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Agency orientation and bureaucratic behaviour towards clients: evidence from a survey experiment among unemployment caseworkers

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ABSTRACT

Frontline workers' behaviour is often guided by considerations of clients' best interests (citizen-agent orientation) rather than strict policy adherence (state-agent orientation). Using a pre-registered 2 × 2 factorial vignette experiment involving caseworkers ($n = 813$) at Danish unemployment agencies, we present evidence on how priming a citizen-agent versus a state-agent orientation influences conduct towards clients – and whether these effects are moderated by clients expressing burdens with policy compliance. Our findings suggest that citizen-agent priming reduces the inclination to sanction noncompliant clients, regardless of expressed burdens, emphasizing how simple prompts can shift bureaucratic decision-making towards clients.

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KEYWORDS Administrative burdens; decision-making; street-level bureaucracy

Introduction

Frontline workers – such as teachers, nurses, and caseworkers – hold pivotal positions in public organizations (Lipsky 1980). Through their direct interactions with citizens and the significant discretionary authority they exercise in their work (Hill and Hupe 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Meyers and Vorsanger 2007), frontline workers are instrumental in shaping how policies are implemented and experienced by citizens (Lipsky 1980; Pressman and Wildavsky 1973; Zacka 2019).

Seminal work of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) is widely recognized for its distinction between how frontline workers perceive their roles – primarily as agents of the state (referred to as 'state-agents') or as advocates for citizens (referred to as 'citizen-agents').[1] While a state-agent orientation aligns with the traditional Weberian concept of bureaucracy, characterized by hierarchical governance and strict

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adherence to formal policy, street-level bureaucracy research emphasizes that many frontline workers predominantly perceive themselves as agents for the citizens they serve (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003; also see; Guul, Pedersen, and Petersen 2021; Oberfield 2010; Zacka 2017). Rather than viewing themselves as government agents primarily tasked with the faithful implementation of policy, they see themselves as citizen servants, whose responsibilities call upon them to draw on their professional expertise to act in what they perceive to be the best interest of their clients (ibid). For clarity, the two agency orientations can be conceptually defined as distinct role identities linked to frontline workers' self-perception of whom they primarily serve. Drawing on social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Tajfel and Turner 1979), these dual self-identities can coexist within individuals. While one orientation – such as the citizen-agent identity – may generally be more predominant, the relative salience of the two can shift depending on specific contexts and circumstances. Thus, although these orientations may exhibit temporal stability, they are neither mutually exclusive nor immune to having their relative prominence influenced by contextual factors and external influences (Bell et al. 2021; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).[2]

However, while street-level bureaucracy research has provided valuable insights into the predominance of the citizen-agent orientation among frontline workers, it remains undocumented how and whether the saliency of these agency orientations can be prompted, such as through simple priming cues. Additionally, research has yet to deliver robust evidence on the causal impact of these two agency orientations – evoking a citizen-agent versus state-agent orientation – on frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making.

Moreover, research shows how client characteristics can shape frontline worker behaviour and decision-making. For example, frontline workers often prioritize clients based on client characteristics (Tummers et al. 2015), such as their perceived needs (Guul et al. 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018) and the burdens clients experience and express during state–citizen interactions (Halling and Petersen 2024; Halling, Herd, and Moynihan 2022). However, while frontline workers guided by a citizen-agent orientation may be more responsive to these client characteristics than those with a state-agent orientation, prior research has not directly examined or documented the interaction between agency orientation and client expressions of needs and experienced burdens.

In this context, we develop theory and expectations by integrating research on frontline worker behaviour, client deservingness, and administrative burden. We address the following questions: How does priming of frontline workers' agency orientation (citizen-agent versus state-agent) influence their behaviour and decision-making towards clients? And are these effects moderated by client expressions of burdens related to policy compliance? Our theorizing suggests that priming a citizen-agent orientation increases inclinations to act in favour of clients – and particularly when clients express administrative burdens.

We test our hypotheses using a 2×2 factorial experimental design embedded in three vignettes within a national survey of caseworkers ($n = 813$) from local government unemployment agencies ($n = 39$) in Denmark. The design features two manipulations: agency cues to prime caseworkers' agency orientation (citizen agent vs. state-agent) and burden cues to vary the presence of client-expressed burdens during caseworker–citizen interactions (expressing vs. no expressing). This

setup enables us to analyse the effects of priming agency orientation and client burden expressions on caseworkers' treatment of clients. We focus on two specific outcomes, each reflecting the intent towards distinct yet contextually relevant behavioural actions. First, we assess the extent to which caseworkers are inclined to impose sanctions on clients for non-compliance with policy – an outcome reflecting strict rule adherence that may potentially overlook client needs ('moving against the client'). Second, we examine their inclinations to seek additional information about clients' needs and situation – an outcome that prioritizes client needs over strict rule following ('moving towards clients'). These two outcomes capture behavioural responses that unemployment agency caseworkers may consider and adopt in the depicted situations, as they navigate the 'external and internal demands and conflicts' inherent in their work (Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015).

Thus, our study offers new insights into bureaucratic behaviour and decision-making towards clients in public services delivery. First, our theoretical framework and empirical findings expand our understanding of frontline workers' agency orientation. While previous street-level bureaucracy research has established that many frontline workers predominantly operate within a citizen-agent orientation (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000), we address a gap in robust empirical evidence regarding how agency orientation (citizen-agent vs. state-agent) can be primed and the effects of such priming on workers' behaviour and decision-making.

Second, this article advances our understanding of street-level coping behaviour and the use of deservingness heuristics (Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015). While research has provided insights into how frontline workers prioritize clients based on their perceptions of client deservingness (Guul et al. 2021; Jilke and Tummers 2018), the impact of deservingness-related signals – particularly in situations where clients express a sense of burden – requires further research attention and documentation. We address the need for studies explicitly designed to examine how such specific deservingness cues influence decision-making regarding individual clients and cases.

Third, our study bridges the literature on street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015) and administrative burden (Herd and Moynihan 2018), offering new insights into both fields. We examine how clients' expressions of burden shape frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making, deepening our understanding of the consequences of administrative burden on the differential treatment of clients. In doing so, we contribute to critical discussions on administrative legitimacy and accountability in frontline work (Rivera and Knox 2023), addressing concerns about legality, equity, and impartiality (Bozeman and Johnson 2015; Frederickson 2010). Additionally, by exploring the interaction between agency orientation priming and clients' expressions of burden, we show how the impact of frontline workers' agency orientation may be moderated by cues related to client deservingness, specifically in the form of their expressions of burden.

Our study also carries practical implications for policymakers, including local public service managers. It prompts consideration of whether clients might receive differing service based on variations in individual frontline workers' agency orientation and a client's expression of burden. If such disparities exist, public officials may be rightfully concerned about potential violations of administrative principles and public values. Policy action and managerial efforts to rectify these disparities may be warranted. As we discuss later, our research offers insights into one

potential lever for influencing – and thus aligning – frontline workers' agency orientation.

Theory

Agency orientation and decision-making

The exercise of discretion in bureaucratic systems presents dilemmas concerning administrative legitimacy and accountability (Koven 2019; Lowi 1969). Dilemmas that arise from differential bureaucratic behaviour and decision-making towards individual citizens and clients who possess otherwise equal rights and entitlements. Disparities in service delivery, not explicitly outlined in policies and their associated protocols and practices (Denhardt and Denhardt 2015; Rivera and Knox 2023), may result in deviations from core administrative principles such as legality, equity, impartiality, and due process for individual citizens (Bozeman 2007; Bozeman and Johnson 2015; Frederickson 2010).

Indeed, the public administration literature has long emphasized how factors, not codified in formal policy and procedures, influence frontline worker behaviour towards citizens and clients. For example, research shows the presence of discriminatory biases related to race and gender in frontline work (Andersen and Guul 2019; Olsen, Kyhse-Andersen, and Moynihan 2022; Pedersen and Nielsen 2020; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018; Petersen 2021). Similarly, street-level bureaucracy research indicates that frontline workers often experience psychological stress when delivering public services (Gofen 2014; Hill and Hupe 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), prompting coping behaviours such as bending or breaking rules for clients, rationing or routinizing service, and prioritizing among clients based on perceived deservingness (Davidovitz and Cohen 2022; Dubois 2010; Evans 2013; Guul et al. 2021; Hansen 2022; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Lipsky 1980; Tummers et al. 2015).

Within this domain of the street-level bureaucracy literature, a key insight underscores that frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making are widely shaped by their agency orientation, conceptualized as either 'state-agent' or 'citizen-agent' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). In the *state-agent* orientation, frontline workers primarily see themselves as 'government employees who are charged with carrying out the plans and policies of government agencies' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 337). Operating as state-agents, they adhere not only to policy rules and regulations but also to self-interest in simplifying their work. Supporting this notion, studies have documented instances where frontline workers prioritize easy-to-serve clients (Baviskar 2019; Guul et al. 2021), leading to a tendency to 'process rather than engage clients' (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 337).

In the *citizen-agent* orientation, frontline workers are primarily guided by their perception of the best interests of the citizens and clients. This entails making moral judgements about clients' worthiness before applying rules and regulations (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Strict adherence to formal rules and regulation becomes a secondary concern, as policy rules and procedures are viewed and used as flexible tools that may be adapted when frontline workers perceive clients as deserving of assistance or may be enforced to penalize clients perceived as undeserving.

While some frontline workers may primarily align with the state-agent orientation most of the time, research suggests that the majority are predominantly guided by the

citizen-agent orientation (Guul et al. 2021; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000, 2003; for recent studies arguing for additional agency orientations, see; Cecchini and Harrits 2022; Gassner and Gofen 2018; Zacka 2017). This notion is bolstered by research indicating that public service employees, in general, exhibit high levels of public service motivation (Perry and Wise 1990). Frontline workers display a drive to positively impact 'specific others', referring to the clients they serve (Andersen, Pallesen, and Pedersen 2011; Bolino and Grant 2016; Vandenabeele 2008). This dynamic is particularly relevant in conditional welfare policies, where interactions between frontline workers and clients are far from automated (Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018). Instead, frontline workers play a critical role in shaping policy outcomes – for example, by enforcing financial penalties on non-compliant clients or prioritizing efforts to assist those too vulnerable to meet the demands independently.

However, important questions remain unresolved regarding how and whether the relative prominence of these dual agency orientations within individual can be influenced, as well as the causal impact of such priming on behaviour and decision-making towards individual clients.

Agency orientation priming

Building on existing research into frontline workers' agency orientation, we theorize that priming their agency orientation will influence their behavioural inclinations towards clients. Priming and its effects are well-established concepts in both behavioural psychology (Bargh 2006; Kahneman 2011) and the study of framing effects in political behaviour (Chong and Druckman 2007; Zaller 1992). Exposure to one 'stimulus' (such as an agency orientation cue) can influence responses to a subsequent 'stimulus' (such as a decision task related to behaviour and decision-making towards a client), without conscious guidance or intention. Although priming research in public administration has been described as limited (see Ngoye et al. 2018), studies have explored priming effects in domains such as citizen service evaluations (Hjortskov 2017; Marvel 2016), performance information processing (James and Van Ryzin 2016), and public service motivation (Christensen and Wright 2018; Pedersen 2015).

With priming defined as ' … *a procedure that increases the accessibility of some category or construct in memory*' (Chong and Druckman 2007, 115), we expect that priming an agency orientation may enhance the salience of that orientation (relative to the other), making it more accessible and relevant in individuals' mental processing. This increased accessibility is, in turn, likely to prompt responses that aligns with the primed orientation. This intuition is consistent with priming and framing theory (Chong and Druckman 2007; Zaller 1992), which suggests that people draw their opinions from a set of considerations stored in memory, with only some of these considerations becoming accessible at a given moment. Priming, therefore, can make certain available considerations more accessible, applicable or 'strong' in people's evaluations.

Integrating the insights discussed above, we expect that priming a citizen-agent (vs. state-agent) orientation may reduce frontline workers' inclination to 'move against clients' while increasing their tendency to 'move towards them' (Tummers et al. 2015). For example, in the context of unemployment agency casework and situations involving client non-compliance, 'citizen-agents' may (a) be less likely to impose a sanction,

and (b) show greater willingness to seek additional information about the client's needs and circumstances. Specifically, as 'citizens-agents' are guided more by the interests of citizens and clients, including their well-being and development, over strict adherence to policy rules and regulations, we expect that:

H1: *Frontline workers are more likely to act in the favor of clients when primed by a citizen-agent orientation cue (as opposed to a state-agent orientation cue).*

For clarity, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) posit that while most frontline workers are predominantly 'citizen-agents', they may occasionally exhibit behaviour guided by the state-agent orientation. As previously discussed, the two agency orientations are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are coexisting role identities that frontline workers often embody simultaneously. While the citizen-agent orientation may serve as the predominant and most salient guide to behaviour for many frontline workers most of the time, specific contexts and situations – such as an agency orientation prime – may activate and increase the salience of the state-agent orientation, thus altering the relative prominence of the two. In line with social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Hogg, Terry, and White 1995; Tajfel and Turner 1979), the agency orientations may be actively invoked in different settings.

Client expressions of burden

Agency orientation, as conceptualized by Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), centres on a specific characteristic of frontline workers: their self-perception regarding their primary allegiance (whether to the 'state' or the 'citizens') and their role in service delivery. Importantly, this perspective revolves around frontline workers' self-perception of their own role identity. It does not directly consider the specific attributes and behaviours of clients and how these characteristics are perceived by frontline workers.

Yet, additional research within the field of street-level bureaucracy emphasizes the importance of frontline workers' perceptions of their clients. Variations in these perceptions, influenced by clients' demographics and behaviours, can impact frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making in their interactions with clients. Indeed, Lipsky (1980) underscores that frontline workers often prioritize assisting citizens whom they perceive to be in greater need or vulnerable positions. A fundamental notion supported by studies documenting the impact of frontline workers' perceptions of clients' deservingness on their decision-making (Guul et al. 2021; Hansen 2022; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Petersen 2021).

In particular, research highlights how frontline workers may rely on a 'deservingness heuristic' (Jilke and Tummers 2018; see also Petersen 2012; Petersen et al. 2011) – an automatic (implicit) mental process regarding their clients' perceived deservingness of help. This heuristic, a subtype of the broader affect heuristic (Kahneman 2011; Skagerlund et al. 2020), operates based on client attributes serving as cues for deservingness, implicitly prompting frontline workers to treat various clients differently (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Van Oorschot 2000).

While *client demographics*, such as employment status, race, and religion, have been linked to perceptions of deservingness, shaping attitudes and behaviour towards clients (Bansak, Hainmueller, and Hangartner 2016; Jensen and Petersen 2017; Schram et al.

2009), recent research on client deservingness in frontline work has broadened its focus to include non-demographic characteristics associated with *client behavior*. Jilke and Tummers (2018) show that teachers often prioritize students in need of help ('needed deservingness') or those demonstrating significant effort ('earned deservingness') in the US context. Their findings also suggest that teachers tend to favour Hispanic and Black students over White students based on 'needed deservingness', indicating a bias towards rather than discrimination against racial minorities. A finding that aligns with some studies (Einstein and Glick 2017; Petersen 2021) but contrasts with others (Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018; Schram et al. 2009). Similarly, Guul et al. (2021) show how caseworkers' perceptions of client deservingness, particularly regarding clients' display of motivation and competence, influence their behaviour towards clients. They find that both of these cues related to deservingness have positive effects on caseworkers' willingness to provide extra help (even at the expense of less time for other clients). This suggests that frontline workers not only prioritize motivated (diligent) clients over less motivated (lazy) ones based on perceptions of 'earned deservingness', but also favour competent, or 'easy-to-serve', clients based on 'resource deservingness' (see also Baviskar 2019).

However, there is limited research on how clients *themselves*—through the information they convey during interactions with frontline workers – can shape frontline workers' perceptions of client deservingness. One notable exception is a recent study by Halling and Petersen (2024), indicating that when citizens express experiences of 'administrative burden' – referring to learning, compliance, and psychological costs in their interactions with the state (Herd and Moynihan 2018) – frontline workers may respond by prioritizing these clients over others and engaging in activities to alleviate their burdens.

Understanding the impacts of such client-to-worker communication is important, as administrative burdens are inherent in many policies and can negatively affect citizen, resulting in the expenditure of time, effort, resources, and reducing their overall well-being and programme uptake (Baekgaard et al. 2021; Baekgaard, Herd, and Moynihan 2023; Herd and Moynihan 2018; Linos and Riesch 2020; Moynihan et al. 2022). On the one hand, we acknowledge the possibility that some frontline workers may not perceive the burden expressed by clients as universally legitimate information, thus not influencing their perception of client deservingness. On the other hand, existing research supports that frontline workers are inclined to perceive clients as more deserving when they express experiences of burden (Halling and Petersen 2024), aligning with the broader concept of the deservingness heuristic.

Arising from evolved biological adaptions that aided our early ancestors navigate small-scale social groups and communities (Petersen 2012, 2015), individuals who openly express personal hardships may elicit sympathy and a sense of deserving help. A deservingness response that is more likely when the individual is perceived as needing more assistance than others and having little control over their situation. Van Oorschot (2000) highlights that deservingness attitudes depend on specific criteria, like perceiving a high need for help and low control over that neediness. From this perspective, we theorize that clients expressing experiences of burdens related to policy compliance during interactions with frontline workers will likely be perceived as having a greater need for help. Moreover, when clients express burden experiences directly linked to formal policy rules and regulation requiring compliance, they

are also perceived as having limited control over their situation. Consequently, when clients express a burden related to policy compliance, they may appear more deserving to frontline workers. This, in turn, can affect the behaviour and decision-making of frontline workers. For example, it may decrease their likelihood of imposing sanctions on clients for policy non-compliance while increasing their propensity to seek additional information regarding the client's needs and circumstances. With this rationale, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: *Frontline workers are more likely to act in the favor of clients who express experiences of administrative burden (as opposed to those who do not express such experiences).*

Interaction: agency orientation priming and expression of burden

Finally, we posit that the effects of priming frontline workers' agency orientation on their tendencies to act in favour of clients could be significantly influenced by whether clients express experiences of burdens related to policy compliance. We ground this expectation in the core concept of agency orientation and the previously established link between deservingness perceptions and clients expressing burdens.

Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) suggest that 'citizen-agents' are predominantly guided by their interpretation of what serves the clients' best interests. However, this orientation does not imply equal treatment of all clients. The citizen-agent orientation entails making moral judgements about clients' worthiness. In this perspective, strict adherence to formal rules and regulation becomes a secondary concern, as policy guidelines are viewed as flexible tools that can be adjusted based on frontline workers' perceptions of whether clients *deserve* assistance or sanctions. Hence, since clients who express experiences of burdens related to policy compliance are perceived as more deserving of assistance, we expect that 'citizen-agents' may be especially inclined to act in favour of clients who express such burdens. Although 'citizen-agents' may typically be less inclined to impose sanctions on clients for policy non-compliance and more inclined to seek additional information related to the client's needs and circumstances compared to 'state-agents', this inclination may be further heightened when clients express experiences of burdens. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: *The impact of a citizen-agent orientation priming cue (compared to a state-agent orientation priming cue) on actions favoring clients is more pronounced when clients express experiences of administrative burden (as opposed to when clients do not express such experiences).*

Data and research design

We employed a survey experiment to test our hypotheses, following a methodology similar to previous studies exploring causal explanations of frontline worker behaviour (Guul et al. 2021; Hansen 2022; Jilke and Tummers 2018; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018). Specifically, we integrated a vignette experiment into a nationwide online survey distributed to caseworkers at municipal unemployment agencies, referred to as *Jobcenters*, across Denmark.

We focus on caseworkers at these agencies for several reasons. Firstly, the Danish unemployment sector is heavily regulated, with stringent conditions attached to receiving benefits (Knotz 2020). While unemployment benefit recipients receive relatively generous allowances, they are also subject to extensive compliance requirements. Specifically, caseworkers play a central role in assisting and monitoring unemployed clients in their job search, which includes tasks like conducting one-on-one meetings with clients to provide feedback on their CVs, discussing available job opportunities, exploring options for further education, and recommending internships. However, caseworkers also have the responsibility to actively monitor their clients' compliance with the specified policy conditions of the unemployment benefit scheme – aligning with the state-agent perspective. This entails ensuring that client attends regular mandatory meetings at their Jobcenter, consistently apply for open jobs, and actively engage in job activation programmes. Caseworkers are empowered to levy financial sanctions on clients in accordance with the level of non-compliance with these and other policy requirements.[3]

Importantly, however, policy also prescribes that their decision-making regarding sanctioning must take into account each client's social and health-related capabilities to prevent significantly worsening already challenging living conditions. Consequently, this authority grants substantial discretion to caseworkers in determining when to apply sanctions (aligning with a state-agent orientation) and when to prioritize providing extra attention to clients (aligning with a citizen-agent orientation), thereby raising questions about the influence of the two agency orientations in navigating such complex decisions. Recent studies show that working in such environments can lead to experiences of perceived red tape and stress among employees in these sectors (Madsen 2024; Mikkelsen et al. 2023).

Our study was preregistered at the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/ft42k?view_only=83fa5b2f914a453c8d0d0edb685b1cbd).[4] Data and code files are available at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15367336. Ethical approval for the study was granted by VIVE's ethical committee.

Data

We collected the survey data between January and February 2023. Initially, we contacted all 94 Danish municipal unemployment agencies to introduce our study and invite their participation. Out of these, 39 agencies responded positively. While most agencies shared an email list of their current caseworkers, some distributed a survey link to their employees. Among the caseworkers we contacted directly, the response rate was 47 percent.

Our analytical sample consists of 813 caseworkers, with a majority identifying as female (81%). The mean respondent is 48 years old, holds a medium-cycle higher education qualification, has around 10 years of work experience as caseworker, and primarily serves cash benefit recipients as their client group. For more detailed descriptive sample statistics, including item response distributions, see Appendix A.

While not a strict probability sample, the sample displays diversity and is approximately representative of similar samples collected from the same target group in previous studies (Guul et al. 2021; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018). Power analysis indicates that the sample size is adequate for detecting effects with a size of $d > .17$ for H1 and H2, and $d > .21$ for H3.[5]

Experimental design

We use an experimental vignette design with two treatments and repeated measures of the dependent variables to assess our hypotheses. Respondents were presented with three different vignettes, each depicting an unemployed cash benefit recipient who had violated a core policy condition for benefit payment and provided a purported reason for this non-compliance (as expressed by the client).

Vignette 1 illustrates a client who failed to submit the required number of job applications due to unstable housing for their family. Vignette 2 presents a client who missed a mandatory Jobcenter meeting, attributing the absence to a headache on the meeting day without consulting a doctor. Vignette 3 details a client who was absent from mandatory job training for a few weeks, citing concern for their child's mental health. All vignettes contained information indicating that the client had been informed about the formal sanctioning policy, a prerequisite for considering sanctions in cases of client policy non-compliance. Essentially, each vignette presents a realistic yet complex situation where the appropriate course of action for caseworkers is not explicitly outlined in policy, relying on their judgement. To facilitate ecological validity, the vignettes were refined and validated through pre-survey focus group interviews with six caseworkers. These interviews assessed the caseworkers' perceptions of client neediness after reviewing the treatment texts, evaluated the realism of the burden cues, and ensured that the outcome variables captured plausible and

Table 1. Agency orientation prompts.

State-agent orientation	Citizen-agent orientation
As a caseworker, you are tasked with various responsibilities. Among other tasks, you have to help ensure that **citizens adhere to the availability requirements mandated for welfare recipients**. Next, you will be presented with a few brief case descriptions concerning welfare recipients. For each case, you will be asked to indicate what you believe is the right course of action. Please indicate what will best ensure that the **enforcement of the current rules and demands onto the client.**	As a caseworker, you are tasked with various responsibilities. Among other tasks, you have to help ensure that **the situation and needs of citizens are taken into account**. Next, you will be presented with a few brief case descriptions concerning welfare recipients. For each case, you will be asked to indicate what you believe is the right course of action. Please indicate what will best ensure that the **situation and needs of the client are taken into account**.

Agency orientation prompts are highlighted with bold font for presentation purposes. Bold font was not used in the survey itself.

contextually relevant actions within the depicted scenarios. The complete vignettes appear in Appendix B.

To address concerns about potential order effects biases, the vignettes were presented in random order. Using three vignettes allows for pooling of data across them, thereby enhancing statistical power and improving the generalizability of results to different aspects of policy non-compliance and client scenarios.

Treatment 1: agency orientation

Before being exposed to the vignettes, all respondents were subject to an agency orientation priming cue. They were randomly assigned to receive either a 'state-agent orientation' or a 'citizen-agent orientation' prompt. Table 1 presents the content of the two prompts.[6]

To maintain consistency, the agency orientation prompts were fixed at the respondent level, ensuring each respondent received the same prompt across all vignettes. This method enables estimation of effects based on between-respondent variation. Additionally, to reinforce the cognitive saliency of the agency orientation prompts throughout the survey, a sentence of text preceded the response items in each vignette, reminding respondents of their initial agency orientation prompt.[7]

Treatment 2: burden feedback

In each vignette, the client's information included a manipulation of burden feedback. For respondents randomly assigned to the burden feedback treatment, the client expressed a burdensome experience. In contrast, for those assigned to a non-burden feedback condition, the client did not report any experiences of administrative burden. The burden feedback cues were as follows (with 'X' referring to the client):

- Vignette 1: '*X also mentions finding it very overwhelming to apply for multiple jobs each week and that he often feels incompetent when employers reject his applications*.'
- Vignette 2: '*Moreover, X shares that he has faced intrusive questions about his personal finances and private life during previous meetings at the job center. He finds it uncomfortable and fails to see its relevance to efforts to re-enter the labor market*.'
- Vignette 3: '*X also expresses that the utility job placement seems futile for finding employment. The tasks assigned to X seem unnecessary, and X feels that neither the manager nor the other employees show interest in getting to know her*.'

The burden feedback cues convey psychological costs experienced by clients as they adhere to benefit conditionality. These cues were designed to broadly align with basic psychological needs, drawing from Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2018). In Vignette 1, reflecting the need for 'competence', the client expresses feelings of overwhelm and incompetence in fulfiling job search requirements. Vignette 2, relating to the need for 'autonomy', highlights a sense of autonomy loss and discomfort caused by supervision perceived as irrelevant to employment prospects. Finally, Vignette 3, associated with the need for 'relatedness', emphasizes inefficiency and redundancy in benefit compliance tasks, along with discomfort arising from social exclusion. In this way, all burden feedback cues depict a client expressing significant burdens. As

noted, we validated the realism of these burden feedback cues during pilot interviews, ensuring their relevance to common client experiences and confirming that the outcome variables reflected plausible caseworker responses. As the burden feedback cues were randomly assigned within each vignette, the burden feedback condition could vary across vignettes for each respondent. This setup enables the estimation of effects using variation both within and between respondents.

Outcome measures

As outcome measures, we aim to capture two distinct behavioural responses that frontline workers may exhibit in real-life situations when clients display policy non-compliance (as depicted in the vignettes). First, we measure respondents' inclinations to impose a sanction on the client. This focus is relevant because sanctions are not automatically imposed but depend on the professional discretion of the frontline workers. Additionally, sanctions typically involve a significant reduction in the unemployment benefits received by clients, regardless of their responsibility for policy non-compliance, effectively representing an act against the clients. Second, we measure respondents' inclinations to schedule an additional meeting with the client. In the context of unemployment casework and client policy non-compliance, this meeting would aim to gather supplementary information regarding the client's needs and circumstances. Importantly, these extra meetings are discretionary and do not negate the potential for imposing sanctions. Additionally, such meetings would increase the caseworker's workload, rendering this information-seeking behaviour an act in favour of the client.

Specially, respondents were asked to provide their responses to two items after each vignette: (a) '*How likely is it that you would work towards imposing a sanction on X [the client]?*' and (b) '*How likely is it that you would request an extra meeting with X [the client] to gain a deeper understanding of their situation? Please assume that this will take time away from meetings with other clients.*' Consistent with previous research involving unemployment caseworkers (Guul et al. 2021; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018), responses were collected using an 11-point scale, ranging from 0 = 'Highly unlikely' to 10 = 'Highly likely'. For conciseness, we label these measures as 'sanctioning' and 'information-seeking', respectively.

Estimation

All analyses adhere to our preregistered analysis plan. We use linear (OLS) regression to estimate intention-to-treat (ITT) effects, clustering standard errors at the respondent level. The primary analyses involve the pooled responses across vignettes. A significance alpha (α) level of .05 distinguishes 'significant' from 'non-significant' results. To assess H1 and H2, each outcome is regressed on two binary treatment variables: citizen-agent orientation (vs. state-agent orientation) and client expression of burden (vs. no expression of burden). To test H3, each outcome is regressed on the same two binary treatment variables along with a binary interaction term ('citizen-agent' orientation × client expression of burden).

Results

Figure 1 shows the average effects of our agency orientation prompts and burden feedback cues on caseworkers' inclinations to engage in (a) 'sanctioning' and (b) 'information-seeking' behaviour.

We observe significant differences in outcomes among our agency orientation prompts. Compared to respondents in the 'state-agent' condition, those primed with the 'citizen-agent' prompt exhibit a *decreased* inclination to impose a sanction ($b = -1.140$; $p < .001$) and an *increased* inclination to engage in additional information-seeking ($b = .313$; $p = .045$). These effects correspond to Cohen's d values of about .34 and .12, respectively.

However, we observe no significant differences in outcomes among our burden feedback cues. Compared to respondents in the baseline condition ('no expression of burden'), those receiving the 'expression of burden' cues show no significant inclination to either impose a sanction ($p = .357$) or engage in additional information-seeking ($p = .579$).

Therefore, we reject the null hypothesis for H1 (at $\alpha = .05$): A citizen-agent orientation priming cue (relative to a state-agent orientation priming cue) appears to *decrease* caseworkers' inclination to impose sanctions while *increasing* their likelihood of seeking additional information related to the client's needs and circumstances. Conversely, we do not reject the null hypothesis for H2 (at $\alpha = .05$): Clients' expressions of burden related to policy compliance do not appear to significantly affect caseworkers' inclinations for sanctioning or information-seeking.

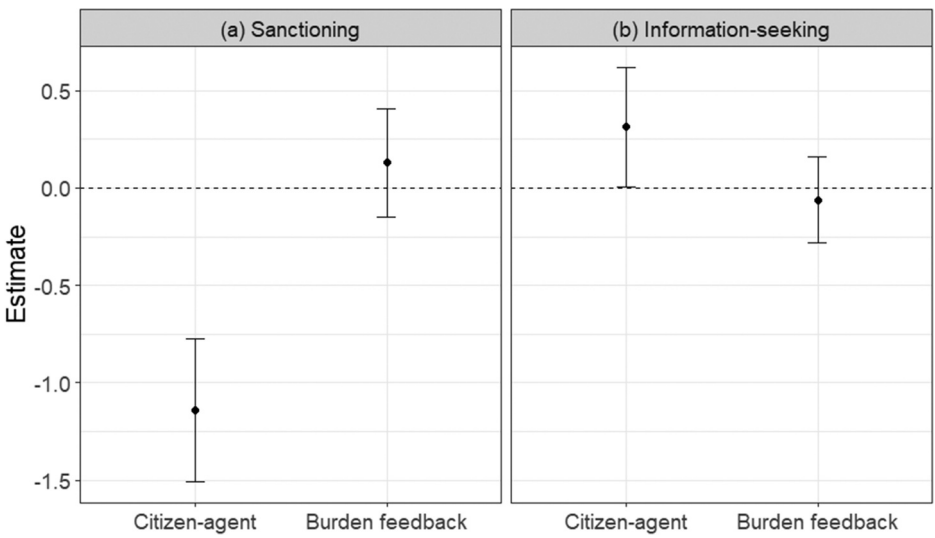


Figure 1. Effects of agency orientation and burden feedback on sanctioning and information-seeking. Dots represent coefficient estimates, with 'State-agent' and 'No burden feedback' as the respective reference categories, while vertical lines depict 95 percent confidence intervals. The underlying OLS regression models appear in Appendix C, Table C1, models 1 and 3.

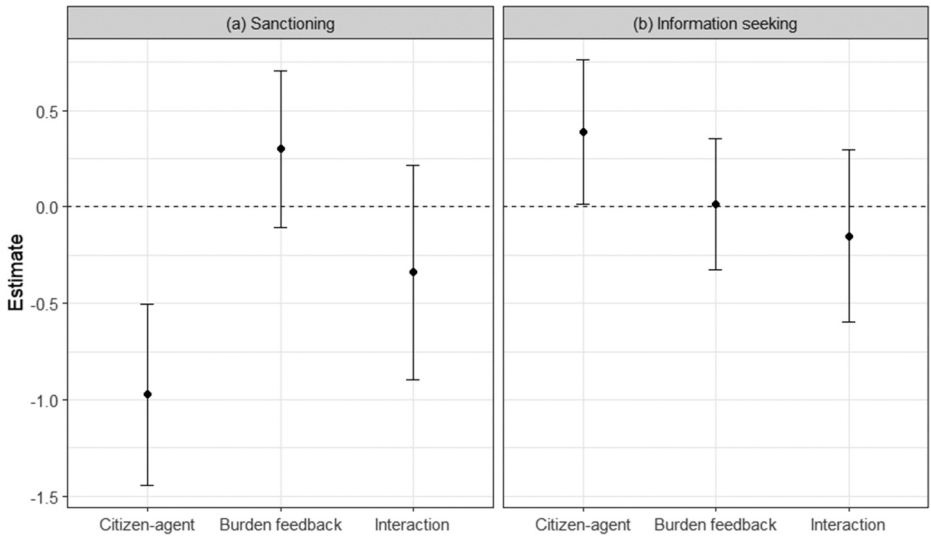


Figure 2. Effects of agency orientation on sanctioning and information-seeking by burden feedback. Dots represent coefficient estimates, with 'State-agent' and 'No burden feedback' as the respective reference categories, while vertical lines depict 95 percent confidence intervals. The underlying OLS regression models appear in Appendix C, Table C1, models 2 and 4.

Interaction effects

Do the significant effects of agency orientation priming on outcomes vary depending on whether clients express experiences of burden? For visual clarity, Figure 2 displays the estimated interaction effects regarding caseworkers' intentions to engage in (a) 'sanctioning' and (b) 'information-seeking' behaviour.

We find no substantial evidence of an interaction effect between agency orientation priming and the expression of burden for our two outcomes. The estimated effects of the 'citizen-agent' prompt (compared to the 'state-agent' prompt) do not significantly differ between the two burden feedback cues. The *p*-values associated with the interaction term coefficients for our two outcomes are not significant ($p = .234$ and .506, respectively).

Thus, we do not reject the null hypothesis for H3 (at $\alpha = .05$): Clients' expressions of burden related to policy compliance do not appear to substantially moderate the effects of priming a citizen-agent orientation (as opposed to a state-agent orientation) on caseworkers' inclinations to engage in (a) 'sanctioning' and (b) 'information-seeking' behaviour.

Robustness analyses

We conducted a series of additional analyses to assess the robustness of our findings. Specifically, we examined (a) effect heterogeneity across the three vignettes, (b) robustness using alternative model specifications and estimators, and (c) supporting analyses to strengthen the interpretation of our results. As detailed in Appendix D, none of these analyses qualitatively challenge or invalidate our main findings and inferences.

We included explicit preambles to remind respondents of their randomly assigned agency orientation prompt before they responded to each vignette. Initially, there might be a concern that this design feature could prompt respondents to answer qualitatively different questions rather than activating their assigned agency orientation. However, it is important to note that our agency orientation prompts do not explicitly instruct the frontline workers to sanction or invite clients for extra meetings. Moreover, a manipulation check, detailed in Appendix E, reveals that respondents in the 'citizen-agent' condition are more inclined to identify citizen well-being as their primary job focus compared to those in the 'state-agent' condition. This finding directly validates the effectiveness of our agency orientation manipulation in influencing the saliency of the respondents' agency orientations – and it further strengthens our assertion that the salience of agency orientations can indeed be primed through informational prompts and is causally linked to decision-making regarding clients.

Discussion and conclusion

How does priming the agency orientation of frontline workers ('citizen-agent' vs. 'state-agent') and the expressions of burden by clients regarding policy compliance affect the behaviour and decision-making of frontline workers when addressing clients exhibiting policy non-compliance?

Using a pre-registered vignette experiment conducted among unemployment caseworkers, we show that explicitly priming a 'citizen-agent' orientation (emphasizing '*consideration of the client's needs and situation*') as opposed to a 'state-agent' orientation (focused on '*enforcement of policy rules and regulations*') may significantly influence frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making towards clients. Our findings emphasize the substantive impact that variation in agency orientations can have on citizens – affecting both normative considerations, such as public values like equity, and descriptive aspects, including the actual service received by individual clients. Furthermore, our findings illustrate how straightforward agency orientation priming can alter frontline workers' agency orientation – and, thus, their behaviour and decision-making when interacting with clients. These insights hold considerable implications for both theory and practice. First, our results contribute to theory by elucidating the dynamic nature of frontline workers' agency orientations, showing how the relative salience of these orientations can be effectively prompted by emphasizing different aspects of their core responsibilities. Second, our findings offer practical insights, suggesting that public service managers have the potential to shift the prominence of specific agency orientations to align with particular organizational objectives.

We did not observe substantive effects, either direct or moderating, of clients' expression of burden. These null findings suggest that client expression of burden may have minimal or negligible effects on frontline workers' behaviour and decision-making. While the absence of moderating effects was expected due to the lack of a direct effect, the null finding for direct effects is intriguing. It implies that burden feedback from clients may not influence deservingness perceptions and subsequent decision-making. This notion aligns with comparable findings among politicians (Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2021) but diverges from previous research involving frontline workers (Halling and Petersen 2024). One plausible explanation for this variation in

results may stem from contextual disparities between studies. For example, Halling and Petersen's (2024) empirical setting and research design differ from ours in at least three important ways. First, our examination focuses on a specific decision context: client non-compliance with policy, whereas clients in Halling and Petersen's study have adhered to policy. Frontline workers may approach non-compliant clients differently than those who comply with formal policy. Although our burden feedback cues align with prominent deservingness criteria (Van Oorschot 2000) and reflect realistic expressions of burdens, frontline workers may interpret them as clients' personal justifications for policy non-compliance. Rather than enhancing citizens' deservingness, some frontline workers may interpret these expressions of burdens as self-serving, potentially deceptive, or strategic attempts by clients to sway decision-making in their favour. Ignoring such expressions might, therefore, serve as a coping strategy to uphold objectivity, legitimacy, and equity in decision-making. Consequently, such cues might not significantly influence deservingness perceptions compared to other types of feedback or cues in different decision context.

Second, Halling and Petersen (2024) examine related yet distinct outcome variables. Specifically, they explore how the expression of burdens affects frontline workers' inclination to assist clients and their inclination to alleviate burdens. Third, our findings are situated within a decision context where frontline workers are prompted to be aware of their work tasks and responsibilities through our agency orientation prompts. This heightened awareness may potentially overshadow or suppress the use of deservingness heuristics based on burden signals. If this hypothesis holds true, it underscores the need for additional research and implies that managerial interventions to prompt workers' attention to formal work tasks could mitigate the risk of deservingness bias in bureaucratic decision-making.

Overall, our results offer encouragement and promise, particularly in their implications for equity and due process for individual clients. Notably, we uncover no evidence of inequitable treatment based on clients' expression of administrative burdens. This is significant because such expressions may stem not only from administrative burdens but also from 'clients' personal communication'. inclinations, resources, extroversion, and openness in sharing feelings with strangers – factors that, in principle, should not serve as deservingness cues (J. Christensen et al. 2020). However, we do find an impact when priming a 'citizen-agent' orientation, compared to a 'state-agency' orientation, leading to decision-making that more strongly prioritizes client welfare in enforcing rules and regulations. While reducing the likelihood of sanctions may alleviate the burden of administrative procedures, inviting clients for additional meetings could be seen as increasing their compliance costs. This dynamic suggests that when guided by a citizen-agent orientation, frontline workers prioritize client welfare, 'move towards clients'. However, in doing so, they may inadvertently increase interactions and, consequently, impose higher administrative burdens for clients.

Our study contributes to both the literature on street-level bureaucracy and administrative burdens. Regarding the former, we provide causal evidence of the link between agency orientation and decision-making, addressing the need for more causal evidence in this area (Jensen and Pedersen 2023). Moreover, we demonstrate that the salience of agency orientations can be actively influenced and potentially aligned with

public organizations work tasks and values by priming interventions. Concerning the latter, we contribute to the emerging field within administrative burden research, which explores variations in attitudes and tolerance towards administrative burden among politicians (Aarøe et al. 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2021) and the broader public (Campbell and Ahn 2023; Halling et al. 2020; Keiser and Miller 2020; Stenderup and Pedersen 2024). However, research on frontlines workers' responses to burden feedback from client is notably limited.

Notes

1. Highlighting the academic impact of their work, the publishing journal's webpage shows that since 2017, the article had been downloaded 4,850 times and cited 485 times (as of April 26, 2024). According to Google Scholar Citations, the article has received a total of 900 citations (also as of April 26, 2024).
2. Thus, we are not implying that individual frontline workers possess either a citizen-agent orientation or a state-agent orientation, nor that an prompt may effectively change an individual to be inherently less (or more) orientated towards the interests of their clients versus policy adherence. The two agency orientations coexist within most frontline workers, with the citizen-agent orientation potentially being more salient than the state-agent orientation among most frontline workers most of the time. In this context, our focus is on the effect of frontline workers being guided by their citizen-agent orientation as opposed to their state-agent orientation, and whether their agency orientation can be prompted (i.e. whether the relative saliency of the two orientations can be shifted).
3. Frontline workers surveyed for this study have the authority to sanction clients, although the procedures may vary slightly depending on the specific unemployment agency. In some agencies, caseworkers can directly impose sanctions, while in others, the process differs, with specific benefit offices administering sanctions based on information provided by caseworkers.
4. The preregistration details include hypotheses, experimental design, measures, and analysis plan. It outlines two sub-hypotheses for each of our three main hypotheses, focusing on (a) inclinations for sanctioning clients and (b) calling in clients for an extra meeting. For brevity, we theoretically explicate only the main hypotheses, but our empirical testing and reporting adhere to all six preregistered sub-hypotheses.
5. At $\alpha = .95$, power = .8, and considering three vignettes ('repeated measures') with an expected moderate-to-high correlation of .7 among the responses across vignettes within respondents. Based on G*Power ('ANOVA: Repeated measures, between factors') with effect sizes *d* based on two and four groups, respectively.
6. To enhance the realism of both prompts, formal policy guidelines mandate caseworkers to both enforce rules and demands *while* considering the citizen's situation and needs (LAB 2019). Additionally, the treatments underwent validation by caseworkers during focus group interviews.
7. Caseworkers assigned to the 'state-agency' condition received the text: '*Remember that we ask you to indicate what will best ensure that enforcement of the current rules and demands*', while those assigned to the 'citizen-agency' condition received the text: '*Remember that we ask you to indicate what will best ensure that the situation and needs of the client are taken into account*'.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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