CREAMING AMONG CASEWORKERS: EFFECTS OF CLIENT COMPETENCE AND CLIENT MOTIVATION ON CASEWORKER PRIOTIZATION OF CLIENTS

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ABSTRACT

Frontline employees cope with high workloads and limited resources by prioritizing their clients. Research suggests that frontline employees direct their attention and work efforts toward particular clients at the expense of other clients. Yet the role of client attributes in the frontline employees' prioritization of clients remains undertheorized and empirically understudied. Using a survey experimental vignette design (2x2 factorial) among 1,595 Danish caseworkers, this article provides new knowledge on how two salient client attributes—competence and motivation—shape the frontline employees' prioritization of clients. We find novel evidence for an asymmetric interplay effect: In line with theoretical expectations, caseworkers are more willing to exert extra effort helping clients who exhibit competence and motivation. However, clients' motivation appears to be a more important factor than clients' competence for caseworker prioritization of clients.

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

INTRODUCTION

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

Although the frontline employees' prioritization of clients serves as a mean to cope with high workloads and limited resources, prioritizing based on "creaming for substantive success" —hereafter referred to simply as "creaming"—constitutes an issue of academic attention and societal concern. In some policy areas, the frontline employees have formal authority to direct their attention and work efforts at particular clients, e.g., those most in need or first in line. Yet, creaming does not form a legitimate basis for prioritization of clients. Breaking with core administrative principles of equity and impartiality, prioritizing clients based on creaming considerations is not supported by formal rules and regulations, and may result in unequal treatment of citizens.

Research shows that the frontline employees' prioritization of clients may occur based on the clients' demographic characteristics, e.g., their race or ethnicity, or other client

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attributes, e.g., the clients' effort or performance as perceived by the frontline employees (Jilke and Tummers 2018). Scholars have substantially expanded our understanding of the impact of client race and ethnicity on public decision-making over the past decade (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016; Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rys 2018; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen 2018; Schram et al. 2009). However, expanded knowledge about the attributes of the clients that frontline employees choose to prioritize over other clients is needed. One strand of research suggests that frontline employees seek to reduce caseloads or improve performance ratings by prioritizing "easy" clients, that is, those with the highest likelihood of policy success (Tummers 2016; Van Berkel and Knies 2016). Another strand of research suggests that the frontline employees' assessment of clients' deservingness is the primary determinant of their decision-making (Schram et al. 2009). The two strands of research yield conflicting theoretical expectations. For example, say that the behavior of caseworkers working with unemployed clients is rooted primarily in creaming considerations. We may then expect for the caseworkers to prioritize the clients who they perceive as competent (as these clients are more likelihood to find employment rapidly). In contrast, say that the behavior of the caseworkers is driven mainly by deservingness considerations. We may then expect for the clients' competence to be of lesser importance, whereas other client attributes, such as their motivation, may be of greater importance. Although studies show that frontline employees cream in some instances (e.g., Tummers 2016) and rely on deservingness heuristics in others (e.g., Schram et al. 2009), the role of client attributes in the frontline employees' prioritization of clients remains undertheorized and empirically understudied. Unraveling what and how client attributes shape the frontline employees' prioritization of clients is both of scholarly relevance and practical importance. Ultimately, the frontline employees' behavior and decision-making add up to the agency policy (Lipsky 1980).

This article examines how clients' competence and motivation, as well as the interplay between these client attributes, influence the frontline employees' prioritization of the work effort invested in helping clients. We build on recent research demonstrating that the frontline employees' perception of a client's effort (related to motivation) and performance (related to competence) influences assessment of that client's deservingness—which, in turn, shape the employees' decision to prioritize helping that client (Jilke and Tummers 2018). Expanding on these insights, this article theorizes and tests how the interplay of clients' attributes is an essential component for understanding the frontline employees' prioritization of clients. In real-life, clients exhibit attributes related to both their competence and motivation, and the interplay of the two attributes may affect how the frontline employees perceive and treat the clients. We theorize that frontline employees' decisions to exert extra effort to help particular clients is a product of a distinct interplay between client attributes. When caseworkers interact with and assess a client, we argue that individual client attributes cannot be considered as separate entities. Frontline employees' assessments are shaped by general impressions of that client—an overall mental picture in which one client attribute may moderate the influence of another. The effect of a client's competence may depend on the client's motivation, and vice versa.

We derive our theoretical expectations from research suggesting how frontline employees can be considered either as "citizen-agents," wherein behavior is guided mostly by perception of client deservingness, or as "state-agents," wherein behavior is guided more by rule-following and self-interest (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000; 2003). Integrating the two perspectives, we build a theoretical model emphasizing how the interplay of client attributes shapes the frontline employees' prioritization of clients. Although frontline employees may prioritize less competent clients or less motivated clients, incompetent clients exhibiting low motivation do not align with neither the "citizen-agent" nor the "state-agent" narrative.

Thus, we theorize that a client who is perceived as both incompetent and unmotivated is seen neither as deserving of receiving extra help nor as more likely to succeed. Relative to the incompetent and unmotivated client, the frontline employees will, therefore, tend to prioritize clients who are perceived either as competent but unmotivated or as incompetent but motivated . Similarly, based on both the "citizen-agent" and "state-agent" narrative, we expect the frontline employees to prioritize competent and motivated clients over other types of clients. In the mixed cases, we recognize how the prioritizing of clients depends on whether the frontline employees act primarily as "citizen-agents" or "state-agents" (Wenger and Wilkins 2009). Still, because the "state-agent" perspective ascribes relatively greater importance to motivation than the "citizen-agent" perspective does to competence, we theorize that the frontline employees will tend to prioritize incompetent but motivated clients over competent but unmotivated clients.

We test our theoretical model using a 2x2 factorial survey experimental design among a sample of 1,595 unemployment caseworkers in Denmark. We examine how variations in clients' competence and clients' motivation affect caseworker willingness to exert extra effort to help clients get back into employment (at the expense of effort toward helping other clients). Our analyses show that both competence and motivation affect caseworkers' inclinations to prioritize clients in line with our theoretical model and expectations. We thus find novel evidence for an asymmetric interplay effect: The effect of the client attribute of competence appears conditioned by the client attribute of motivation. Client competence make caseworkers more likely to exert extra effort to help a client, but only when the client is also motivated. Conversely, while job competence appears to boost the positive effect of job motivation, client motivation improves the likelihood of receiving extra help from caseworkers irrespective of the client's job competence.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we develop a theoretical model integrating knowledge about street-level bureaucratic behavior and prioritization of clients. We use the model for deriving hypotheses about the role of clients' competence and clients' motivation in how frontline employees prioritize clients. Second, we discuss the empirical case and our research design. Third, we present the results of our analyses. In conclusion, we discuss the implications of our findings for how we may understand citizen-state interactions and the frontline employees' prioritization of clients.

THEORY

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

though the procedures may be contrary to agency policy" (Lipsky 1980, p. 19), creaming often entails that the strongest clients are prioritized at the expense of the weaker clients; those who are less likely to succeed. However, to what extent and how do client attributes, such as competence and motivation, induce the frontline employees to exert an extra effort helping some clients at the cost of deprioritizing others? This question remains largely unexamined in the literature.

An emerging experimental literature demonstrates how client attributes—in particular, race and ethnicity—affect frontline employees' treatment of clients (Andersen and Guul 2016; Pedersen, Stritch, and Thuesen, 2018), prioritization of response to clients' requests (Einstein and Glick 2017; White, Nathan, and Faller 2015), and the quality of answers they provide (Hemker and Rink 2017). However, some other studies find no difference in treatment for race and ethnicity (Grohs, Adam, and Knill 2016; Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rys 2018). The mixed findings may suggest that client characteristics cannot be meaningfully considered as separate entities. Frontline employees' reaction to one client characteristic may depend on other client attributes that modify the perception of clients (Hemker and Rink 2017; Schram et al. 2009)

While our understanding of racial and ethnic biases has expanded in recent years, few studies have examined how other client attributes, such as competence and motivation, influence the frontline employees' behavior and decision-making. Despite the lack of research, some studies argue that these non-demographic client attributes might be a main underlying explanation for differential treatment of clients. For example,

Jilke and Tummers (2018) theorize that frontline employees' perception of clients' effort (motivation) and performance (competence) influences their assessments of the clients' deservingness—shaping, in turn, the employees' prioritization of clients. Jilke and Tummers (2018) propose that the frontline employees' notion of deservingness is derived

from the clients' exhibition of high effort ("earned deservingness"), exhibition of low performance ("needed deservingness"), or exhibition of high performance ("resource deservingness"). However, their theoretical model and hypotheses suggests that frontline employees prioritize both the lowest performing clients, as these clients have the highest potential for improvement ("needed deservingness"), and the highest performing clients that are most likely to succeed ("resource deservingness"). Moreover, their model does not consider the potential interplay between client attributes.

In the following, we draw on the "state-agent"-"citizen-agent" perspective (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000) and theorize on how different client attributes condition the effect of other client attributes, and, thus, how the interplay of client attributes is an essential component for understanding the effects of client attributes on the frontline employees' prioritization of clients.

Theoretical Model

Frontline employees have different guides of behavior. According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), frontline employees can be perceived as "state-agents," that is, agents whose behavior is guided primarily by rule-following and self-interest that induces them to use their discretion for making their work "(…) easier, safer, and more rewarding" (339). Frontline employees do so by "(…) focusing on easier clients, and by avoiding, dismissing, or reducing contact with the unpleasant or impossible cases" (ibid.). This "state-agent" guide of behavior stands opposite to a "citizen-agent" narrative. From this perspective, the frontline employees choose their work and profession based on a profound interest in delivering high-quality public services to people in need. According to the "citizen-agent" perspective, the primary guide of behavior is whether the client is deserving of extra help (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2000). Both perspectives ground theoretical expectations emphasizing that the

behavior of the frontline employees depends on the clients' attributes. As has been the approach in previous studies (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Tummers 2016), we may consider the two perspectives separately when developing expectations about the frontline employees' prioritization of clients. However, we argue that frontline employees act following a combination of "state-agent" and "citizen-agent" guides of behavior, rather than one of the two narrative at a time. The two perspective operate simultaneously with the relative strength of each narrative potentially varying across individuals and policy contexts.

The two perspectives suggest that the client attributes of competence and motivation are important and assessable in interactions between frontline employees and their clients. According to the "state-agent" perspective, however, the clients' competence affects the likelihood of policy success. Clients' competence is therefore viewed as more important than their motivation. In contrast, the "citizen-agent" perspective emphasizes the importance of the perceived deservingness of the clients, with deservingness perceptions being often based on assumptions about the clients' motivation (Cosmides and Tooby 1992; Gilens 1999; Hauser et al. 2003; Petersen et al. 2011).

Regarding clients' motivation, Jilke and Tummers (2018) show how frontline employees are more likely to prioritize motivated clients, because these clients are perceived as more deserving. Although client motivation is mostly associated with the concept of deservingness (Petersen 2012; Schram et al. 2009), we also expect that the frontline employees' self-interest (and, thus, their "state-agent" guided behavior) make them more likely to prioritize motivated clients, as motivated clients are also more likely to succeed. Looking at the attributes separately, as has so far been the primary approach in the literature, thus leads to expectations about the relationship between clients' attributes and the frontline employees' prioritization of clients: frontline employees tend to prioritize competent clients and motivated clients.

However, we contest that the frontline employees' perceptions of clients are formed by a multitude of client attributes (Hemker and Rink 2017). Simply considering each client attribute separately is therefore an inadequate approach. For example, Schram et al. (2009) find effects of client race on the frontline employees' decision-making, but only when the respondents are simultaneously exposed to a negative cue verifying stereotypical beliefs.

Thus, when frontline employees interact with clients, they do not react to single attributes. Different client attributes modify or condition perceptions of other client attributes. Consequently, we need to examine how the interplay of client attributes influences frontline employees' client perception, as the overall mental picture of clients' likelihood of policy success and deservingness is shaped by the combination of attributes. For example, when school teachers decide which students to prioritize, they are not only assessing the students' competence, but also the students' motivation. Jilke and Tummer (2018) hypothesize that high client performance ("earned deservingness") increases the likelihood that frontline employees prioritize a client—which may be true on the average. However, we theorize that whether the client achieved a high performance through hard work (motivation), talent, or sheer luck may condition whether the "earned deservingness" matters or not. In other words, in order to understand how client competence affects the frontline employees' prioritization of clients, we have to consider client motivation as well (and vice versa).

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

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

Figure 1. Client Types

Imagine a baseline situation in which a frontline employee perceives a client as a "lazy novice"; incompetent and unmotivated. According to the "state-agent" perspective, the frontline employee is expectedly more inclined to prioritize "lazy experts," as these clients are more competent and, therefore, more likely to succeed. Similarly, according to the "citizen-state" perspective, we expect a frontline employee to be more inclined to prioritize "diligent novices," as these clients are more motivated and, therefore, more deserving of extra help. Thus we hypothesize:

H1: Frontline employees are more likely to prioritize clients who are competent, but unmotivated ("lazy experts") compared to clients who are incompetent and unmotivated ("lazy novices")

H2: Frontline employees are more likely to prioritize clients who are motivated, but incompetent ("diligent novices") compared to clients who are incompetent and unmotivated ("lazy novices")

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

H3: Frontline employees are more likely to prioritize clients who are motivated, but incompetent ("diligent novices") compared to clients who are competent, but unmotivated ("lazy experts")

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

H4: Frontline employees are most likely to prioritizing helping clients who are both competent and motivated ("diligent experts")

METHODS
We test our hypotheses in a sample of public caseworkers working with unemployed citizens in Denmark. Similar to frontline employees in other public service organizations, the unemployment caseworkers face situations of high demands for service and limited available resources (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011). The Danish unemployment service is organized in

94 municipal job centers. For receiving unemployment benefits, unemployed citizens are obligated to sign up at these centers. At the job centers, the caseworkers assist the clients with finding employment. For example, the caseworkers may assign the clients to internships or job training programs that help the clients becoming more attractive job candidates. Whereas the job training programs are often expensive, assignments to the internships are rare but in high demand among the unemployed, because they provide a better opportunity for future employment. Consequently, due to a limited amount of resources and a low supply of internships, caseworkers have to prioritize what clients to provide with job training programs and what clients to recommend for internships.

Design

Ideally, we would randomly assign the caseworkers to individual cases that are identical except for variation in client competence and motivation, and then observe how much time and effort the caseworkers spend on each case. However, because no two real-life cases are identical, we test our hypotheses using a 2x2 factorial survey experiment. Our design involves a stylized description of an unemployed client. Manipulating the client's job competence (low-high) and job motivation (low-high), we operate with four distinct treatments, each signifying a hypothetical client exhibiting a distinct combination of competence and motivation. Referring to Figure 1, we henceforth refer to the four treatment conditions as "lazy novice," "lazy expert, "diligent novice," and "diligent expert."

We took several remedies for ensuring the realism of our approach (we will discuss the limitations of our design in greater length later). First, we use a between-subject design where each caseworker were asked to evaluate a single client (rather than to prioritize between two or more clients). We believe that the between-subject design best reflects how caseworkers work and interacts with clients (in contrast, teachers engage with a classroom of

students). We are essentially interested in how the caseworkers prioritize the time and effort spent on each client, and not how they directly prioritize between clients. Second, when assessing clients, caseworkers have access to a multitude of relevant information about the clients. Therefore, we constructed a vignette describing an unemployed client on unemployment benefits that involved a relatively lengthy description of background information (e.g., the client's unemployment history, family situation, and personal challenges). The additional client information reduces the treatment intensity of our experimental manipulation of client competence and motivation—providing, in turn, for a tougher (more conservative) test of our hypotheses. Third, we embedded the cues about the client's competence and motivation in an evaluation from an employer of a short internship (a realistic way for caseworkers to receive information about clients). We made tangible claims about how the client had fared during the internship signaling competence vs. incompetence and motivated vs. unmotivated attitude. We recognize that our exact operationalizations, like in all experiments, might affect the outcome. Finally, we confirmed the contextual realism of the vignette in a qualitative pilot study.

For minimizing the risk of bias caused by correlation of client names with ethnic or social status (Jilke, Van Dooren, and Rhys 2018), we referred to the client as "X". In addition, we randomized the gender of the client to minimize the risk of confounding due to gender interplay with the relevant attributes. The full vignette appears in Table 1. As our outcome measure, we asked the caseworkers to report the likelihood that they would use additional time on helping the client on a scale from 0-10. We reminded the caseworkers that providing extra help to the client would mean less time for helping other clients.

Table 1. The Vignette

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

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

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

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

Data Collection

We embedded the survey experiment in an electronic survey. We acquired the caseworkers' email addresses through contact to all 94 job center managers in Denmark. In total, 44 job centers provided the requested email addresses[1], while 6 job centers agreed to participate but asked for an "open link" for the distribution of the survey. Restricting the sample to the caseworkers of whom we received direct contact information does not change the results substantially.

We collected the data in November 2017 through January 2018. A total of 1,595 caseworkers participated in the survey experiment. As we do not know the number of caseworkers in the 6 job centers not providing us with direct contact information, we are unable to calculate an exact response rate. The response rate is 47 percent among the job centers providing direct contact information. Because one (large) job center provided us with a full list of all employees (not only caseworkers) we consider the 47 percent to be a conservative estimate.

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

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[1]One job center provided contact information on a subsample of their caseworkers.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows that the four experiment groups balance well on observable covariates. One exemption is the gender of the client in the vignette. However, as we determined the status of client gender by randomization by construction, this variable should not be associated with other relevant characteristics. Still, we run robustness analyses with control for client gender. Table 2 also shows the raw (unadjusted) outcome scores, by treatment conditions and for the full sample. We included two simple manipulation checks at the end of the survey (one for motivation and one for competence). Both checks support that the treatment conditions affected the respondents' perception of both the client's competence and motivation in expected direction (see the Appendix, Table A2).[2]

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics.

|	Lazy Novice		Lazy Expert		Diligent Novice		Diligent Expert		Full sample	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Female share [0;1]	0.82		0.80		0.81		0.85		0.82	
Female share (missing) [0;1]	0.01		0.02		0.01		0.02		0.02	
Age, years [natural coding]	44.36	11.34	44.32	11.91	43.93	11.16	44.73	11.65	44.34	11.52
Age, years (missing) [0;1]	0.10		0.07		0.08		0.09		0.08	
Experience, years [natural coding]	7.44	6.80	7.56	6.94	7.63	6.70	7.47	6.69	7.53	6.77
Experience, years (missing) [0;1]	0.03		0.02		0.02		0.03		0.02	
Caseload, no. of cases [natural coding]	61.54	49.24	58.74	46.09	63.35	63.44	63.41	55.15	61.79	53.78
Caseload, no. of cases (missing) [0;1]	0.26		0.27		0.26		0.26		0.26	
Client female share [0;1]	0.52		0.50		0.50		0.43		0.49	
Response rate [0;100]	87.39%		86.68%		92.06%		89.75%		88.96%	
Outcome (priority) [0;10]	6.94[A]	2.01	7.11[A]	2.09	7.48	1.87	7.86	2.00	7.36	2.03

Note: Joint F-test shows no significant differences at the .05-level on baseline covariates or response rate (for those assigned to a survey experimental treatment), but significant differences for client female and the outcome measure. [A] Experimental conditions not significantly different from each other at the .05 level.

We use OLS regression with clustered standard errors (at job center level) to estimate the differences in outcome between the treatment conditions. Figure 2 presents the

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[2] We find that the motivation treatment significantly affected perception of the client's competence. However, the effect appears small and negligible (the coefficient is only 1/20 in magnitude of the effect of the competence treatment on perception of client's competence).

mean willingness to help the client across treatment conditions (based on Table A1, Model 1, in the Appendix).

Figure 2 shows several findings—all of which are in line with our tests of differences in means across treatment conditions (Table 2). First, we find no evidence supporting H1. The difference in prioritization is statistically insignificant and substantially negligible (a .08 standard deviation change in the outcome). Thus, the caseworkers are not more likely to prioritize clients that are competent and lazy ("lazy experts") relative to clients that are incompetent and lazy ("lazy novices"). As we will discuss later, this finding is at odds with the "state-agent" narrative predicting prioritization of "lazy experts" at the expense of "lazy novices."
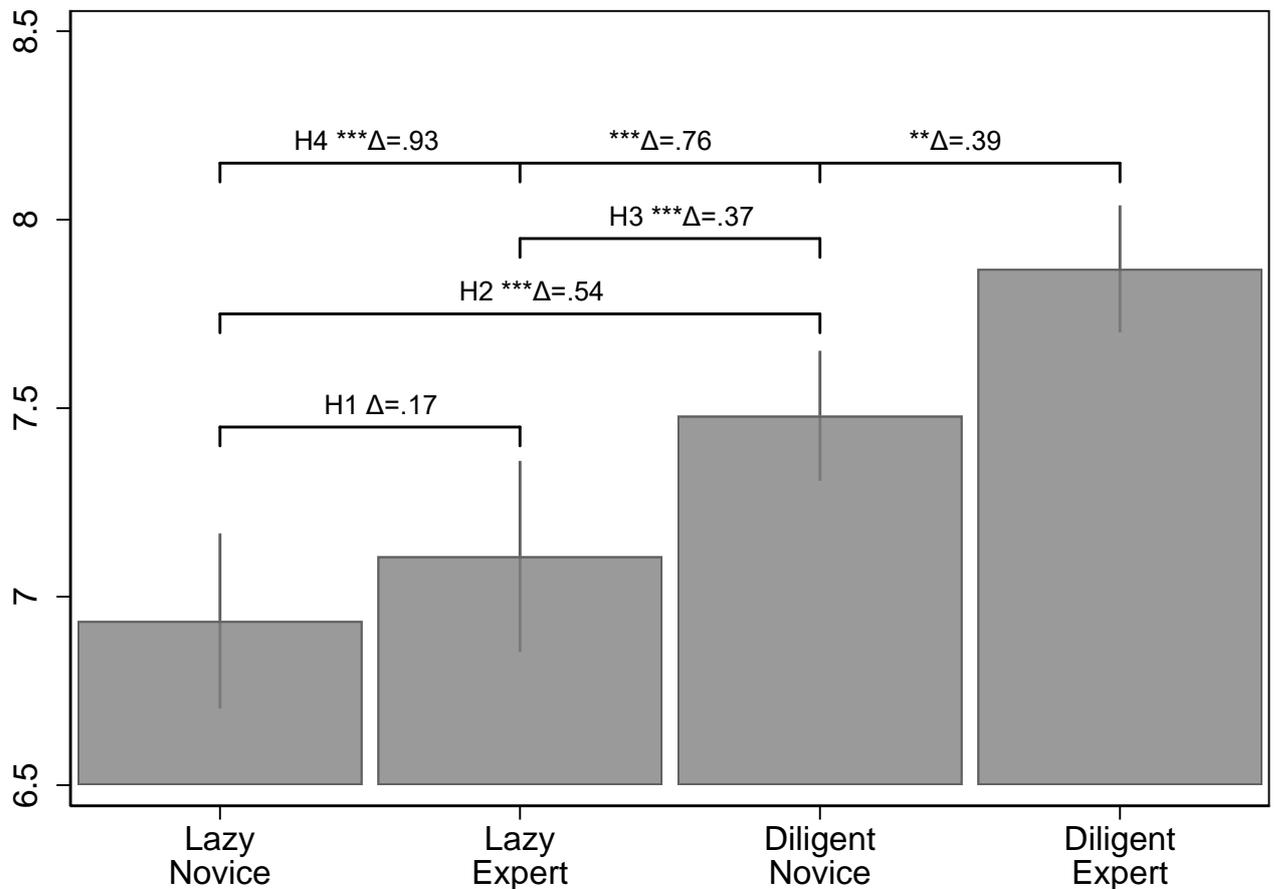
Figure 2. Mean Priority across Treatment Conditions (with 95 Percent Confidence Intervals). n = 1,595. Δ = Absolut difference between conditions. * *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001.

Second, in support of H2, we find that client motivation matters for the frontline employees' prioritization. The caseworkers are significantly more willing to help the "diligent novice" relative to the "lazy novice" (a .27 standard deviation change in outcome). Interestingly, the caseworkers are also more willing to help the "diligent novice" at the expense of the "lazy expert" (a .18 standard deviation change in outcome). This finding supports H3, suggesting that motivation is a more important client attribute than competence when frontline employees' prioritize their clients. As previously discussed, a viable explanation for this result refers to the salient role that client motivation plays in both the "state-agent" and "citizen-agent" perspective.

Finally, we find support for H4. The caseworkers are most willing to help clients exhibiting competence and motivation ("diligent experts") (a .46 standard deviation change in outcome compared to the "lazy novice"). This finding indicates that frontline employees are prioritizing the "easy to serve" clients at the expense of the other clients. The potential consequence of this behavior is that the clients in the least need of help to succeed are prioritized at the expense of those in the most need of help. We will return to this point in the final discussion. Our findings also suggest that the effect of client competence is conditional on client motivation, thus corroborating the notion that one client attribute (motivation) may condition the effect of other client attributes (competence). Hereby, our analysis highlights a potential issue with existing studies examining how a single client attribute affects frontline employees' decision-making.

To test the robustness of our findings, we have conducted analyzes including covariates, a variable for the random assignment of client gender, and job center fixed effects

(see the Appendix, Table A1, Models 2-5). We have also tried adjusting the standard errors for multiple hypothesis testing with Bonferroni adjustment. None of these tests did substantially alter the main results—thus supporting the robustness of our findings.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article expands our knowledge about how client attributes affect the frontline employees' prioritization of clients. Using an experimental vignette design among more than 1,500 unemployment caseworkers, we find novel evidence for an asymmetric interplay effect of two important and generic client attributes: competence and motivation.

In line with Jilke and Tummers (2018), we find that client motivation (effort) and client competence (performance) both affect the frontline employees' inclinations to prioritize a client. Caseworkers are increasingly willing to prioritize clients exhibiting high competence and high motivation. However, in contrast to Jilke and Tummers (2018), our findings also suggest that client motivation is a more important factor than client competence for the caseworkers' prioritization of clients. Client competence appears to enlarge the positive effect of client motivation, while client motivation appears to condition the positive effect of client competence. We believe that our results differ from those of Jilke and Tummers (2018) for several potential reasons. First, the context of the decision is different. Jilke and Tummers (2018) study school teachers who usually interact with students in classroom settings. Therefore, the teachers' time and effort prioritization often relates directly to the choice between two or more students. In contrast, the caseworkers we examine usually review and assess one client at a time; interact with clients strictly at one-on-one meetings (Guul 2018). Second, the nature of the policy goals is different. Whereas the policy goals for unemployment service are relatively singular and unambiguous—getting the client back in employment—the area of schooling is characterized by multiple, and potentially conflicting, goals (e.g., that all students achieve a sufficient level of academic skills, experience challenge and progression, thrive emotionally, develop into democratic citizens). Finally, the interplay between the two attributes might explain the difference in results. Indeed, we find that incompetent but motivated clients are prioritized over competent but unmotivated clients.

Breaking new ground, our results demonstrate how client attributes are not to be considered or examined as isolated constructs. Client attributes interact in shaping frontline employees' judgements and decision-making. Future research should focus on how different attributes may enlarge or reduce the effects of other attributes. We advise caution in making strong claims about the effects of single attributes, as the effect of, say, clients' competence may be conditional on the frontline employees' perception of clients' motivation.

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

Our findings must be interpreted in light of limitations to our study's research design. Our analyses are based on caseworker responses to a survey experimental vignette, and thus have strong claim to internal validity. Still, the size and significance of the effects we observe might be underestimated due to stochastic measurement error in the caseworkers' responses. Moreover, we capture would-be responses to a stylized vignette. How caseworker prioritize clients in real-life settings may differ from their reported survey answers—and real-life prioritization of clients occurs based on more information than what is possible to convey through text in a survey vignette. Although we designed the vignette seeking to increase contextual realism, the prioritization effects of clients' competence and motivation in and across real-life casework may potentially differ from our results. Finally, our sample may not fully represent the full population of Danish unemployment caseworkers. The caseworkers in our

sample may differ from those who did not participate. Importantly, this concern does not diminish the internal validity of our study. However, it does raise questions about the generalizability of our findings. Nonetheless, we have no substantive reason to suspect our findings to be largely non-generalizable to other groups of frontline employees, policy areas, and countries. At the same time, we recognize that whether our findings do apply in other settings and situations is an empirically open question.

Related to this latter point, we acknowledge that our specific operationalization of competence and motivation might affect our findings—like in all experimental setups. Specifically, our treatments may not be perceived as having equal intensity. The ideal would be to examine a broad range of operationalizations. However, as caseworkers time is a limited resource, we choose to prioritize a well-powered test of the operationalization that we saw best fit, and which we validated through a qualitative pilot study, rather than risk committing a type 2 error (i.e., failure to reject a false null hypothesis).

These limitations call for future research seeking to replicate our findings. In line with recent calls for increasing scholarly attention to replication endeavors (Pedersen and Stritch 2018; Walker et al. 2018), future studies should examine the extent to which our findings hold over variations in persons, settings, and situations.

Another venue for future research relates to the implications for practice of our study. So what? Why should we care about the frontline employees' prioritization of clients and the ways that clients' competence and motivation shape prioritization behavior? We contend that the frontline employees' prioritization of clients and its underlying causes constitute an issue of societal importance and salience. Prioritization of clients based on the caseworkers' perception of clients' competence and motivation is not supported by formal policy rules and regulations, and may result in unequal treatment of individual citizens. In many areas of public services delivery, a client's competence and motivation do not constitute legitimate

grounds for provision of extra assistance or benefit to the client. We recognize that prioritization of clients might be a feasible strategy for improving agency performance, and that some policy areas are marked by procedures—formal or informal—allowing the frontline employees to prioritize some clients over others. However, these procedures will typically prescribe a prioritization of the clients who are most in need. In contrast to our findings, we are aware of no areas of public service in which a prioritization of the clients who are most likely to do well or succeed is justified by policy rules or regulations.

Thus, our study encourages public decision-makers to be aware of the potential presence of client prioritization bias in their organization's services delivery and (inasmuch as an equal treatment of clients is desired) to actively seek to minimize the risk that the citizens "most in need" are deprioritized in favor of those who are "the least in need" (i.e., the competent and motivated). Research plays a vital role in the realization of this agenda: Besides replicating our findings, future studies should seek to identify tangible interventions that effectively curb the occurrence of creaming. For inspiration, the limited but increasing body of debiasing research may serve as a useful starting point (Morewedge et al. 2015; Nasie et al. 2014; Schwartz et al. 2010, 2014). Ultimately, whether all citizens should be entitled to a fair and equal treatment in their dealings with government and the public services is a political question. However, concern about fairness and equity is often a main argument for delivering services in a public rather than private context (Boyne et al. 2003, p. 23). According to core administrative principles of equity and impartiality, citizens who, for some reason or another, are more competent and motivated should not be receiving extra benefits or services at the expense of those who are less so.

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APPENDIX

Table A1. Treatment Effects. OLS Regression.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment condition	***	***	***	***	***
- Lazy Novice	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
Incompetent, unmotivated					
- Lazy Expert	0.171	0.172	0.173	0.175	0.180
Competent, unmotivated	(0.178)	(0.177)	(0.175)	(0.175)	(0.179)
- Diligent Novice	0.544^{***}	0.546^{***}	0.553^{***}	0.556^{***}	0.554^{***}
Incompetent, motivated	(0.134)	(0.133)	(0.135)	(0.134)	(0.135)
- Diligent Expert	0.934^{***}	0.945^{***}	0.907^{***}	0.919^{***}	0.886^{***}
Competent, motivated	(0.140)	(0.139)	(0.139)	(0.139)	(0.142)
Constant	6.936^{***}	6.857^{***}	6.007^{***}	5.915^{***}	5.980^{***}
	(0.116)	(0.129)	(0.220)	(0.236)	(0.233)
Observations	1,595	1,595	1,595	1,595	1,595
Female client	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Covariates	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed effects	No	No	No	No	Yes
Adjusted R-square	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.05	0.04

Betas and standard errors clustered at job center level (in parentheses). $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$. Number of groups in fixed effects estimation: 50.

Table A2. Manipulation Check.

	Competence	Motivation
Competent	1.786***	0.103**
	(0.042)	(0.034)
Motivated	-0.061	2.143***
	(0.052)	(0.040)
Constant	2.497***	2.102***
	(0.040)	(0.045)
Observations	1,532	1,518
Adjusted R-square	0.50	0.62

Betas and standard errors clustered at job center level (in parentheses). $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$, $^{***}p < .001$.