

Rule bending on the frontlines of public service delivery: how and why caseworkers favor the strong

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Abstract

When facing a disobedient client, caseworkers are often required to impose sanctions. However, even when sanctions are explicitly required by law, research shows that caseworkers may turn a blind eye. Why is that? In this study, we ask how certain clients can merit themselves to avoid sanctioning. Theorizing from the notion of client deservingness, we develop a theoretical account of how certain client attributes cause frontline workers to bend the rules. Drawing from a novel conjoint experiment among Danish unemployment caseworkers ($n = 407$ with 1,210 observations), we show that caseworkers tend to favor stronger clients when bending the rules in clients' favor. Clients who appear motivated, who have not been sanctioned in the past, and who have more previous job experience are all less likely to be sanctioned. Our findings reveal a paradox. Although welfare usually targets clients in need, avoiding welfare sanctions seems based on clients' resources. Consequently, caseworkers' rule-bending means that 'the winners take it all' since the more resourceful clients are also the ones who can get away with disobedience.

Keywords: street-level bureaucrats, rule-following, discretionary biases, conjoint experiments

¹ Note. This is a preprint and may be different from the final, typeset version.

Introduction

When should individual frontline workers deviate from the rules made by elected policy makers? While a spontaneous answer seems to be ‘never’, research is full of examples that police officers, teachers, caseworkers, and others occasionally bend or even break the rules to accommodate clients (Einstein and Glick 2017; Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Lipsky 1980; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Schram et al. 2009; Tummers et al. 2015). However, deviating from the rules may contradict with both Weberian principles of legitimate bureaucracy and equal treatment, since bending the rules may favor some clients over others. Indeed, treating like with like is one important reason why stated policy rules exist in the first place (Olsen 2006).

Although a key tenet of democratic state-citizen interactions, research on rule following has been almost entirely focused on the state-side of the interaction. Research shows that rule deviation depends on *frontline worker attributes* (DeHart-Davis 2007; Monties and Gagnon 2022; Weissmuller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2020; Pedersen and Johannsen 2018; Oberfield 2009), *workplace attributes* (Borri 2017; Fleming 2020; Morrison 2006), as well as *attributes of the rules themselves* (Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2020; Bozeman, Youtie, and Jung 2021).

Surprisingly, although *client attributes* is a well-known factor in frontline workers’ attitudes and behaviours, research is sparse on what role client attributes play in rule bending. This leaves the literature with a twofold problem. First, there is a pressing need for theoretical accounts of the relationship between client attributes and rule bending. Second, current state of art offers no empirical evidence that can help answer the straightforward question of which clients frontline workers are willing to bend the rules in favour of. Our study attempts to remedy this gap. Specifically, we ask

the research question: *what is the causal effect of client attributes on caseworkers' willingness to bend the rules?*

Based on research on deservingness in public administration and political psychology, we develop a theoretical account of how client attributes affect rule bending. We then test our account empirically, drawing from a conjoint experiment embedded in a nationwide survey among Danish unemployment caseworkers ($n = 407$ with 1,210 data points). Our findings show that client attributes have a substantial effect on caseworkers' willingness to bend the rules in clients' favor. As an example, caseworkers were about 15 percent less likely to lean toward sanctioning a client who appeared motivated compared with one that did not.

In contrast with our hypotheses, our findings suggest that caseworkers will bend the rules in favor of effortful clients, but not clients in need. This is surprising since other studies of clients' deservingness point to need as the most important factor (see e.g. Jilke and Tummers 2018). We theorize that the difference in findings may be due to the distinction between welfare regulation (our study) and welfare production (previous studies).

Our study offers novel empirical evidence of when and why frontline workers are willing to bend the rules in clients' favor. This is important not only because it speaks to issues of legitimacy and democratic governance, but also because it helps disentangle the traits of the 'the good client' in the eyes of frontline workers (Clarke et al. 2005; Mik-Meyer 2017; Pykett et al. 2010). Paradoxically, our findings suggest that although welfare benefits target clients in need, it is the strong and resourceful clients who are most likely to get away with disobedience. This, in turn, raises concerns that frontline workers' preferences may increase social inequities on the frontlines of public service in a way where 'the winners take it all'.

Theory

Policy rules state the criteria that a client must live up to in order to be eligible for welfare benefits. At the same time, it is often up to the individual frontline worker to assess if any particular client lives up to these requirements. Since it is not possible to monitor every decision, frontline workers have the opportunity to deviate from what is stated in policy rules. For our purpose, we refer to this deviance as ‘rule bending’, although the distinction between ‘bending’ and ‘breaking’ the rules is not always clear cut (Tummers et al. 2015).

Because of its central role in state-citizen interactions, scholars have been greatly occupied with the question why frontline workers sometimes deviate from the rules. To date, research has been largely focused on the ‘state’ side of the state-citizen interaction when studying rule following. State of the art cluster around three main explanations, as shown in Table 1. One set of explanations has to do with *frontline worker attributes*. For instance, the reason frontline workers bend or break the rules is a result of certain personality traits, such as the propensity for taking risks (Morrison 2006). In the second view, rule bending is seen as a result of *workplace attributes*. For example, research suggest that observing coworkers deviating from the rules makes it more likely for frontline workers to bend or break the rules themselves (Fleming 2020, Morrison 2006). Finally, a third set of explanations deals with *attributes of the rules themselves*. For instance, employees are more likely to follow written rules than unwritten, verbal rules (Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2020).

Surprisingly, very little research has explicitly considered the independent effect of *client attributes*. This is unexpected since public administration research thoroughly documents how client attributes affect a broad array of decisions with frontline workers

(e.g. Jilke and Tummers 2018; Hasenfeld 2010; Keiser, Mueser, and Choi 2004; Lipsky 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

Table 1. Why do frontline workers bend the rules?

Antecedent of rule bending	Examples	Examples of studies
Frontline worker attributes	Personality traits, motivation, professional identity,	DeHart-Davis (2007) Monties and Gagnon (2022) Weissmuller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn (2020) Pedersen and Johannsen (2018) Oberfield (2009)
Workplace attributes	Organizational norms, co-worker rule violations, threats of punishment	Borri (2017) Fleming (2020) Morrison (2006)
Attributes of the rules	Degree of formalization, burdensome to clients	Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald (2020) Bozeman, Youtie, and Jung (2021)
Client attributes	Clients in greater need, hardworking clients	Ambrose, Taylor, and Hess (studying costumers in a private sector setting) (2015)

In particular, frontline workers seem to respond to attributes related to clients' deservingness (Baviskar 2019; Einstein and Glick 2017; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Goodsell 1981; Harrits and Møller 2014; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Lu, Xu and Wang 2021). Building on these insights, we theorize that frontline workers will be more willing to bend the rules in favor of clients they perceive as deserving.

In short, instead of considering all possible concerns, frontline workers will ask themselves: does this client deserve my help or not? Two overall considerations guide the answer concerning (a) clients' effort and (b) clients' need (Petersen et al. 2011; Jensen and Petersen 2017; van Oorschot 2000; Jilke and Tummers 2018).

Bending the rules in favor of effortful clients

First, we expect frontline workers to bend the rules in favor of clients who signal effort.

For example, frontline workers might be more favorable to clients who intend to give something back at a later point in time or to clients who have already given something in the past. In that case, deservingness is linked to reciprocity: clients who seem motivated or willing to put in effort themselves are seen as more deserving or worthy of frontline workers' help (Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2020; Križ and Skivenes 2014). To illustrate, one might consider frontline workers asking clients the question, "What have you done in return, or can you do in the future?" (van Oorschot 2000: 38).

Clients can show effort in different ways, with some being more directly reciprocal than others. For instance, a client should be perceived as deserving if he has never needed help in the past or has no record of 'parasitic behavior' (e.g. cheating the system). Relatedly, a client might display effort by signaling that he is actively trying to become self-dependent again as soon as possible and thus will be able to contribute again in the future. In our context of unemployed citizens, one can think of an unemployed client who actively apply for a large number of jobs or attend additional education to improve his qualifications for a specific position. Signaling effort, then, might convince the potential care-giver that the client is worth helping even if he has not signaled effort in the past.

In sum, we can express our expectations regarding the effortful clients in the following hypothesis:

- (H1): Caseworkers are more likely to bend the rules in favor of clients who signal effort.

Bending the rules in favor of clients in need

First, we expect frontline workers to bend the rules in favor of clients who signal need.

Frontline workers will act favorable to clients who have little chance to better their condition on their own. For example, a client with a lot of money sitting in a savings account would be less deserving when asking to collect social benefits than someone who is already failing to pay rent. To illustrate, one can imagine frontline workers asking clients the question: “How much do you *need* this help?”

Clients can signal need in different ways. In its most basic form, clients’ need trigger a sense of empathy with the potential help-giver. Therefore, even cues of past suffering can trigger a sense of deservingness. For example, Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner (2016) show that refugees who have suffered torture are more likely to be accepted for asylum by respondents compared to asylum seekers without any special vulnerabilities. In the unemployment context, we should expect clients who provide for children to be perceived as more deserving, since the children they provide for have little control over their own situation.

The notion that frontline workers will be favorable toward clients in need is in line with previous studies suggesting that frontline workers often subscribe to a citizen-agent narrative (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Frontline workers are willing to go to great lengths to provide meaningful public service to their citizens (Perry and Vandenabeele 2015) and when policy rules and requirements do not fit with clients’ wishes and demands, frontline workers may experience a role conflict (Tummers 2012). One way of resolving such conflicts is by bending the rules.

In general, clients signal higher levels of need if they have little control of their own situation. In the unemployment context, this can happen in different ways. For instance, long-term unemployed clients should be perceived as more deserving because

their skills are more outdated and therefore they are further from getting a job than someone who recently graduated. Similarly, older clients often struggle more than younger ones to find a new job, likely for the same reasons.

We can express our expectations regarding the needy clients in the following hypothesis:

- (H2): Caseworkers are more likely to bend the rules in favor of clients who signal need.

Methods

For our purpose, an ideal test case should live up to three criteria. First it should comprise a type of welfare encounter where frontline workers assess the eligibility of clients based on formal policy rules. Second, it should be possible, in practice, to deviate from such policy rules, bending rules in clients' favor. Third, the case should maximize the potential for making sound inference to similar cases.

To fulfill all three criteria, we chose to study sanctioning among unemployment agencies in Denmark. In Denmark, unemployed citizens who receive cash benefits are required to meet with their caseworker for a number of scheduled appointments. The goal of these is to discuss potential job openings, as well as any barriers the client might experience in their job search. Moreover, these appointments allow the caseworker to control if the client is actively seeking new employment. Any failure to show up to a scheduled appointment requires the caseworker to sanction the client according to Danish law (Law on Active Social Policy §37). In sum, caseworkers judge clients' eligibility based on formal rules but also have the opportunity to deviate from them by abstaining from imposing sanctions. With regard to the potential to make inference, our case is an unlikely one for observing rule-bending behavior since unemployment

casework is heavily regulated by formal, written policy rules. Hence, if we observe rule bending in our case, we would expect it to take place in similar cases as well.

We chose to focus on sanctioning because sanctioning has a substantial impact on affected citizens. The size of the sanctions under study here depends on the initial benefit but ranges between about 3.5 and 5 percent of the total benefit. Considering the relatively low level of cash benefits (roughly half the median income in Denmark, Statistics Denmark 2022), sanctions pose a significant reduction in citizens' livelihood. Furthermore, sanctions are not only important from the perspective of citizens but also caseworkers who view sanctions as "the most important process they have in terms of case management and producing results" (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011: 220).

The experimental design

To estimate the effect of multiple client attributes on frontline workers' willingness to bend the rules, we conducted a conjoint survey experiment. In brief, we presented caseworkers with a number of fictive clients in which we had randomly manipulated a number of attributes. Caseworkers were then asked to assess if they would sanction a similar client in their daily work.

Our design allowed us to estimate the average treatment effect of each client attribute (Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014). Moreover, because estimates represent effects on the same outcome scale, we can compare the relative influence of each attribute. Thus, the conjoint design made it possible to obtain substantially meaningful estimates for several attributes. Although critics of survey experiments often question whether such designs can really mimic real-world attitudes, an empirical comparison by Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto (2015) showed that the conjoint design performs remarkably well when held against a real-world benchmark.

To ensure full transparency, we have pre-registered our conjoint experiment at [blinded for review].

Outcome and treatment measures

We gave caseworkers a brief vignette describing a hypothetical client and then asked if caseworkers would impose sanctions should a similar case come up in their daily work.

Because caseworkers were required to impose sanctions for all client profiles, we can interpret willingness to sanction as a measure of the willingness to bend the rules in clients' favor. We measured willingness to sanction using a 10-point scale ranging from "1: Not sanction, definitely" to "10: Sanction, definitely." This ratings-based approach provided us with more finely grained information about each respondent's preferences than would, for example, a forced-choice design. Further, given the sensitivity of the issue under study, we feared that a forced-choice design would prompt respondents to 'play it safe' and consistently state that they would enforce regulations exactly. In contrast, a rating-based approach remedied that concern and allowed us to interpret higher levels on the 10-point scale as higher degrees of willingness to sanction and, conversely, lower levels as lower degrees of willingness to sanction.

We designed our vignette building on case descriptions used in similar studies (Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018). To ensure contextual realism, we also conducted two separate pilot interviews with experienced caseworkers, discussing the vignette in detail. We avoided using real names in our description so that possible connotations would not add noise to our estimates. Figure 1 displays the full text. Following the vignette, we presented caseworkers with three consecutive client descriptions. Each description provided caseworkers with a set of client attributes (for an example, see figure 1).

Receiving the treatment in the experimental design meant being presented with certain values or ‘levels’ of each attribute, whereas other values corresponded to receiving the control. We chose attributes based on the dimensions of deservingness laid out in the theory section. Table 2 lists all attributes and individual levels.

Figure 1. Vignette and example of a client description

Citizen A

- Citizen A is a 53-year-old job-ready cash benefit recipient. Citizen A has no formal education.
- Citizen A has been unemployed since February 2018
- Citizen A has previously worked 4 years as a cleaning assistant in a small business, but lost the job because of a round of layoffs
- Citizen A lives alone with two children
- Citizen A's caseworker perceives Citizen A as motivated to find a new job
- Citizen A has not previously been sanctioned

To what degree would you sanction versus not sanction Citizen A?

1: Not sanction, for sure	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10: Sanction, for sure
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Table 2. Full list of client attributes and levels

Deservingness type	Attributes	Levels
Effort	Previous job experience	Controls: 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, 4 years, 5 years Treatments: 11 years, 12 years, 13 years, 14 years, 15 years
	Client motivation	Control: Seems unmotivated to find new job Treatment: Seems motivated to find new job
	Previously sanctioned	Controls: Has previously been sanctioned Treatment: Has not previously been sanctioned
Need	Age	Controls: Client in 30s: 32-year-old, 33-year-old, 34-year-old, 35-year-old Treatments: Client in 50s: 52-year-old, 53-year-old, 54-year-old, 55-year-old
	Single provider	Controls: Not single provider: Lives with a partner and one child, Lives with a partner and two children, until recently lived with a partner but now lives alone Treatments: Single provider: Lives alone with two children, until recently lived with a partner but now lives alone with their two children
	Length of unemployment	Controls: Less than six months of unemployment: November 2019, December 2019, January 2020 Treatments: More than two years of unemployment: January 2018, February 2018, March 2018

For client effort, we included three attributes:

- tenure in previous job,
- whether the client had been previously sanctioned or not, and
- whether the client seemed motivated to find a new job.

We included tenure because people with more years of recent job experience have contributed for a longer continuous period before needing help. Similar attributes are found in Petersen et al. (2011). We defined tenure based on the ‘long-tenure’ category in OECDs database on labor market statistics (>10 years) (OECD 2022).

Previous sanctions and the motivation to find new work were both measured as dichotomous variables with “has not previously been sanctioned” and “client’s caseworker perceives client as motivated to find a new job” as representing the effortful client, as contrasted with “has previously been sanctioned” and “client’s caseworker perceives client as unmotivated to find a new job.” We believed that clients with no history of sanctions and clients who seemed motivated to find new work would be thought of as effortful and ‘non-parasitic’.

Concerning clients’ need, we included the following three attributes:

- age,
- length of unemployment period, and
- whether the client was a single provider

We chose age as a measure of need, since job opportunities tend to drop quite sharply as clients get older (Burn, Button and Neumark 2017). We based the specific levels on the range of the age categories defined in Eurostat’s labor market statistics, which range from 15 through 64 years (Eurostat 2022). However, in Denmark unemployed clients

under the age of 30 have different rights and responsibilities than older clients. To make our fictive clients comparable in terms of age, we therefore defined clients in their early 30s as being relatively younger and clients in their early 50s as being relatively older, so that both age groups were roughly 15 years from the minimum and maximum of the OECD age range.

We chose unemployment length because long term unemployment both makes it harder to find a new job and has negative consequences for those who experience it (see e.g. Machin and Manning 1999; Milner, Page, and LaMontagne 2013). We defined treatment as having been unemployed for more than two years, in contrast to having been unemployed for less than six months. The two year-threshold is about double that of, for example, Machin and Manning's widely cited definition of long term unemployment (1999).

For the single providers, we included levels with both one and two children as well as information about whether the client had recently started living alone. The latter was done to give a sense of realism. While being a single provider does not *per se* makes it harder to find a job, having to provide for someone else makes clients more vulnerable to the impact of sanctions and thus in greater need of receiving benefits.

Sampling procedure

We contacted the head manager of every employment agency in Denmark (94 in total, dispersed among 98 municipalities) and asked for their assistance in distributing our survey. Twenty-six agencies agreed to help by forwarding a direct link to our survey to the caseworkers affiliated with their employment agency. To ensure that the respondents' participation was anonymous, we informed managers that the response rate of each municipality would not be disclosed, nor would any responses be made public at the municipal level. In addition, we informed all of the participating

caseworkers that their responses would be anonymous and comply with general confidentiality procedures, and we provided them with a link to the [blinded for review]'s data protection guidelines to ensure that respondents were fully aware of their rights. Furthermore, we made explicit that any participation was voluntary.

Table 3. Sample characteristics

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Max
Male	381	0.14	0.35		
Age: 29 or younger	365	0.09	0.29		
: 30s	365	0.13	0.33		
: 40s	365	0.27	0.44		
: 50s	365	0.26	0.44		
: 60 or older	365	0.14	0.34		
Education: Lower_secondary	378	0.01	0.07		
: Secondary	378	0.02	0.13		
: Youth vocational training	378	0.10	0.30		
: Higher, short cycle	378	0.16	0.37		
: Higher, medium cycle	378	0.60	0.49		
: Higher, long cycle	378	0.12	0.33		
Formally educated social worker (yes)	374	0.43	0.50		
Work experience, caseworker (years)	356	9.10	8.36	0.00	49.00
Tenure (years)	365	5.70	5.97	0.00	42.00

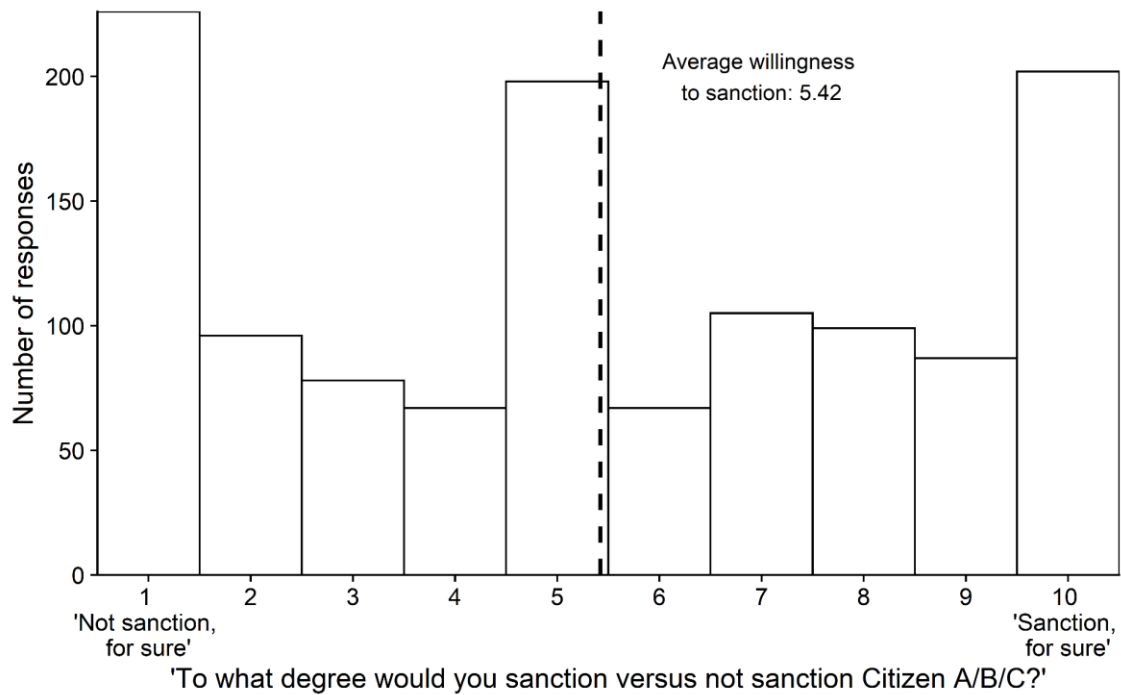
Note: N is less slightly than 407 for respondent characteristic due to attrition: Items on respondent characteristic were placed at the end of the survey to avoid interference with the experiment.

In total, 802 caseworkers received the survey and the opportunity to participate in our study, 407 of whom answered the willingness to sanction measure for one or more clients (51% response rate). Both the response rate and respondents' background characteristics are similar to other survey studies conducted among employment agencies in Denmark (e.g. Guul, Pedersen and Petersen 2020; Stigaard et al. 2006). Table 3 shows background characteristics for caseworkers in our sample. By far, most caseworkers who evaluated their first client profile also completed the remaining two. In total, we have a sample of 1,210 data points (one per evaluated clients profile).

Findings

Each client profile corresponds to a decision made by the caseworker regarding whether that client should be sanctioned or not. According to policy rules, all client profiles in our experiment must be sanctioned. A first question of interest is whether caseworkers are willing to bend the rules in favor of some clients and not others? Our results show that this is the case. In figure 2, we plot the distribution of willingness to sanction across all profiles. Variation in willingness to sanction is substantial with the mean of the distribution falling at roughly the middle of our 10-point scale. As an alternative way of viewing the distribution, splitting the data at the middle of the scale, we see that caseworkers lean toward sanctioning only in about 46 percent of the profiles (i.e. profiles are assigned with a score of 6 or more). Having concluded that there is considerable variation in caseworkers' willingness to sanction, we can move on to the main question of our study: which client attributes cause caseworkers to be more or less willing to bend the rules?

Figure 2. Caseworkers' willingness to sanction clients across all client profiles.

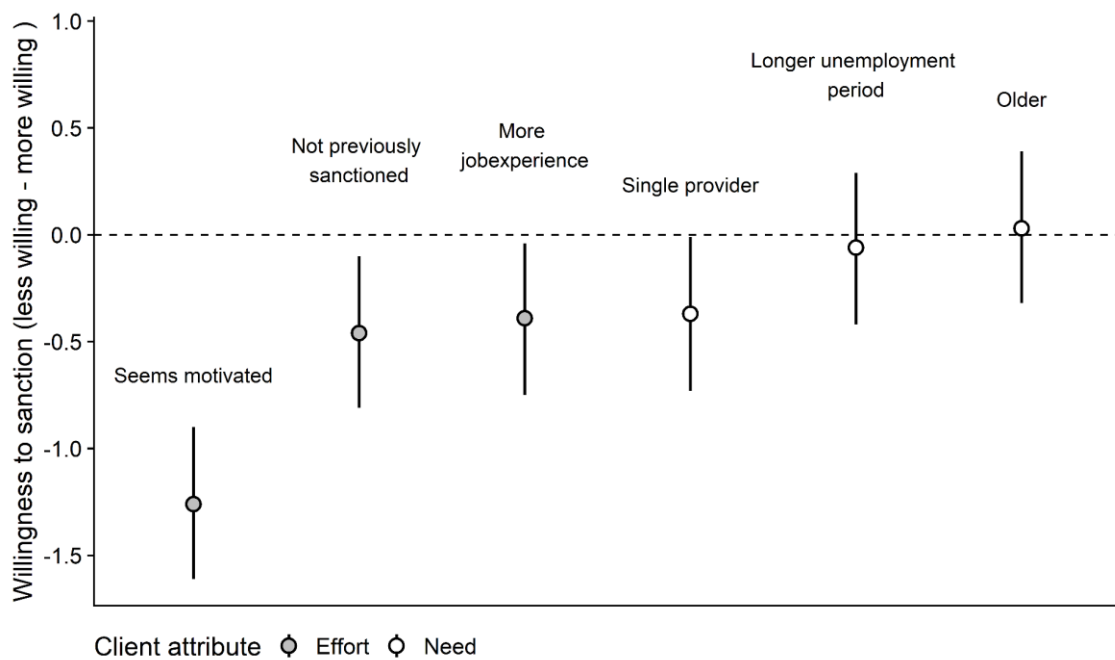


Note. Although policy rules require caseworkers to sanction *all* clients in the conjoint experiment, caseworkers' willingness to sanction ranges across the full 10-point scale. Dashed line marks the average willingness to sanction. $n = 1,210$.

The causal effect of client attributes on caseworkers' willingness to sanction

Figure 3 displays the main quantity of interest in our experiment. Each dot represent the Average Marginal Component Effect of each deservingness attributes, with vertical lines illustrating the corresponding 95 percent confidence interval. Each estimate represents the difference in willingness to sanction on a 10-point scale. Higher values indicate greater willingness to sanction and lower values less.

Figure 3. The causal effect of client attributes on caseworkers' willingness to sanction



Note. Average Marginal Component Effects of each client attribute on caseworkers' willingness to sanction (as measured on a 10-point scale). Vertical bars are 95 percent confidence intervals. $n = 2,010$.

Caseworkers are less willing to sanction clients who signal effort. Reading figure 3 from left to right, the most notable effect concerns whether a client seems motivated to find a new job. On average, caseworkers rate their willingness to sanction almost 1.5 points lower than the unmotivated control profile ($p < 0.001$). This is a substantial difference of about 19 percent relative to the control. Also noteworthy, are the effects of clients' history of sanctioning, as well as the length of their previous job experience (AMCE = -0.46, $p=0.012$ and AMCE = -0.39 with $p=0.03$, respectively). Although smaller in magnitude compared with client motivation, these effects still represent a difference of 7 and 6 percent compared to the control.

For clients who signal need the picture is less clear. Being a single provider does have an effect on willingness to sanction of about -0.37 point ($p=0.045$), whereas the

length of clients' unemployment period has no detectable effect (AMCE = -0.06, $p=0.72$). The latter is also the case for clients' age (AMCE = 0.03, $p = 0.86$).

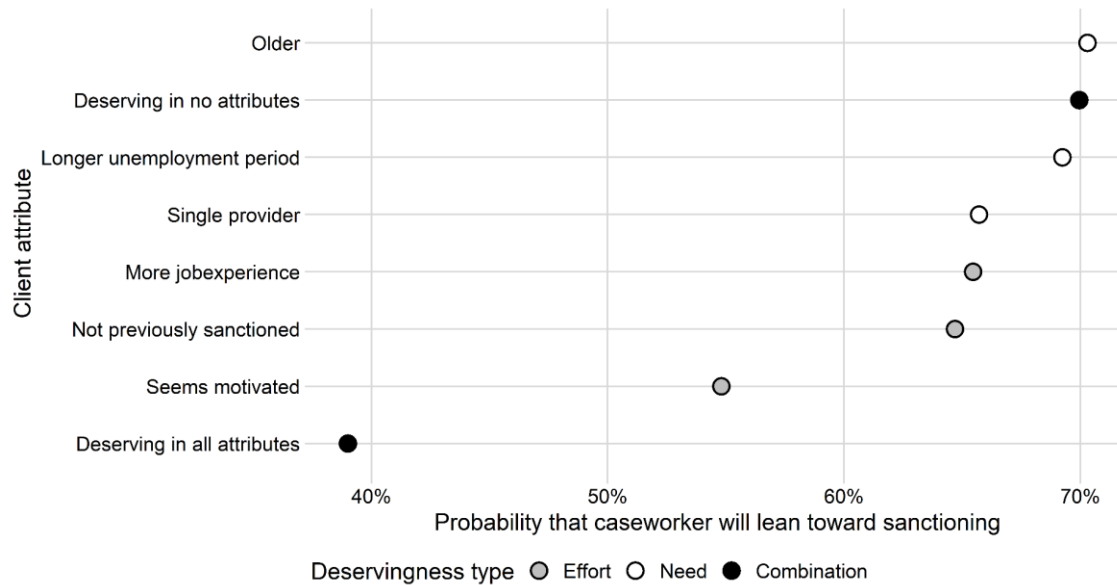
To give a more intuitive understanding of the results, we also ran a number of statistical simulations to calculate the effect of each client attribute on the *probability* that a caseworker would lean toward sanctioning that client. For the simulation procedure, we used the model from Figure 3 to express the probability that caseworkers rate a client above the midpoint of our rating scale ('lean toward sanctioning') or below ('lean toward *not* sanctioning') when all other attributes are held at the 'Control' level. For illustrative purposes, we also calculated two extreme scenarios of a client deserving in all vis-à-vis no attributes. Figure 4 shows the results.

Reading across client types, we see that effect sizes fall into four overall clusters. At the top right, we find older clients and clients with longer unemployment periods. Caseworkers were about 70 percent likely to lean toward sanctioning those clients. Essentially, both of these attributes does not make it any less to be sanctioned than a clients with no deservingness attributes at all.

Moving to the left, our next cluster comprises deservingness attributes with significant impacts on the probability of leaning toward sanctioning. As an example, being a single provider causes a drop in probability of about 5 percentage points.

Moving further to the left again, clients who seem motivated to find a new job enjoy a decrease in the probability by about 15 percentage points, as compared with a client with no deservingness attributes. Finally, a client who is deserving in all attributes has a just under 40 percent chance that caseworkers will lean toward sanctioning.

Figure 4. Predicted probabilities that caseworkers will lean toward sanctioning a client in the face of different client attributes



Discussion and Conclusions

Our study has provided novel empirical evidence of the effect that client attributes can have on frontline workers' willingness to bend the rules. Caseworkers in our sample were more willing to bend the rules in favor of clients who signaled effort. For instance, caseworkers were more likely to turn a blind eye to disobedient clients who seemed motivated, who had not been sanctioned previously, or who had more job experience and, in turn, were closer to the labor market. Surprisingly, caseworkers showed no difference towards clients in greater need. Although, single providers did receive some degree of favorable rule bending, neither older clients nor clients suffering from long-term unemployment changed rule bending attitudes.

Using a conjoint survey experiment among real-world caseworkers with close-to-practice vignettes of fictive clients had two significant advantages. First, it allowed us to estimate caseworkers' overall willingness to bend the rules by abstaining from imposing sanctions although required by law. Second, our design allowed us to

disentangle the individual impact of each client attribute. Still, as no design is without limitations, readers should interpret our findings in light of three methodological restrictions.

First, it seems reasonable to ask how well a survey experiment captures the ‘true’ attitudes of its respondents. Such concerns may be addressed by the fact that conjoint designs have been shown to be effective in mitigating social desirability bias, likely because having multiple cues provides respondents with several ways to explain deviant attitudes (Horiuchi, Markovich and Yamamoto 2021). Moreover, studies suggest that conjoint designs generally capture respondents’ real-world behaviors “remarkably well” (Hainmueller, Hangartner, and Yamamoto 2015).

A second point of attention regards the overall realism of judging the deservingness of vignette profiles, relative to real in-the-flesh clients. Effect sizes presented here may be different from what we would see in a real-world setting. While this is a valid concern, we contend that effect sizes are more likely to be larger in real-world settings. First, the intensity of ‘treatments’ is greater when one is faced with more than subtle text cues because psychological proximity enhances the emotional responses from prosocial interactions (Grant 2007). Second, treatments are administered multiple times during a real-world interaction, rather than a one-off text cue provided by a vignette. Still, as we can never know for sure, our findings should be interpreted in the light of this important concern.

Finally, the external validity of any experiment should be considered. As our sample is similar to those of other studies on the same population, we consider our findings to be representative of the larger sample of Danish caseworkers (e.g. Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021). Furthermore, as argued earlier, our case constitutes a

least-likely case and so conclusions from our study should infer well to similar samples of frontline workers making decisions in regulatory settings.

Despite its limitations, our study augments how we should think about rule following on the frontlines of public service. Frontline workers' willingness to bend the rules is not only a product of frontline workers' attributes (DeHart-Davis 2007; Monties and Gagnon 2022; Weissmuller, De Waele, and van Witteloostuijn 2020; Pedersen and Johannsen 2018; Oberfield 2009), workplace attributes (Borrey 2017; Fleming 2020; Morrison 2006), or attributes of the rules themselves (Piatak, Mohr, and McDonald 2020; Bozeman, Youtie, and Jung 2021). Client attributes have a significant and independent effect on frontline workers' willingness to bend the rules.

Adding to the existing literature on rule following behavior, we have developed a theoretical account of the impact of client attributes and provided empirical evidence from a practical setting. Our study hereby shifts some of the attention from 'state' to 'citizen' in rule bound state-citizen interactions. At its core, our study helps to produce more valid answers to the question why and under which circumstances frontline workers are willing to bend the rules in favor of their clients.

Our findings produce a number of important questions, which a future research agenda should address. In terms of *advancing theory development*, we have highlighted the need to move some of the scholarly attention from 'state' to 'citizen' when studying rule-bound state-citizen interactions. Scholars should continue to push this issue further, for instance by developing and testing theoretical models that bring together the four streams of explanations outlined here. Also, as our review of the rule bending literature is mainly centered around public administration and political psychology research, interesting follow up work should try to bring in ideas from neighboring fields as well. One fruitful vantage point might be to look to the criminology literature on deviant

behavior and neutralization techniques, which has several accounts for why ‘deviant behavior’ occurs (see e.g. Kaptein and Van Helvoort 2019; Maruna and Copes 2005).

In terms of *advancing empirical evidence*, a research agenda on frontline workers’ rule following would benefit from putting our findings to the test in additional empirical settings. Although we attempted to maximize generalizability through strategic case selection, our study’s conclusions are necessarily bounded. As one advance, future scholars should test additional types of client attributes, professions, and forms of public service deliveries. Another advance would be to conduct large-n studies, which would allow scholars to test interaction effects between, for instance, client *and* frontline worker attributes. Such an approach would also move the literature toward more comprehensive models.

Being able to distinguish between different client attributes revealed a thought-provoking paradox. On the one hand, the overall premise of welfare distribution is that welfare should go to citizens in need. On the other hand, our findings suggest that individual caseworkers preferred to bend the rules in favor of stronger clients: those motivated, compliant, and easy to get back to work. Such clients comply with the notion that a ‘good citizen’ in today’s welfare work is a person who engage in cooperative, active and responsible relations with welfare workers (Mik-Meyer 2017; Pykett et al. 2010). However, caseworkers’ preferences for bending the rules in some cases and not others likely have unintended distributional consequences. As noted by Clarke et al. (2005), not all clients can be motivated, and so caseworkers’ rule bending also disfavors certain clients. The consequence may be that ‘the winners take it all’: Clients who already have the resources to be motivated or have years of previous work experience, are also the ones who can get away with disobeying the rules.

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