioral efforts street-level bureaucrats employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis” (2015, 1100). Nine ways of coping were defined. These include prioritizing some clients over others, routinizing work, and using personal resources (such as working in your own time).

In this study, we analyze one important way of coping street-level bureaucrats can use: prioritizing clients, especially prioritizing *motivated* clients over *unmotivated* clients. The motivation of clients is especially relevant in frontline work settings that are service oriented, such as social work and education (Berglund and Gerner 2002; Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2002).

For instance, social workers work with difficult target groups, such as drug-addicted clients, unemployed persons, and troubled families. Such clients should be at least a little motivated to improve their own situations. Križ and Skivenes (2014, 795) quote a social worker who states that:

If I think a family will meet the challenge of going the distance, I will hook them in. And what that means is if I'm running, and a family is running with me, I will provide services. If I am pulling that family behind me, or pushing them, I may not be inclined. Because if it takes that much effort, they're not ready, and they don't want the service.

We study the effect of prioritizing motivated clients on job performance, as rated by the supervisors. In other words, do street-level bureaucrats who focus on motivated clients get lower or higher job performance ratings by their supervisors? The relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance is not straightforward. This can be shown when connecting it to the distinction between the state-agent narrative and the client-agent narrative, as developed by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000, 2003, 2012). In the state-agent narrative, street-level bureaucrats are policy makers (not takers) and their discretion should be limited (2000, 336–41). When supervisors supervise street-level bureaucrats using a state-agent narrative, it can be argued that when the supervisors notice that street-level bureaucrats are prioritizing motivated clients, they will give street-level bureaucrats *lower* performance ratings. In a state-agent narrative, such a practice is unacceptable, as all clients should be treated equally and rules should be adhered to. Hence, supervisors following a state-agent narrative who perceive that street-level bureaucrats are prioritizing motivated client will give those street-level bureaucrats lower performance ratings.

Contrary to this, the citizen-agent narrative tells a different story. Street-level bureaucrats argue themselves that they base their decisions on normative choices (who is “worthy,” or “deserving” of help), and not on governmental rules or equality before the law. An important aspect of deservingness is that clients are motivated to progress (Maynard-Moody and Leland 2000; Petersen et al. 2011). Furthermore, helping motivated clients will probably have a larger effect than helping clients who are not motivated in progressing. Hence, street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients use scarce resources efficiently. Supervisors might also follow such a line of argumentation. Hence, supervisors following a citizen-agent narrative would give street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients *higher* performance ratings.

We will discuss these expectations more extensively in the theoretical framework.

By studying the relationship between coping and job performance, this study is theoretically innovative. Job performance is a crucial element in organizations. However, not much research has studied the relationship between coping during public service delivery and job performance. In work and organizational psychology, coping is often related to indicators like burnout and engagement (for instance, Mearns and Cain 2003). In public administration, most scholars analyze *antecedents* of coping (for instance, Nielsen 2006; Savi and Cepilovs 2016; Thomann 2015; Triandafyllidou 2003; Tummers and Rocco 2015), not *effects* of coping like performance. This study adds by studying the effect of coping on one crucial aspect at work: job performance, as rated by supervisors.

More specifically, our study can shed light on the value of the state-agent versus the citizen-agent narrative. If supervisors give street-level bureaucrats higher performance ratings when street-level bureaucrats prioritize clients, this can be seen as a partial confirmation of the importance of the citizen-agent narrative. On the other hand, if supervisors give such street-level bureaucrats lower ratings, this might indicate that the state-agent narrative has more sway among supervisors. Testing this is beneficial, as previous work testing the citizen-agent and state-agent narratives focuses on street-level bureaucrats themselves, and less on supervisors (see, for instance, Harrits and Møller 2014).

We measure coping by surveying street-level bureaucrats and job performance by surveying supervisors, thereby eliminating common source bias, which can be a serious threat to the validity of the research (Favero and Bullock 2015). Related to this, supervisor-rated measures of job performance have a stronger predictive validity than self-rated measures (Atkins and Wood 2002). On the other hand, we do acknowledge that still other biases can be present, such as halo effects (Viswesvaran, Schmidt, and Ones 2005).

Based on the above, we aim to answer the following research question:

What is the relationship between coping by prioritizing motivated clients and job performance, and how can we understand this relationship?

This brings us to the outline of this article. First, we will discuss the theoretical background on coping and job performance, and develop two hypotheses. Next, we show the method for testing these hypotheses. We have conducted a multisource survey in a nonprofit social work organization in the United States. We will discuss both the quantitative and qualitative results. We show that—in contrast to the state-agent narrative and in line with the citizen-agent narrative—coping

prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance. We conclude with a discussion of the main findings, by highlighting the limitations of this study, and by showing research directions for scholars.

Theoretical Framework

A Background on Coping

The most notable work on coping is “Psychological stress and the coping process” by Richard Lazarus (1966). Based primarily on this work, coping evolved as a distinct research field (see, for instance, Folkman and Lazarus 1980; Skinner et al. 2003). In this study, we focus on a distinct type of coping: coping during public service delivery. These are *behavioral* (not cognitive) ways of coping occur when *street-level bureaucrats interact with clients*. Examples of such ways of coping are working overtime for clients, prioritizing some clients over others, and bending rules for clients. This is in line with how public administration scholars predominantly study frontline work; they analyze how the behavior of street-level bureaucrats directly affects public service delivery, forming and reforming policies through interactions with citizens (Durose 2011; Gofen 2014; Hill and Hupe 2009; Marvel and Resh 2015; Portillo and Rudes 2014; Winter 2003).

As stated, this study focuses on one way of coping employees can use during public service delivery: prioritizing among clients. Prioritizing during public service delivery is defined as “giving certain clients more time, resources, or energy.” Hence, professors can, for instance, invest more time and effort in helping some students than others. Prioritizing is an important way of coping in service delivery and happens regularly (Lipsky 1980). Setting priorities among clients can be based on various criteria. For instance, in large disasters or in emergency care settings, physicians prioritize patients who benefit most. This is referred to as “triage.” In less extreme situations, other criteria may be used, such as whether a client is friendly versus hostile (Sandfort 2000), or whether a client has a large or small chance of “success” (Baviskar 2013).

We will analyze the effect of prioritizing motivated over unmotivated clients. We define prioritizing motivated clients as devoting more time, resources, and energy to clients who are—in the view of street-level bureaucrats—more driven to progress. We should stress that the degree of motivation of the client is a perception of the worker. It could be that the client is in fact motivated, but that the street-level bureaucrat views him or her as unmotivated. Scholars have shown that street-level bureaucrats indeed behave differently to *motivated* versus *unmotivated* clients. For instance, Hagen and Owens-Manley concluded—in a qualitative study of 29 social workers—that most

workers place “tremendous emphasis on the clients’ efforts to help themselves” (2002, 175). This signaled to the workers that these clients wanted to move forward. As a result, social workers put far more effort in these motivated clients versus the rest. Maynard-Moody and Leland (2000) provide similar examples of Vocational Rehabilitation counselors. They note that when clients are deemed “deserving” by these counselors, they receive extraordinary services and attention from street-level bureaucrats. Counselors cut through red tape for these clients, keep their cases open for longer, and even work overtime for them, for instance, coming in on the weekend to help a client move to a new home. One of the most important determinants of “deservingness” is whether a client is motivated: “the motivated client is [...] deemed morally superior and worthy of investment” (118). Hence, street-level bureaucrats take into account whether clients are—according to the street-level bureaucrat—motivated (see also Anagnostopoulos 2003; Van der Aa 2012).

We focus on the relationship of coping by prioritizing motivated clients and job performance. We develop the notion of coping by prioritizing motivated clients primarily on public administration literature. However, it is also important to provide a broader view of coping by prioritizing motivated clients, by connecting it to a core debate in decision-making, namely between rational choice theory and bounded rationality. Rational choice theory posits that people are rational agents. As rational agents, they have complete and transitive preferences among choice alternatives. They take into account available information, probabilities, and potential costs and benefits of choices. Based hereon, they act consistently in line with their preferences.

However, rational choice theory has been severely criticized, most notably by Herbert Simon. Simon (1947, 1955) developed the notion of bounded rationality, which in short argues that decision-makers are not fully rational: decision-makers have to face limited available information, limited cognitive availability to process information, and limited time. Instead of *maximizing*, they are *satisficing*; searching until they find an acceptable (but not “the best”) option. From a bounded rationality view, street-level bureaucrats might not consider all options available (because they have limited information and time), do not know their exact preferences, and will choose an option (for instance, often prioritize motivated clients) when this option is acceptable to them. Research on bounded rationality and related insights about the limited selfishness and cognitive biases of people has led economists to reconsider the cornerstone of their conceptual frameworks, the *Homo Oeconomicus* (Jones 2013).

It can be argued that coping by prioritizing motivated clients can be seen as a form of satisficing. Employees search for acceptable—but by no means ideal—solutions in an

environment with multiple demands, scarce resources, and high workloads (see also O'Connell 1991). Related to this, we will discuss in the Results section that the decision to prioritize motivated clients is not always based on extensive reasoning (which would be in line with rational choice) but instead on heuristics (which is more in line with satisficing) such as sayings in the organization. For instance, some street-level bureaucrats state that they try to remember the saying that “we should not work harder than our clients” and, based here on, prioritize motivated clients and focus less on unmotivated ones.

The Effects of Coping by Prioritizing Motivated Clients on Job Performance

We can now connect coping by prioritizing motivated clients to job performance. Campbell, McHenry, and Wise (1990, 314) define job performance as “observable things people do (i.e. behaviors) that are relevant to the goals of the organization.” We analyze the job performance as rated by the supervisor (see, for similar approaches in public administration, Hassan and Hatmaker 2014; Wright, Hassan, and Christensen 2015). The supervisor will, for instance, rate the employee on the quality and quantity of work (Welbourne, Johnson, and Erez 1998) and evaluate to what extent the street-level bureaucrat meets performance expectations (Peterson et al. 2011).

When discussing the relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance, we will build on the state-agent and citizen-agent narrative of Maynard-Moody and Musheno. In their book “Cops, teachers, counselors: Stories from the front lines of public service,” Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 9) argue that the state-agent narrative tells how street-level bureaucrats apply the laws, rules, and procedures to the cases they handle. According to them, this is the dominant way scholars study street-level bureaucrats. Maynard-Moody and Musheno note that the scholarly community neglects another viewpoint, which is very much prevalent in the lives of street-level bureaucrats (or frontline workers, as they call these workers). They call this the citizen-agent narrative. This citizen-agent narrative concentrates on the judgments that street-level bureaucrats make about the identity and “deservingness” of the clients they face. The state-agent narrative is about following the law, whereas the citizen-agent narrative is about following normative and cultural norms.

The state-agent narrative acknowledges discretion when applying the law to specific cases and emphasizes that self-interest guides street-level bureaucrats. According to the state-agent narrative, this combination can be a dangerous cocktail: street-level bureaucrats have the opportunity (discretion) and incentives (their

own self-interest) to follow their own agenda instead of governmental rules. This poses a threat to democratic governance (Keiser 1999). When prioritizing, street-level bureaucrats may discriminate, favoring certain groups over others. Various studies in public administration and political science indeed show that street-level bureaucrats do at times discriminate in their treatment of clients, introducing their own biases in decision-making (Davis, Livermore, and Lim 2011; Einstein and Glick 2016; Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Schram et al. 2009). To counter this, supervisors should enforce rules and procedures, bringing discretion under control.

When supervisors follow such a state-agent narrative, they would probably not be pleased when they notice that street-level bureaucrats prioritize motivated clients. Supervisors could stress core public administration values like legality and impartiality (Van der Wal, De Graaf, and Lasthuizen 2008): street-level bureaucrats should follow governmental rules and should treat all clients equally. Related to this, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 18) argue that street-level bureaucrats sometimes view supervisors as “obstacles” to doing what is—in their view—right and fair for clients. From a state-agent narrative, being such an “obstacle” can be perfectly legitimate. Based hereon, it can be expected that:

H1: Street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients will be given *lower* job performance ratings by supervisors.

The citizen-agent narrative tells a different story. Street-level bureaucrats argue that they base their decisions on normative choices (who is “deserving” of help and who is not), not on governmental rules. An important aspect of deservingness is that clients are motivated to progress. Hence, street-level bureaucrats will especially help motivated clients as these are the “deserving” clients: they are the ones making an effort to succeed. The importance of such deservingness cues have been stated in public administration (Kelly 1994; Maynard-Moody and Leland 2000), political science (Petersen et al. 2011; Van Oorschot 2000), and psychology (Feather 2006; Leventhal and Michaels 1971). Related to this, clients need motivation to achieve results (Berglund and Gerner 2002; Križ and Skivenes 2014). In order to have as much impact as possible, it pays off to prioritize motivated clients. Van der Aa (2012, 144) quotes a social worker stating that:

Sometimes you have clients who do not want to improve and who are unmotivated, [...] these clients call you for every tiny little thing and then ask you to fix it.

Hence, when this social worker puts a lot of effort into these clients, he will probably not get high results, as

for high results it is crucial that clients themselves also cooperate. [Anagnostopoulos \(2003, 305\)](#) encounters similar situations when studying English teachers in Chicago high schools. She notes that teachers are “not wasting energy on kids who don’t care.”

Supervisors of street-level bureaucrats may hold the same line of reasoning: street-level bureaucrats they supervise should help the deserving clients, and being motivated is a crucial aspect of deservingness. Such reasoning can be based on the background of these supervisors. Lower-level supervisors in frontline organizations in sectors such as social work, police, and education often have been street-level bureaucrats themselves. Such “managing professionals” ([Llewellyn 2001](#)) have a similar training as the street-level bureaucrats and may have incorporated the “deservingness” heuristics often found among street-level bureaucrats ([Evans 2011](#)). Next to this, from a managerial perspective, it can be good for the organization if street-level bureaucrats especially help motivated clients, as these clients really make progress. In this way, the organization spends scarce resources efficiently ([Lipsky 1980](#)). From a citizen-agent narrative, it is then hypothesized that:

H2: Street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients will be given *higher* job performance ratings by supervisors.

Data and Method

Research Setting

To test these two competing hypotheses, we studied street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors in a large nonprofit social work organization in the United States. The organization provides mental health and social services to children, young adults, and their families. Together with the two vice presidents of the organization, we identified all workers who had direct contact with clients (called “direct care staff” in the organization). The total number of direct care staff (from here on: “street-level bureaucrats”) was 250. They held jobs such as mental health counselor, mental health therapist, psychiatric nurse practitioner, and instructional aide. We linked them to their 43 direct supervisors via company records. The organization gave us the opportunity to survey all of these 250 street-level bureaucrats and their 43 immediate supervisors.

Studying these street-level bureaucrats and their supervisors was appropriate for testing our hypotheses for two reasons. First, they work in a nonprofit service-oriented setting. Second, there are indications that supervisors can monitor their supervisees. This is important, as the relationship between prioritizing and performance is more straightforward in this way:

supervisors may “reward” or “punish” street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients. To be able to do this, they should be aware of the fact that street-level bureaucrats prioritize or not. In this organization, supervisors have a low span of control: they supervise on average six street-level bureaucrats. Furthermore, supervisors often have been—or still are—street-level bureaucrats themselves. This is shown by their job descriptions, such as “mental health therapist” or “clinical supervisor.” Related to this, their educational background is often similar to the people they supervise: various supervisors were licensed social workers themselves. A low span of control and a similar background means that it could be the case that they “know” to some extent whether street-level bureaucrats prioritize clients. We will discuss the extent to which this assumption holds in the qualitative section of the findings and further elaborate on it in the concluding section, where we discuss limitations of this research.

Data Collection Strategy

The items used for this study are based on a larger employee and supervisor survey. The used items are shown in the [supplementary material](#). We did not ask for gender and supervisor name, as we collected this information via company records.

At the end of 2014, we approached street-level bureaucrats to participate in a survey. In the introductory text, we stated the purpose of the study, showed the participating researchers, provided incentives, noted that participation was voluntary, secured anonymity of responses, and indicated that there were no commercial interests. The e-mail address (of the lead researcher) was provided for questions. The survey was distributed and, after a number of reminders, we received 173 responses (response rate 69%).

One month after closing the survey for the street-level bureaucrats, we surveyed 43 supervisors to tap the performance of the street-level bureaucrats. Each supervisor rated the performance of all of his/her employees who were street-level bureaucrats and who had filled out the survey. The introductory text was largely similar to the one for the employees. After the introductory e-mail and various reminders, we received responses from all 43 supervisors (response rate 100%). We therefore received performance ratings for all 173 respondents.

We also provided space for comments on various places in the surveys. A total of 130 employees and 13 supervisors commented, which is quite substantial given the size of the survey (173 respondents in the employee survey and 43 supervisors). In total, they provided 311 comments, totaling 9,563 words. This yielded qualitative data. We analyze the relevant qualitative data in the Results section.

Measures

We used two measures to analyze the job performance of the street-level bureaucrats. By using two measures, we can make more robust claims about the relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance.

The first measure of job performance is based on the validated scale of [Welbourne, Johnson, and Erez \(1998\)](#). Supervisors were asked to rate each of their subordinates on a number of job performance criteria, namely “quantity of work output,” “quality of work output,” “accuracy of work,” and “customer service provided (internal and external).” The answer categories were “needs much improvement,” “needs some improvement,” “satisfactory,” “good,” and “excellent.” Cronbach alpha was .876.

Second, we used the scale of [Peterson et al. \(2011\)](#). The supervisors of the street-level bureaucrats were asked to rate their workers on a 1–5 Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree) on three items: this employee “meets his or her performance expectations,” “performs the tasks asked of him or her,” and “fulfills the responsibilities stipulated by management.” Cronbach alpha was .914.

A validated scale for prioritizing motivated clients has not been developed. As no validated scale is available, we developed a new one using scale development procedures ([DeVellis 2011](#)). We summarize the main steps.

First, based on the definition of prioritizing motivated clients, six items were developed. Answer categories were “never,” “hardly ever,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” We used templates when developing the items. Templates allow researchers to adapt items to their specific situation by replacing general phrases with more specific ones: ones that fit the context of their research. For example, instead of using the terms “clients,” the researcher can rephrase this to suit the specific situation, for instance, with “students” in an education section or “patients” in a health care setting. This increases reliability and content validity ([DeVellis 2011](#)). In this case, we used “participants,” as that is the common term to refer to clients in this particular social work organization. As an example, one of the template items is:

If clients are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort

In this context, we changed this to:

If participants are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort

Second, 18 experts examined the initial pool of items. We selected these experts based on their expertise ([DeVellis 2011](#), 75). This is shown in [table 1](#).

Based on the interviews, we ended with the best-fitting items for prioritizing motivated clients. We included the items developed in our survey. The final items for prioritizing motivated clients (here: participants) are shown below. Cronbach alpha was .910.

1. I spend less energy on unmotivated clients
2. I avoid clients who are unwilling to develop themselves
3. I invest less time in clients who do not want to move forward
4. I help unmotivated clients less than motivated clients
5. I will only do the minimum for “lazy” clients
6. If clients are not interested in progressing, I put in less effort

Alongside the variables described above, we included gender, age, and education as control variables.

Statistical Methods Used

We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) followed by structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus. We used CFA and SEM for three reasons. First, these techniques allow for the estimation of latent variables rather than only measured variables, thereby improving validity and reliability ([Brown 2006](#)). Second, they provide statistical indices of whole model fit. Related to this, in CFA and SEM, it is possible to measure the whole model, even when there is more than one dependent variable. Third, an advantage of using SEM—and particularly the robust weighted least squares estimation (WLSMV) in SEM—is that WLSMV is a robust estimator that does not assume normally distributed variables and provides the best option for modeling categorical data ([Brown 2006](#)). We identified all

Table 1. Interviewed Experts for Scale Development

Type of Expert	Reason for Interviewing	Number of Expert Interviews
Street-level bureaucrats	To increase understandability of scale and its relevance to practice	12
Public administration scholars	To check the relevancy of the scale for the public administration literature	4
Psychometric expert	To analyze the psychometric properties of the scale	1
IT expert	To check applicability of the scale with web surveys	1
		Total: 18

Likert-type items (related to prioritizing motivated clients and the job performance measures) as categorical as, in essence, Likert-type items are categorical.

The data have a “nested” structure: our respondents are “nested” in supervisors as supervisors rate a number of employees. To account for this, we identified the supervisors as the cluster and used the TYPE=COMPLEX analysis command. In this way, we control for the nested structure in the data, more specifically the nonindependence of observations (for a technical overview, see [Muthén and Muthén 1998–2010](#)).

Psychometric Properties of Model

We conducted CFAs to analyze whether the factor structure described was also present in the data. The CFA model proved to be a good fit of the data: root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .024 (criterion \leq .08), comparative fit index (CFI) = .994 (criterion \geq .90), Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .992 (criterion \geq .90). The values of the standardized factor loadings were all high, as shown in [table 2](#).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

[Table 3](#) shows the means, standard deviations (SDs), and correlations. SPSS was used as latent constructs have no interpretable mean. A number of interesting results can be seen. First, the majority of the responding street-level bureaucrats is female (68%), and the average age is around 35 years. Second, the average score on coping is quite low and on performance quite high, but the SDs are moderate. This indicates adequate variability in the data, which is needed for further analysis as both the dependent and independent variables should show some variability in order to find a relationship. Third, the correlations between coping and both performance measures are significant

and positive. This points in the direction of Hypothesis 2: prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance.

Results of SEM Analyses

[Table 4](#) shows the results of the SEM analysis. The SEM model had a good model fit: RMSEA = .059, CFI = .987, TLI = .985. The control variables and the way of coping by prioritizing motivated clients explain in total 11.2% for the Welbourne et al. job performance measure and 7.9% for the Peterson et al. job performance measure. Such a degree of explained variance is in line with expectations, as many variables affect job performance.

Hypothesis 1 states that street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients will be given lower performance ratings by supervisors. Hypothesis 2 argues the opposite: street-level bureaucrats who prioritize motivated clients will be given higher performance ratings. It can be seen that supervisors rate the job performance of employees who prioritize motivated clients significantly higher: $\beta = .204$, $p < .01$ for the job performance measure of Welbourne et al. and $\beta = .190$, $p < .01$ for the job performance measure of Peterson et al. Hence, we must reject Hypothesis 1. On the other hand, Hypothesis 2 is not rejected: prioritizing motivated clients seems to be positively related to job performance.

Discussion Based on Qualitative Data

To increase our understanding of the positive relationship between coping by prioritizing motivated clients and job performance, we will examine the qualitative data. Each quote comes from a different street-level bureaucrat.

First, it became clear that helping motivated clients over unmotivated ones seems to be an acceptable

Table 2. Standardized Factor Loadings

Item	Coping by Prioritizing Motivated Clients	Job Performance (Welbourne et al.)	Job Performance (Peterson et al.)
COP1	.756		
COP2	.843		
COP3	.910		
COP4	.791		
COP5	.831		
COP6	.874		
JPW1		.855	
JPW2		.980	
JPW3		.856	
JPW4		.821	
JPP1			.928
JPP2			.969
JPP3			.963

Table 3. Means, SDs, and Correlations for the Variables in the Study

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Gender (1 = female)	68% female	NA	1				
2. Education	4.12	1.296	.117	1			
3. Age	35.98	9.793	-.020	-.125	1		
4. Coping by prioritizing motivated clients	1.990	.704	-.134	.228**	-.069	1	
5. Job performance (Welbourne et al.)	3.995	.796	.132	.203**	-.068	.186*	1
6. Job performance (Peterson et al.)	4.210	.703	.024	.137	-.128	.175*	.761**

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

Table 4. Structural Equation Model for Relationship of Prioritizing Motivated Clients and Control Variables on Job Performance

	Job Performance (Welbourne) (Standardized Scores)	Job Performance (Welbourne) (Unstandardized Scores)	Job Performance (Peterson) (Standardized Scores)	Job Performance (Peterson) (Unstandardized Scores)
Gender	.083	.159 (.159)	.021	.044 (.243)
Education	.230*	.154* (.066)	.139	.103 (.068)
Age	-.053	-.005 (.007)	-.133	-.013 (.007)
Coping: priority setting	.204**	.230** (.088)	.190**	.238** (.079)
R^2	.112	—	.079	

Note: SEs for unstandardized coefficients shown in brackets.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

practice in the organization. An indication hereof is that there was a saying in the organization that street-level bureaucrats “should not work harder than their clients.” Two quotes illustrate this:

We have a saying that we should not work harder than our clients. Unless they are in crisis or we are in engagement. I try to remember this saying. We don't want to work harder than our participants at fixing their own lives.

This can indicate a “story” in an organization (Van Hulst 2013). Stories “materialize who and what practices are valued and why” (Musheno and Maynard-Moody 2015, 173). On a similar vein, some street-level bureaucrats themselves also believed that putting energy in unmotivated clients was counterproductive. One of them stated that:

When participants are not motivated to change or to receive help/support. We cannot force help on them. This is awkward and counterproductive.

Another noted that:

Honestly, if a participant is pre-contemplation and it's demonstrated through cancellations and lack of follow-through I address this with them. If there are a large number of cancellations I may close the case and encourage them

to reapply for services when they are more ready themselves.

Related to this, the value of helping motivated clients seems to be institutionalized in the rules and requirements of service provision in this organization. Illustrating quotes are:

My program has specific requirements for continuing services. A participant who is not engaging (after an amount of time) = closing.

As our program is voluntary I try to motivate but at times they are not ready for the intensity of treatment and decide not to engage.

How much energy I invest in a participant with a high level of resistance depends on the stage of treatment. If it is the beginning of treatment I am more likely to invest more energy in ‘motivational interviewing’ and other techniques in order to assess readiness for change and if it continues throughout several months of treatment our program requires that we close the case.

Based hereon, it can be argued that coping by prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance. Prioritizing motivated clients aligns with organizational patterns, both in informal ways (in the saying “we should not work harder than our clients”

and own beliefs of street-level bureaucrats) and formal rules (such as the rules of some programs that street-level bureaucrats should not devote time to clients who are consistently unmotivated). If street-level bureaucrats focus on helping motivated clients, they are following preferred practices in the organization. This would probably result in more positive performance ratings from supervisors. Concluding, this section discussed qualitative insights, as such providing some background to interpret the quantitative results.

Robustness Check

Next to two job performance measures, we ran separate analyses for more specific performance criteria. We do not have specific hypotheses concerning the relationships between coping and these more specific performance dimensions. We have included it as a robustness check. For the more general job performance measures (Welbourne et al. and Peterson et al.), we showed that frontline workers who prioritize motivated clients get higher ratings on job performance from their supervisors. This is in line with the citizen-agent narrative but runs counter to the state-agent narrative. We have added the more specific performance dimensions to test whether there were no negative relationships with more specific performance measures (which could point toward a state-agent narrative in more specific performance dimensions).

Next to two job performance measures (Welbourne et al. measure and Peterson et al. measure), we also included four additional more specific performance measures: career performance, innovator performance, team performance, and extra-role client performance. Career performance, innovator performance, and team performance are based on the role-based performance scales of Welbourne, Johnson, and Erez (1998). Supervisors were asked to rate each of their subordinates on a number of criteria, such as “making progress in his/her career” (career performance), “coming up with new ideas” (innovator performance), and “making sure his/her work group succeeds” (team performance) (for details, see supplementary material). The answer categories were “needs much improvement,” “needs some improvement,” “satisfactory,” “good,” and “excellent.” Cronbach alphas were .936, .934, and .919, respectively. Extra-role client performance was based on the scale of Netemeyer, Maxham, and Pullig (2005). Supervisors were asked to indicate how often their subordinates conducted a number of actions. Response categories were “never,” “hardly ever,” “sometimes,” “often,” and “always.” A sample item was “How often did this employee go above and beyond the ‘call of duty’ when serving clients?” Cronbach alpha was .912.

The additional separate SEM analyses are shown in table 5. We find that there is a significant positive

Table 5. Structural Equation Models for Relationship of Prioritizing Motivated Clients and Control Variables on Specific Performance Dimensions

	Career Performance (Standardized Scores)	Career Performance (Unstandardized Scores)	Innovator Performance (Standardized Scores)	Innovator Performance (Unstandardized Scores)	Team Performance (Standardized Scores)	Team Performance (Unstandardized Scores)	Client Performance (Standardized Scores)	Client Performance (Unstandardized Scores)
Gender	.143	.310 (.172)	-.036	-.073 (.170)	-.038	-.077 (.181)	.068	.147 (.246)
Education	.281*	.214* (.107)	.173	.122 (.063)	.190	.134 (.061)	.157	.119 (.007)
Age	-.086	-.009 (.007)	-.108	-.010 (.008)	-.085	-.008 (.007)	.022	.002 (.006)
Coping: priority setting	.197**	.253** (.092)	-.007	-.008 (.087)	.136	.161 (.085)	.054	.039 (.101)
R ²	.163		.046		.065		.035	
RMSEA	.060		.061		.054		.061	
CFI	.990		.991		.990		.989	
TLI	.988		.988		.988		.986	

Note: SEs for unstandardized coefficients shown in brackets. ***p* < .01; **p* < .05.

relationship with career performance ($\beta = .197, p < .01$). The relationship between prioritizing and team performance is positive and almost significant ($\beta = .161, p = .059$). There is no significant relationship with the other two performance constructs (innovator performance and extra-role client performance). Concluding, street-level bureaucrats who cope by prioritizing are given higher job performance ratings (both the Welbourne et al. measure and the Peterson et al. measure) and higher “career advancement” ratings. There are no significant relationships with innovator performance, team performance, or extra-role client performance. Furthermore, we found no significant negative relationships. This indicates that street-level bureaucrats who cope by prioritizing motivated clients are in general higher rated, which is in line with the citizen-agent narrative.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this article was to investigate the effect of an important way of coping (prioritizing motivated clients) on job performance. Based on a discussion of the public administration literature, we developed two competing hypotheses. We tested these in a survey of street-level bureaucrats and their immediate supervisors. In this way, this study has added two important elements to the literature. First, it is theoretically innovative as it links coping during public service delivery to an important outcome: job performance. We also relate this explicitly to the debate between the state-agent and the citizen-agent narrative. Second, the combination of different data sources diminishes the risk of common source bias. We are—to the best of our knowledge—the first to conduct a multisource study with validated scales in the street-level bureaucracy field.

In this final section, we discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from the study, as well as limitations and related future research suggestions. We found that prioritizing motivated clients is positively related to job performance. As shown in the qualitative data, helping especially motivated clients was in line with organizational patterns. Street-level bureaucrats “should not work harder than our clients” and organizational rules require that “a participant who is not engaging (after an amount of time) = closing [the case].” Hence, we show that helping motivated clients indeed is a practice employed by street-level bureaucrats (see also Hagen and Owens-Manley 2002; Križ and Skivenes 2014). Furthermore, we show quantitatively that it is positively related to job performance. This aligns with previous qualitative findings (Anagnostopoulos 2003; Van der Aa 2012).

How can the positive relationship between prioritizing motivated clients and job performance be

interpreted? On the one hand, these results can be seen in a positive light. Helping especially motivated clients is likely to have a large impact than helping clients who are not motivated in progressing. “Pushing” unmotivated clients may be a waste of time, money, and effort (Križ and Skivenes 2014). Related to this, Berglind and Gerner (2002, 719) note that “Many rehabilitation counselors at the social insurance office say that they feel hopeless when meeting unmotivated clients. It’s hard to make any progress.” Given the fact that service organizations—such as schools and social work organizations—are confronted with scarce resources, using these scarce resources to help motivated clients may be good use of time, money, and effort.

On the other hand, the positive relationship between helping motivated clients and job performance can also have a darker side. When prioritizing, street-level bureaucrats may discriminate (see, for an example in policing, Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014). Related to this, street-level bureaucrats may perceive that clients are unmotivated, while in fact these clients are very motivated but are unable to show this given a lack of their own competences or biases of street-level bureaucrats. Next to this, one of the core tasks of service-oriented street-level bureaucrats is to *motivate* clients (Ames 1992). When street-level bureaucrats only help clients who are already motivated, this may increase existing differences between them, widening achievement gaps.

This brings us to a number of limitations of this study, and related suggestions for future research. First, future studies could study other effects of this (and other) ways of coping, embarking on new theoretical venues. Potentially effects regarding clients/citizens are performance as rated by *clients* and discrimination of target groups (Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004). Next to this, it can be analyzed whether prioritizing motivated clients has effects on more general policy indicators such as rule compliance and degree of benefits provided (Henderson and Pandey 2013; Scott and Pandey 2000).

A related suggestion for future research is to connect coping and street-level bureaucracy studies with insights from judgment and decision-making. Future studies could, for instance, study which clients are perceived as “motivated” by which street-level bureaucrats. In this decision-making process, street-level bureaucrats may use heuristics for deciding which client is “motivated,” for instance, based on age, gender, or race. Rather than evaluate the motivation of each client in detail, the street-level bureaucrat can judge them based on such broad criteria. These criteria may have limited connection with the “true” degree of motivation. In psychology there is a large literature on judgment and decision-making, with a particular

emphasis of cognitive biases (for instance, [Tversky and Kahneman 1974](#)). Furthermore, there are recent public administration examples which apply this work to a public administration context (for instance, [Andersen and Hjortskov 2016](#); [Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2016](#); [Olson 2016](#)).

Related to this, coping by prioritizing motivated clients can be connected to representative bureaucracy ([Meier and Bohte 2001](#); [Nicholson-Crotty et al. 2016](#)). Representative bureaucracy theory states that a public workforce that is representative of the citizens/clients to which they provide services will produce policy outputs that are beneficial to such clients ([Marvel and Resh 2015](#)). Related to this, it could be studied whether street-level bureaucrats who share the same characteristics as clients (such as gender or ethnicity) will see such clients as more motivated and help them more.

Another future research suggestion would be to measure the extent to which supervisors monitor street-level bureaucrats, and whether the practice of prioritizing motivated clients is viewed favorably in the organization. A limitation of this study that we did not explicitly measure these two variables. We had indications—based on their low span of control, education background, and job titles—that supervisors were able to closely monitor street-level bureaucrats. Furthermore, the qualitative findings highlighted that prioritizing was indeed a practice which was endorsed in the organization, via among else the saying that “we should not work harder than our clients” and program requirements. Future research could dive deeper into these relationships.

A related limitation relates to the research context. This study analyzed social workers and their supervisors in one organization in the United States. This specific context could affect the results. More in general, this is just one study. We have invested considerable time and effort in developing this multisource study with high response rates (69% for street-level bureaucrats and 100% for supervisors). However, this intensive approach also meant that it was hard to conduct the research on a large scale, for instance, by studying various organizations in various institutional settings. When a higher n —and hence more power—is available, more coping strategies could be incorporated to study their relative effects. Next to this, replications of the studied relationships are necessary to further the state of knowledge in the field. It would be interesting to conduct additional studies, both regarding social workers in the United States, but also by studying other groups of street-level bureaucrats (such as emergency care workers, university professors, or high school teachers) in other

countries with different institutional setups, such as Asian or European countries.

Finally, methodological limitations are apparent. An important one is that the cross-sectional analysis makes assumptions about the likely direction of causality, moving from the way of coping to job performance. When testing for causal effects, few of the methods in the social sciences can live up to the rigor and level of control of an experimental design ([Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2016](#); [Jilke, Van de Walle, and Kim 2016](#)). Future studies could test the proposed relationships using an experimental design.

To conclude, this study provides important insights that help to understand how street-level bureaucrats cope when working directly with clients, and its relationship with job performance. Embracing and further researching coping during public service delivery, including its antecedents and effects, should prove to be a timely and productive endeavor for both researchers and practitioners alike.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data is available at the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* online.

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