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Frontline employees' responses to citizens' communication of administrative burdens

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Abstract

The literature on administrative burdens demonstrates that citizens may experience different kinds of administrative burdens when interacting with the state. However, we know little about whether citizens' communication of these experiences affects how frontline employees implement compliance demands. Building on the street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden literature, we hypothesize that citizens' communication of direct and indirect psychological costs affects frontline employees' inclination to accommodate citizens. Furthermore, we expect this effect to be stronger for members of the ethnic majority than for ethnic minority members. We test these expectations using a preregistered survey experiment on a sample of 1048 Danish public caseworkers from 32 employment agencies. Results show that frontline employees are indeed more willing to reduce demands and help citizens that communicate their experiences of direct and indirect psychological costs. Further, we find some evidence that frontline employees are more responsive to citizens from the ethnic majority.

Evidence for Practice

- The study shows that citizens' experiences of burdens cannot simply be derived from formal policy design. To understand how citizens' experiences of burdens are shaped, we need to take the informal implementation of policies into account as well.
- Our results demonstrate that frontline employees in unemployment agencies are more willing to prioritize and reduce state demands for citizens who communicate direct and indirect psychological costs. Further, we find some evidence of discrimination against ethnic minorities.
- Our results suggest that public organizations may be able to reduce citizens' experiences of burdens by providing citizens with a line of communication to the frontline employees.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the literature on administrative burdens has demonstrated how state demands can have severe consequences for citizens' psychological well-being (Baekgaard et al., 2021; Christensen et al., 2020; Jilke et al., 2018) and inflict substantial economic costs on society (Sunstein, 2019). While this research has provided ample evidence that state demands cause citizens to experience psychological costs, we know little about whether citizens communicating these psychological costs (Gilad & Assouline, 2022) in citizen–state interaction can feed back into the implementation of state demands. Understanding the construction of administrative burdens in frontline implementation of polices is crucial because frontline employees often have the discretion and authority to either reduce or enhance the compliance demands causing the psychological costs (Jilke et al., 2018; Lipsky, 1980; Soss et al., 2011a). Consequently, to comprehend citizen–state interactions, we not only

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need to understand how state demands affect citizens (Baekgaard et al., 2021; Moynihan et al., 2015) but also how and when citizens' communication of burdens affect frontline employees' enforcement of state demands in public organizations (Masood & Nisar, 2021). Therefore, this study examines how citizens' communication of direct and indirect psychological costs affects frontline employees' intended decision-making and whether their decisions are conditional on citizens' characteristics in term of their ethnicity.

Our starting point is previous research showing that citizens often communicate their onerous experiences in citizen–state interactions (Bell et al., 2023; Bisgaard, 2023; Gilad & Assouline, 2022; Nielsen et al., 2021). Such experiences may be communicated through numerous different encounters with frontline personnel; for example, when parents share their frustrations and experiences with caseworkers in child protection services (Karmsteen, 2023), unemployed clients discuss their job situation with caseworkers (Pedersen et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2009) or entrepreneurs negotiate with frontline labor inspectors or tax officials (Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020).

Building on the street-level bureaucracy literature, we argue that frontline employees in these citizen–state interactions are primarily guided by a citizen–agent narrative (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000) that makes them move toward citizens when burdens are communicated (Tummers et al., 2015). Consequently, we theorize that the communication of burdensome experiences – in our setting direct and indirect psychological costs – makes frontline employees more inclined to engage in efforts to help citizens and reduce their burdens. Psychological costs refer to psychological discomfort that arises as a direct consequence of a concrete state demand (e.g., anxiety from having to fill out an unemployment benefit claim), while indirect psychological costs refer to psychological discomfort that is not directly tied to a specific state demand but arises while a person is complying with state demands (e.g., developing anxiety while participating in a compulsory public program).

Further, we know from previous research that frontline employees do not always treat citizens equally (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2018) and that marginalized groups are often disproportionately targeted with administrative burdens (Christensen et al., 2020; Nisar, 2018; Olsen et al., 2020). In particular, scholars have shown that frontline employees tend to discriminate based on race or ethnicity by treating citizens from the ethnic majority more favorably compared with citizens from the ethnic minority (Pedersen et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2009). To understand the conditionality of burden communication, we also investigate whether frontline employees are more likely to reduce demands and help citizens from the ethnic majority compared with minority members (Olsen et al., 2020).

To test our preregistered hypotheses,[1] we conduct a large-scale factorial 2 × 2 vignette survey experiment on a sample of 1048 professional caseworkers who work in Danish unemployment agencies. We focus on citizens' communication of direct and indirect psychological costs because previous work has already demonstrated that citizens experience these types of cost in the context of our study (Baekgaard et al., 2021). In our experiment, we manipulate (1) whether citizens communicate psychological costs and (2) citizen ethnicity (Middle-Eastern vs. Danish). Using a within-subject experimental design, we provide the caseworkers with three fictitious vignettes describing different citizen–state encounters familiar to the caseworkers. In one vignette, we manipulate psychological costs caused directly by state demands, and in the other two vignettes, we manipulate indirect psychological costs that arise while participating in mandatory job training programs. Following each vignette, caseworkers evaluate their inclination to make an extra effort to help the citizen and reduce the citizen's compliance demands. Thus, we do not measure the frontline employees' actual behavior, but instead their behavioral intentions. Our results show that frontline employees are more inclined to reduce state demands and help citizens when citizens communicate their experienced psychological costs. This is true for both indirect and direct psychological costs, though effect sizes are larger for indirect costs. In addition, we find some evidence that frontline employees are more responsive to burden communication from members of the ethnic majority.

Our study makes at least three important contributions to the literatures on administrative burdens and street-level bureaucracy. First, while some scholars in this field have begun exploring the role of frontline employees in shaping experiences of burden (Bell et al., 2020; Bell & Smith, 2022), knowledge about how citizens' communication of burdens affects administrative decision-making remains scarce. As mentioned, citizens frequently voice their burdens in encounters with the state (Bell et al., 2022; Karmsteen, 2023; Nielsen et al., 2021), and it is therefore critical that we understand how this communication affects decisions, especially as some citizens may be conscious about how it can sway decision-making at the frontline (Döring, 2021; Döring & Madsen, 2022; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020). Our study shows that citizens' burden communication directly influences frontline employees' prioritization intentions and inclination to reduce burdens for citizens, that is, lead to more favorable decisions. While it is certainly positive that frontline employees respond to citizens' needs, our findings raise concerns about differential treatment of citizens, as resourceful citizens may be more likely to communicate burdens (Gilad & Assouline, 2022), and the least resourceful citizens may be unable to do so effectively (Christensen et al., 2020).

Second, our study contributes to the growing street-level bureaucracy literature on the factors that shape frontline employees' decision-making. Previous studies have shown that demographic characteristics such as

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ethnicity (Pedersen et al., 2018) and gender (Pedersen & Nielsen, 2020) as well as non-demographic characteristics such as performance (Jilke & Tummers, 2018), competence, and motivation (Guul et al., 2021) affect frontline employees' willingness to prioritize clients. We add to this growing literature by showing that citizens' communication in citizen–state interactions, specifically regarding experienced burdens, is a factor that determines frontline employees' prioritization intentions and inclination to reduce burdens. Moreover, our study adds to our knowledge about discrimination in the public sector by showing that the effect of burden communication is contingent on clients' ethnicity. Although we do not find evidence of a direct effect of client ethnicity on frontline employees' decision-making, we do find indications that frontline employees respond more favorably to burdens voiced by members of the ethnic majority. Critically, this result suggests that frontline employees may deviate from key administrative principles of equal treatment of citizens.

Finally, while previous research suggests that experiences of administrative burdens may feed back into the design of public policies (Herd & Moynihan, 2018), and even calls for empirical studies of such processes (Halling & Baekgaard, 2023: 10), no studies – to our knowledge – have examined how citizens' communication of administrative burdens affects the informal policy implementation by frontline employees. Our study answers this call and provides the first causal evidence of the relationship between citizens' burden communication and frontline employees' decision-making. Finally and importantly, by theorizing and empirically linking burden communication and frontline employees' decision-making, our study contributes by bridging the growing literature on administrative burdens and the prominent street-level bureaucracy literature.

THEORY

In this section, we outline how citizens' communication of administrative burdens may affect frontline workers' implementation of state demands. Figure 1 summarizes our theoretical argument.

As shown in the figure, frontline employees are charged with implementing and enforcing state demands. The administrative burden literature has delivered ample evidence showing that the implementation of burdensome demands directly affects citizens' psychological well-being (Baekgaard et al., 2021). When citizens experience administrative burdens such as psychological distress, they can opt to voice or communicate their experiences in citizen–state encounters. Recent work illustrates that citizens indeed communicate and voice their experiences of burdens in interactions with the state in writing (Gilad & Assouline, 2022) using different strategic behaviors to influence decisions (Nielsen et al., 2021). Relatedly, Raaphorst and Loyens (2020) show that social interactions between frontline workers and citizens affect case decisions. Such social interactions could potentially include communicating the burdens that the client experience. Finally, studies on administrative literacy (Döring, 2021; Döring & Madsen, 2022) and bureaucratic self-efficacy (Bisgaard, 2023) document that citizens' understanding of how to navigate the public system and behave when interacting with frontline employees is an important means to gain favorable decisions. We extend these findings and suggest that when citizens communicate burdens in citizen–state interactions, it prompts the frontline employees to prioritize these citizens and reduce demands. The reduction or alteration of state demands by frontline employees may in turn affect citizens' experiences of administrative burdens. This creates an iterative process where communication of burdens affects frontline implementation of state demands, which then affects the experience and communication of burdens.

In the next section, we discuss the different types of administrative burdens that citizens can experience as a direct or indirect consequence of compliance demands in more detail. In this study, we limit our focus to citizens' experience and communication of direct and indirect psychological costs because previous work has causally established that clients experience these costs in the context we study (Baekgaard et al., 2021). We return to the implications of this choice in the section on limitations.

Administrative burdens and state demands

Administrative burdens have been defined "as an individual's experience of a policy's implementation as onerous" (Burden et al., 2012). Moynihan et al. (2015) outline three types of onerous experiences – or costs – that individuals may experience in their interactions with the state: learning, compliance, and psychological costs. Learning costs are the efforts associated with collecting information

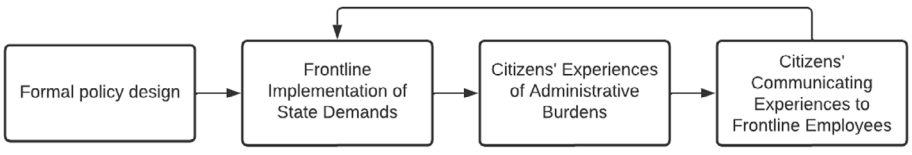


FIGURE 1 How Communication of Administrative Burdens Affects Implementation of State Demands. The figure is inspired by similar models in Baekgaard and Tankink (2022) and Halling and Baekgaard (2023).

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about programs, in particular eligibility requirements. Psychological costs encompass the stress of dealing with onerous requirements, stigma from participating in unpopular programs, and loss of autonomy. Compliance costs are the work involved in getting into or staying in a welfare program. Examples are filling out forms, waiting in line, and providing documentation (Moynihan et al., 2015).

We use the term "state demands" "to describe state actions that likely impose compliance costs, that is, state-imposed demands that target groups will have to comply with in order to take up services or benefits" (Baekgaard et al., 2021, 808).[2] Studies have provided strong empirical support to the notion that state demands cause individuals to experience psychological costs. For example, Baekgaard et al. (2021) demonstrate how an exogenous reduction in unemployment agencies' demands significantly decreased citizens' experience of stress while simultaneously increasing their feeling of autonomy. Moreover, Hattke et al. (2020) show that administrative burdens in the form of bureaucratic delay and demands cause citizens to experience negative emotional reactions such as confusion, anger, and frustration.

A few existing studies have also examined administrative burdens in relation to frontline employees. Bell et al. (2020) find that ideology shapes frontline employees' support for administrative burdens. The study shows that conservative frontline employees tend to support policies that increase administrative burdens as they argue that these policies prevent fraud and demonstrate client deservingness. On the other hand, more liberal frontline employees typically justify their opposition to such policies by claiming that they undermine social equity. In another study, Bell and Smith (2022) find that when frontline employees adopt a support role rather than a role as a compliance officer, they are more likely to use their discretionary power to assist students in dealing with administrative burdens. However, no studies have examined how frontline employees react to the communication of direct and indirect psychological costs from citizens. We address this question in the next section.

Frontline reactions to citizens' communication of psychological costs

Recently, the view of citizens as passive users of public services (Le Grand, 1997) has been challenged. Instead, scholars argue that citizens are actively pursuing different strategies in order to change the frontline employees' decision-making in their favor (Mik-Meyer, 2017; Nielsen et al., 2021). One such strategy is for citizens to communicate or voice their experienced administrative burdens to frontline employees (Gilad & Assouline, 2022). Citizens may do so to get the attention of frontline employees or as an appeal of indulgence (Nielsen et al., 2021). How, then, does frontline employees respond when citizens communicate their experienced psychological costs?

Following Tummers et al. (2015), we argue that frontline employees can respond to citizens' communication of psychological costs by either moving toward or away from citizens.[3] Moving away means avoiding meaningful interactions with citizens. In our context, this means rationing access to public benefits by making it harder for citizens to get into public programs or rigidly enforcing demands for citizens already in the program (Tummers et al., 2015). Moving toward citizens, on the other hand, entails behaviors that seek to adjust to citizens' needs. For instance, this means adjusting the rules to meet citizens' demands, prioritizing certain citizens over others, or spending their own time to the benefit of the citizen (Tummers et al., 2015).

Moving away from citizens

When citizens communicate their experienced psychological costs, frontline employees may respond by moving away from citizens. Such behavior is likely guided by what Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) coin a "state–agent narrative." Here, frontline employees are rule-followers and act according to their self-interest, which may lead to cream skimming by selectively prioritizing "easier clients, and by avoiding, dismissing, or reducing contact with the unpleasant or impossible cases" (p. 339). When citizens communicate their experience of psychological costs, frontline employees guided by a state–agent narrative may be inclined to disregard and ignore citizens because citizens that experience psychological costs constitute a more complex case, are harder to serve, and require more time and effort to help compared with other citizens.

Previous studies suggest that frontline employees may act in a self-serving manner in some contexts. For instance, Soss et al. (2011b) display how for-profit organizations sanction citizens more often than nonprofit organizations when pay-for-performance regimes are implemented. The authors argue that some organizational practices, such as cash motives or performance goals, are core drivers of this kind of behavior. Hence, according to the authors, self-serving behaviors are not the default for frontline employees but rather a perverse effect following the introduction of a high-stake performance system. This is in line with Maynard-Moody and Musheno's (2000) argument that frontline employees generally do not act according to or identify with the state–agent narrative. Instead, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) emphasize that frontline employees should be considered "citizen–agents" in many situations (we detail this narrative below). Overall, given the lack of evidence suggesting that frontline employees' behavior is generally guided by the state–agent narrative, we do not expect frontline employees to *move away* from citizens

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when citizens communicate their direct or indirect psychological cost in citizen–state encounters. Instead, we expect them to *move toward* citizens.

Moving toward citizens

According to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000), frontline behavior is mainly driven by a citizen–agent narrative where the primary guide of behavior is normative perceptions of citizens' needs. When a citizen–agent narrative is predominant, the frontline employees are willing to "discount the importance of self-interest and will often make their work harder, more unpleasant, more dangerous, and less officially successful in order to respond to the needs of individuals" (p. 329). This is similar to what Watkins-Hayes (2009) refers to as "social workers", who are frontline employees that use their discretion to advocate for their clients and provide comprehensive services. Others, called "efficiency engineers," prioritize speed and efficiency in processing cases. The latter group rejects the idea that their job should involve comprehensive service delivery and defines success as getting clients off welfare and into work.

However, due to limited resources, even frontline employees driven by a citizen–agent narrative are not able to respond equally to the needs of all citizens. Consequently, frontline employees need to prioritize among their clients (Guul et al., 2021). Previous studies have found that frontline employees' prioritization of clients is based on a range of different factors. Here, the literature has mostly focused on citizens' demographic characteristics such as their gender, ethnicity, and educational background (Meier, 2019), but research suggests that citizens' effort and performance are important as well (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). We extend this research by arguing that citizens' communication of psychological costs is another key signal that affects frontline employees' decision-making in terms of their prioritization of clients and enforcement of state demands. Concretely, we expect the communication of psychological costs in citizen–state encounters to convey important information to the frontline employees about the citizen.

Specifically, the communication of psychological costs is a strong signal that the citizen is in need of help. Recent research in public administration shows that frontline employees are highly responsive to needy citizens. In particular, Jilke and Tummers (2018) examine the effect of three different forms of deservingness: earned, needed, and resource deservingness. Earned deservingness concerns citizens' work rate with hard-working citizens expected to be more deserving and hence more likely to receive help. Needed deservingness concerns citizens' need for help, with the needy or vulnerable citizens being the most likely to receive help. Finally, resource deservingness concerns the citizens' level of personal resources, with the expectation that frontline employees prioritize citizens with high personal resources to ensure a high level of program success. Using a choice experiment, the authors find evidence that cues related to citizens' level of needed deservingness are by far the strongest predictor of frontline employees' prioritization of citizens. While the deservingness criteria used by Jilke and Tummers (2018) are not the same as the CARIN (control, attitude, reciprocity, identity, and need) proposed by van Oorschot (2000, van Oorschot and Roosma 2017), they are highly comparable.

When citizens are perceived as needy, it may evoke feelings of empathy among frontline employees (Jensen & Pedersen, 2017). This idea of empathy being a key driver in people's decision-making processes has strong support in social psychology, where scholars have demonstrated how empathy positively relates to altruistic values and negatively relates to self-interest (Batson et al., 2015; Fultz et al., 1986). Thus, when people feel empathy toward others, they are generally more inclined to engage in actions that improves the well-being of those individuals. According to empathy–altruism theory, we should therefore expect that higher levels of empathy toward clients increase the likelihood that frontline employees engage in altruistic behaviors such as helping or reducing burdens for clients. Overall, we expect frontline employees to be more likely to help citizens who communicate psychological costs by reducing their demands and exerting an extra effort to help the clients. Hypothesis 1 summarizes the expectation:

> **H1.** Frontline employees are more likely to reduce demands and help citizens when citizens communicate psychological costs.

Burden communication and ethnicity

To understand how communication of administrative burdens creates feedback effects in citizen–state encounters, we also need to consider the potential conditionality of these effects, as frontline employees may not respond equally to all citizens. Thus, previous work on administrative burdens shows that marginalized groups experience disproportionally severe administrative burdens (Christensen et al., 2020; Olsen et al., 2020). Specifically, we expect that the effect of the feedback effect depends on citizen ethnicity. We focus on ethnicity because previous research suggests that frontline employees often discriminate against clients based on their race or ethnicity (Petersen, 2021; Soss et al., 2011b). In line with previous studies in a European setting, we focus on differences in treatment between citizens from the ethnic majority and citizens with non-Western origin (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Jilke et al., 2018; Pedersen et al., 2018).

The literature presents two predominant explanations for discriminatory behavior based on ethnicity.[4] First,

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frontline employees may treat certain groups differently due to statistical discrimination. In the absence of full information about each individual citizen, frontline employees rely on group averages to determine how costly or burdensome a given citizen is likely to be (Phelps, 1972). Regardless of whether these stereotypes are statistically correct or not, frontline employees, according to this argument, avoid certain groups of citizens because they expect that these groups will be more costly to serve (Andersen & Guul, 2019) or have a lower likelihood of achieving program success. However, statistical discrimination is based on rational calculations and hinges on organizational incentives that encourage the use of stereotypes (Assouline et al., 2022). While such incentives may be present to some extent at Danish unemployment agencies, they are not prominent. Although we cannot exclude statistical discrimination, we do deem it less likely in our study.

Second, and more plausibly in our case, frontline employees may discriminate against ethnic minorities because of unintentional and unconscious biases against certain groups. These biases, that often stem from cultural stereotypes, are "[i]nternalized by bureaucrats and thereby in a nonconscious way influence the decisions they make when they implement policies" (Andersen & Guul, 2019). Unconscious biases are the main explanation for discriminatory behavior in the racial classification model (RCM) developed by Soss et al. (2011a); Schram et al. (2008). The RCM suggests that when racial minorities are relevant to a policy area and their group is associated with stereotypes that are considered "policy-relevant," bureaucrats may unconsciously use race as a way to classify individuals, even if these stereotypes are not valid. Assouline et al. (2022) proposes a related explanation labeled "implicit prejudice." Here, it is not policy-relevant group stereotypes, but uncontrolled emotional responses that trigger discriminatory behavior. Specifically, interacting with members of an outgroup that are perceived as a threat to the individual or the ingroup can cause negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, anger, contempt, and disgust (Stephan & Stephan, 2016), which can result in discrimination against the outgroup. Overall, based on the literature, we expect frontline employees to treat members of the ethnic minority less favorably compared with members of the ethnic majority by – in our study – being more likely to reduce burdens and help citizens from the ethnic majority.

More importantly, we may also expect client ethnicity to condition the effect of burden feedback. Thus, we know from research that ingroup members hold a distrust in members of other social groups (Brewer, 1999; Hughes et al., 2017). This is relevant in the context of signaled or communicated burdens when frontline employees interpret the information they receive from citizens concerning their experienced psychological costs. If frontline employees are more critical about the validity of the information communicated by members of the ethnic minority compared with the ethnic majority, they may be less likely to respond to the information in the expected manner.

In the literature, only a few studies have examined related questions. For instance, research on what is referred to as "ethnic pains" (Nielsen & Birkelund, 2009) considers a similar mechanism in nurses' perceptions of ethnic minorities. Specifically, ethnic pains is a phenomenon where health care professionals experience that members of ethnic minorities exaggerate their levels of pain in citizen–state encounters, which results in frontline employees that are uncertain how seriously they should take expressions of pain from some ethnic minority members (Nielsen & Birkelund, 2009). In a Danish survey on the subject, two out of three doctors and more than half of the nurses agreed that members of the ethnic minority tended to exaggerate their actual level of pain (Michaelsen et al., 2004, 291). A similar process may take place when citizens from ethnic minority groups communicate information about their experienced psychological costs. Frontline employees may believe that the members of the ethnic minority exaggerate the actual costs or are simply more likely to mistrust the validity of the communicated information.

Based on the above, we expect that client ethnicity directly affects frontline employees' willingness to help and reduce burdens. More importantly, we also expect that the effect of burden communication on frontline employees' willingness to help and reduce burdens is contingent on client ethnicity. Overall, we therefore propose the following two hypotheses[5]:

> **H2.** Frontline employees are less likely to reduce demands and help citizens when citizens have a non-Western ethnicity.
>
> **H3.** The effect of citizens' communication of psychological costs (low vs. high) is moderated by citizen ethnicity (Danish vs. non-Western) so that frontline employees are more likely to reduce demands and help Danish citizens with high psychological costs compared citizens of non-Western ethnicity.

METHODS

Empirical setting

We examine our hypotheses on a sample of social caseworkers in Danish unemployment agencies. In Denmark, unemployment benefits are organized through 94 unemployment agencies that are run by the municipalities. Our study focuses on citizens on monthly means-tested unemployment cash benefits. To be eligible for these benefits, citizens must be unemployed, of working age, fit to work, and not be members of an unemployment

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insurance fund. To receive the benefit, they must register with their local unemployment agency and be assigned a caseworker who will help them find a job. To maintain their entitlement to the benefit, clients must follow a set of rules and procedures, such as regularly consulting with their caseworker, actively seeking employment, and being willing to accept job offers. They must also accept and attend employability-increasing activities arranged by their local unemployment agency, such as on-the-job training and utility jobs (Pedersen et al., 2018).

Danish unemployment agencies constitute a good test case for at least three reasons. First, unemployed Danes face considerable demands to get access to unemployment benefits. According to a survey report by the Danish Mental Health Fund, 68% of the unemployed citizens on sick leave believed that the contact with their local unemployment agency had worsened their overall quality of life. Shockingly, 23% in the survey even replied that their contact with the unemployment agency had led them to thoughts about life not being worth living (Kaae & Bentzen, 2019). Caseworkers in the Danish unemployment agencies are thus very familiar with clients suffering from different kinds of psychological costs because of burdensome demands.

Second, the Danish unemployment agencies are a good test case because the social caseworkers have considerable discretion in determining whether demands should be reduced or maintained for citizens. In many cases, the caseworkers can either directly reduce burdensome demands for citizens for a period or they can decide to exert an additional effort to help the citizens. This is neither a universal feature of street-level work nor a unique feature of the Danish unemployment system. Unemployment caseworkers in other countries such as the Netherlands (Bolhaar et al., 2020), Germany (Schmieder & Trenkle, 2020), Switzerland (Huber et al., 2017), and the United States (Schram et al., 2009) also enjoy considerable discretion in numerous decisions concerning citizens (e.g., whether to sanction clients).

Third, Danish welfare recipients, the target group in our study, are required to fulfill various demands to get welfare benefits. These demands range from writing 1–2 weekly job applications, attending regular meetings at the unemployment agency, and participating in courses, internship programs, or utility jobs, as well as documenting job-related activities. As such, the caseworkers in Danish unemployment agencies are familiar with different sorts of demands. Importantly, the variety of state demands allows us to examine how frontline employees respond to citizens' communication of psychological costs in different contextual settings.

Research design

To ensure an identification strategy that provides us with a strong causal design to test our hypotheses, we deploy a 2×2 factorial survey experiment. We use a within-subject repeated measures design where each respondent is presented with three vignettes in the survey, meaning they are exposed to three 2×2 experiments. We made this choice for two reasons explicated by Clifford et al. (2021). First, repeated measures designs, contrary to popular belief, often produce results that are similar to those of other designs while increasing the precision of the study. Specifically, the authors find that across six experimental studies, pre-, post-, and within-subject designs increase statistical power while having little effect on estimated treatment effects. Second, the authors show that these designs allow for a deeper understanding of the size and variability of treatment effects. In our case, the within-subject design allows us to analyze the effect of experimental treatments both pooled and separately. While the pooled analysis maximizes statistical precision, the separate analysis gives deeper insights into what is driving our results. Hence, by including the three different contextual settings in one analysis, we ensure that our findings are not simply a result of one contextual setting (e.g., one type of demand and one type of communicated psychological cost) but instead robust across very different contextual situations with varying types of demands and communicated psychological costs.

However, within-subject designs still have certain limitations. Specifically, even though a recent study suggest it is not a general problem (Mummolo & Peterson, 2019), they may cause demand effects where respondents "infer the purpose of an experiment and respond so as to help confirm a researcher's hypothesis" (Mummolo & Peterson, 2019). Such effects are especially likely to occur for sensitive issues such as ethnicity. To examine the extent to which demands effects are present in our data, we report analyses where we show how responses change as respondents progress through the three vignettes. Further, when weighting the evidence for the hypotheses concerning ethnicity, we put most weight on the results from the first vignette. In accordance with our preregistration, we also report pooled results across all vignettes.

Independent variables: Experimental vignettes

Psychological costs are a rather broad category (Moynihan et al., 2015). Therefore, to capture some of the different aspects of the concept, we include various signals of psychological costs in the vignettes that are either direct or indirect consequences of state demands. In the first vignette, the client reports that the state demand of having to write a CV and sign in on a job site is *very stressful and overwhelming*. Here, psychological costs are a direct consequence of state action and this vignette therefore constitute our test of direct psychological costs.

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In the second vignette, the client says that he *feels exploited and ridiculed* in the internship program in which he participates. In the third vignette, the client expresses feeling *stressed* by the mandatory program that he attends and that he *gets palpitations and a stomachache*, which are clear symptoms of stress. In these vignettes, psychological costs are an indirect consequence of state actions in that they are caused by experiences in an internship and utility job. Hence, these vignettes are used to test how communication of indirect psychological costs affect frontline employees intended decision-making. Importantly, although the psychological costs that the citizens communicate either directly or indirectly arise from the state demands that the clients face, none of the psychological costs described in the vignettes are not outside of the control of the unemployment agencies.

Second, following the literature on stereotypes and discrimination, we manipulate ethnicity by varying the clients' names (Pedersen et al., 2018; Petersen, 2021; Schram et al., 2009). We used the 10 most popular ethnic Danish and Middle-eastern names in Denmark and randomly provided the caseworkers with one of them.[6] We chose this approach because names may hold certain social connotations (Landgrave & Weller, 2021), and using a variety of names reduces the likelihood that a single name is driving the results.

In Table 1 below, the three vignettes are displayed. In the survey, the order of the vignettes was randomized. Because we want our results to be robust to different contextual settings, the vignettes describe three different situations that caseworkers regularly confront. To ensure the realism of the vignettes, they were developed in close collaboration with two experienced caseworkers and a frontline manager, who all gave detailed feedback on the vignettes and provided valuable background knowledge.[7]

In the first vignette, a citizen is required to write a resume and upload it to a webpage for unemployed job candidates only shortly after becoming unemployed. This is a standard demand that all unemployed clients have to comply with in order to receive welfare benefits. The second vignette describes a citizen in an internship program that unemployed citizens are required to attend within the first 6 months of unemployment. Clients that are unable to find an internship program may be placed in what is termed a "utility job." Utility jobs are municipality-organized work where clients typically get cleaning assignments for 25–37 h a week. The idea behind these utility jobs is to incentivize clients to find a permanent job or an internship program. Because utility jobs are often perceived as undesirable, many clients either find a job or leave the unemployment benefits program shortly before being assigned to a utility job (Hansen, 2021). Our third vignette describes a client that is currently in such a utility job program.

Dependent variables

Following each vignette, we ask the caseworkers to respond as if the citizen in the vignette is their own client.

TABLE 1 Experimental vignettes.

	Vignette 1: Recently unemployed	Vignette 2: Internship program	Vignette 3: Utility job
Introduction and background information on client	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] is a job-ready cash benefit recipient who registered as unemployed 2 weeks ago. In preparation for his first interview with the job center, [ethnic Danish/minority name] was asked to prepare a CV and sign in to jobnet.dk.	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] is a job-ready cash benefit recipient and has been granted a four-week internship as a waiter in a restaurant with good prospects for permanent employment after the internship.	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] is a job-ready cash benefit recipient and has been assigned a utility job cleaning municipal areas for 13 weeks, 32 h per week.
Client communicates issue with state demands [psychological costs in italics]	However, at the interview with his caseworker, [ethnic Danish/minority name] says that he has not prepared his CV. [Ethnic Danish/minority name] explains that he does not have the technical skills [*and that it has been very stressful and overwhelming for him to write a CV so soon after being laid off*].	The second week of the internship, [ethnic Danish/minority name] writes to his caseworker. [Ethnic Danish/minority name] explains that contrary to the agreement, the restaurant owner has only given him dishwashing tasks [*and that he dislikes showing up and feels exploited and ridiculed at the workplace*].	The seventh week of the utility job, [ethnic Danish/minority name] contacts his caseworker via telephone. [Ethnic Danish/minority name] says [*that he feels stressed by the utility job and gets palpitations and a stomachache when he is at work. Furthermore*] [that] it is difficult for him to look for jobs actively alongside the utility job.
Client requests reduction in state demands	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] therefore asks if he can have an extra 2 weeks to upload his CV to jobnet.dk.	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] therefore asks his caseworker for permission to terminate the internship early.	[Ethnic Danish/minority name] therefore asks if his work hours at the utility job can be reduced to give him more time to write job applications.

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TABLE 2 Differences between participating and nonparticipating unemployment agencies.

	Participating	Non-participating	Difference
Inhabitants in municipality	72,102	53,804	18,298
Socioeconomic index	1.04	0.99	0.05
Share of non-Western immigrants[a]	4.45	4.10	0.35
Share of unemployed[b]	4.47	4.66	0.19
Share of cash benefit recipients[b]	2.17	1.98	0.19

Note: $^{+}p < .10$, $^{*}p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$. Based on administrative data gathered from www.noegletal.dk, www.dst.dk, and www.jobindsats.dk.
[a]As percentage of the whole population.
[b]As percentage of the workforce.

This information was followed by our two dependent variables. First, in order to measure the caseworkers' willingness to reduce state demands, we asked the caseworkers, "How likely is it that you will work towards granting the request of [name]?" Second, to measure whether the caseworkers are willing to exert an additional effort to help the client, we use a measure developed by Guul et al. (2021) and ask the following: "How likely is it that you would make an extra effort to help [name] get a job? Assume that an extra effort means that you have a little less time to help other clients." In both questions, the caseworkers could respond on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 indicates "very unlikely" and 10 indicates "very likely."

Data collection and descriptive statistics

To examine our hypotheses, we use data from a survey among caseworkers at Danish unemployment agencies. We contacted the managers from all 94 Danish local unemployment agencies and invited them to participate in our survey. In total, 32 unemployment agencies agreed to participate in the survey. Our sample of unemployment agencies is diverse in terms of geography and population. Importantly, as can be seen in Table 2 below, the sample of unemployment agencies is representative on key variables such as share of non-Western immigrants and share of unemployed citizens.

The managers at the unemployment agencies were given the option to either provide us with direct contact information on their employees or forward the survey themselves. Twenty-eight managers provided us with contact information on the caseworkers, while four managers opted to distribute the survey link to their employees. Restricting the sample to unemployment agencies that provided us with direct contact information on caseworkers does not change our results substantially. In total, we distributed the survey directly to 1911 caseworkers. In accordance with our preregistration, the data collection ran from February 23 to March 23 2021. During this period, we also sent out two reminders. A total of 868 out of 1911 caseworkers (45.4%) answered all questions necessary for our analysis. We consider this response rate to be very satisfactory given the numerous responsibilities and tasks caseworkers perform on a daily basis. In addition, a further 180 caseworkers participated via the open link that was forwarded by their local managers, and we therefore end up with a total sample of 1048 caseworkers for our analysis.

Before turning to our analysis, we shortly present key descriptive statistics from our sample. These are displayed in Table 3 below. As we can see from the table, the caseworkers balance well on observables characteristics across the four treatment groups. This is not surprising given our random allocation of the treatment. The table also provides us with some interesting information about our sample. Eighty percent of caseworkers in the sample are women, which is in line with prior studies among Danish caseworkers (Guul et al., 2021). Furthermore, the mean age is 47 years, and respondents have a bit more than 8.5 years of work experience on average. In addition, both age and work experience have a fair amount of variation, which suggests a diverse pool of caseworkers. Finally, about 20% of the caseworkers have some sort of managerial responsibility at their workplace.

RESULTS

Communication of psychological costs

We test our hypotheses using standard OLS regression.[8] When pooling the vignettes, we cluster the standard errors at the individual level to account for any dependencies between responses within individuals, while we cluster the standard errors at the unemployment agency level when analyzing the individual vignettes. In the main text, we rely on figures to present the results, while detailed regression tables are available in the appendix. Figure 2 displays the results of the experimental treatments for both individual vignettes and when pooling the vignettes. As discussed, the recently unemployed vignette manipulates direct psychological costs, while the two other vignettes manipulate indirect psychological costs from interacting with the unemployment agencies. Results show that communication of both direct and indirect psychological costs affect frontline employees' intentions to reduce state demands and intended willingness

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TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics by treatment groups and full sample.

	Low psychological Burden				High psychological Burden					
	Danish		Middle-eastern		Danish		Middle-eastern		Full sample	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Covariates										
Age	46.37	11.42	47.84	11.43	46.55	11.32	47.03	11.44	46.93	11.42
Female share [0;1]	.81		.80		.83		.80		.81	
Job experience	8.49	7.07	8.92	7.23	8.44	6.92	9.04	7.89	8.72	7.29
Managerial responsibility share [0;1]	.17		.19		.21		.20		.19	
Dependent variables										
Reduce burdens [0;10]	5.04	3.04	5.00	3.03	6.16	2.84	5.91	2.95	5.52	3.01[a]
Help client [0;10]	6.63	2.51	6.73	2.48	7.26	2.20	7.10	2.23	6.92	2.37[b]
Observations	834		760		759		792		3144	

Note: One-way ANOVAs show no significant differences ($p < .05$) between the four treatment groups for either female share, job experience, age, or managerial responsibility.
[a]The between-subjects SD is 1.98, and the within-subject SD is 2.27.
[b]The between-subjects SD is 1.86, and the within-subject SD is 1.48.

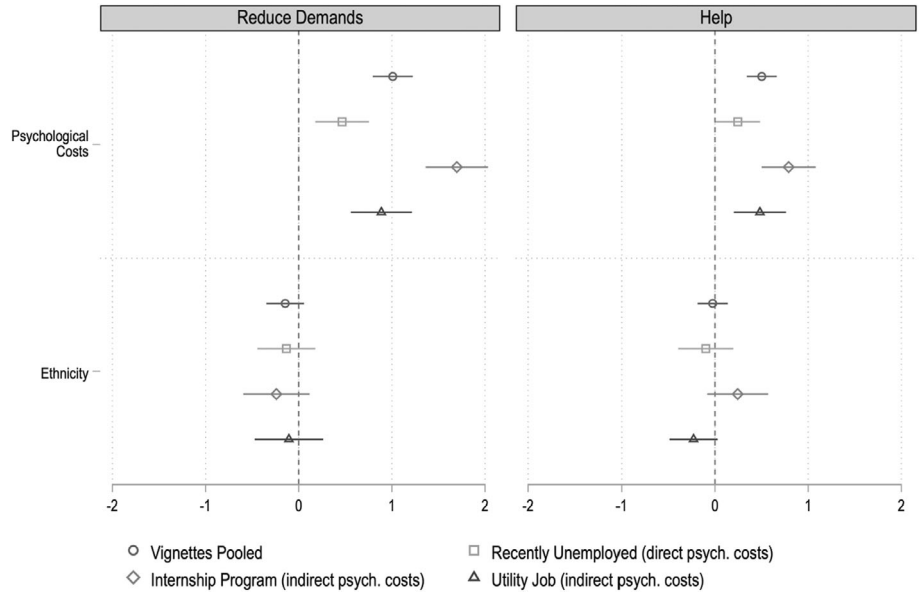


FIGURE 2 Effects across vignettes. Entries are regression coefficients from the Table A1. Psychological Costs: 1 = high psychological costs. Ethnicity: 1 = Middle-Eastern.

to help clients. Hence, all depicted coefficients are statistically significantly ($p < .05$), which lends strong support for Hypothesis 1. The effect on reducing burdens when communicating direct psychological costs in the first vignette is 0.50, which corresponds to a small effect (Cohens $D = .16$), while the pooled effect of direct and indirect psychological costs at 1.00 corresponds to a large effect (Cohens $D = .33$).

We also observe that the effect of communicating psychological costs is higher on caseworkers' willingness to reduce state demands than their willingness to exert an additional effort to help the clients. Further, we see some variation across vignettes. Specifically, frontline employees are most willing to help and reduce burdens for citizens in the internship program vignette. One explanation for this result may be that this vignette concerns a situation where the client is not in control of his own situation (being ridiculed by colleagues). As a consequence, caseworkers may perceive the client as more deserving and hold a higher empathy toward the client, which in turn should make them more willing to help him compared with the two other vignettes (Meuleman et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the results in Figure 2 demonstrate that frontline employees are responsive to both

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direct and indirect communication of psychological costs that arise in different stages and situations of citizen–state encounters.

Ethnicity effects

Figure 2 also report the average effects of the ethnicity cue. None of the reported coefficients are statistically significant, which suggest that there is no direct effect of client ethnicity on intentions to help and reduce burdens. However, our experimental design, where caseworkers are exposed to several vignettes, comes with the risk of learning effects and social desirability bias affecting the results – especially for a sensitive issue such as ethnicity. Therefore, Figure 3 reports regression results across vignette order as this allows us to examine if respondents change their indented behavior throughout the survey. In the first vignette they encounter, respondents cannot know about the purpose of the survey, and therefore learning is not an issue, while it might be for the second and third vignette. To be adequately powered, we present results pooled across the three vignettes.

Results for ethnicity in Figure 3 are very consistent with those reported in Figure 3, and hence we find no support for Hypothesis 2 that frontline employees are less likely to reduce demands and help citizens with a minority background compared with citizen from the ethnic minority. All coefficients reported in Figure 3 are statistically insignificant, which means there are no differences in intentions to help and reduce burdens between clients with different ethnicities. It is worth noticing that there are some indications of an order effect for help intentions. Here, we see that frontline employees are significantly more likely to help the minority citizen in the third vignette compared with the first vignette. However, none of the effects are significantly different from zero.

Interaction between psychological costs and ethnicity

Finally, we examine whether there is an interaction effect between psychological costs and ethnicity to test Hypothesis 3. We again turn to ordered analyses to be able to detect any order effects. Results are reported in Figure 4. We find no interaction effect between client ethnicity and psychological costs for caseworkers' intentions to reduce demands. This result is consistent across the first, second, and third vignette, and there are no indications of order effects for this outcome. However, when it comes to respondents' indented willingness to help clients, some ordering is present in our data. Hence, we see in Figure 4 that there is a negative interaction effect between psychological costs and ethnicity for the first vignette that respondents encounter, while the interaction term is insignificant for the second and third vignette. Since the first vignette constitute our main test, this lends support for Hypothesis 3 that frontline employees are more likely to reduce demands and help Danish citizens with high psychological costs compared with citizens of non-Western ethnicity.

Subgroup analysis

In Table 4, we explore potential heterogeneous effects. It is likely that individual-level characteristics among frontline employees create variation in their decision-making. For example, as discussed in the theory section, some

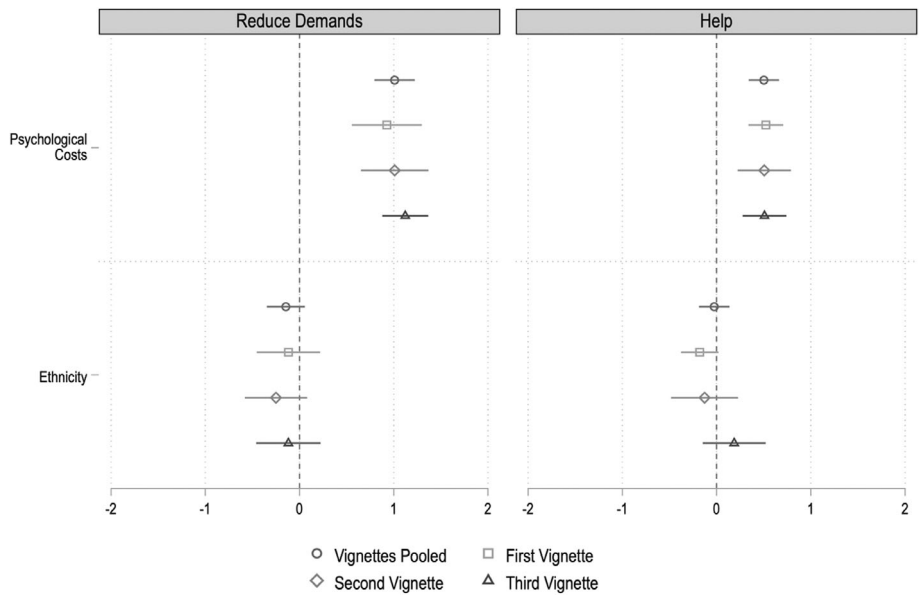


FIGURE 3 Effects across Vignette Order. Entries are regression coefficients from the Table A2. Psychological Costs: 1 = high psychological costs. Ethnicity: 1 = Middle-Eastern.

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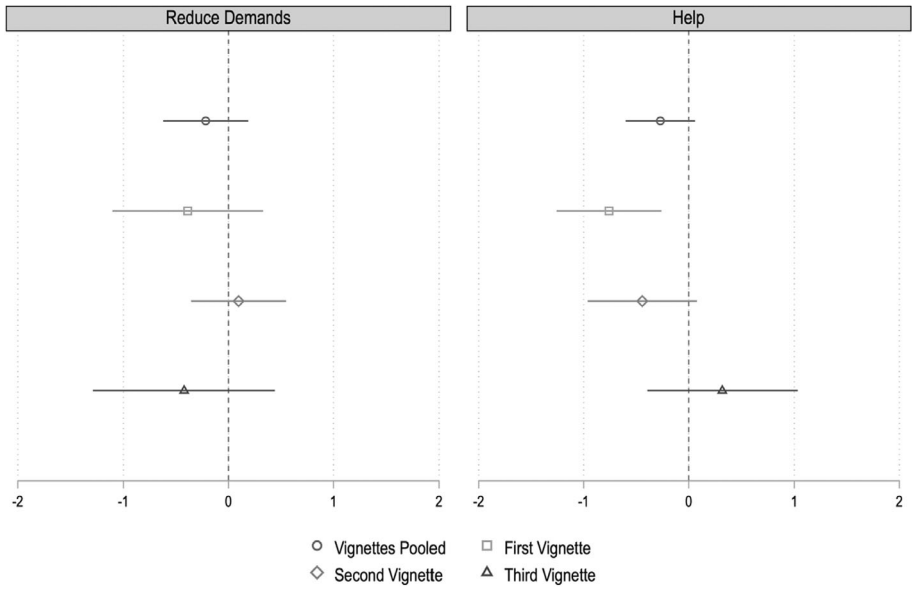


FIGURE 4 Interaction between Psychological Costs and Ethnicity Across Vignette Order. Entries are regression coefficients from the Table A3.

frontline employees may consider themselves as "efficiency engineers," while others conceive of themselves as "social workers" (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Unfortunately, we have not measured these concepts in our survey, but we do have data on their user orientation (Jensen & Andersen, 2015),[9] gender, age, and tenure and can thus test whether these characteristics moderate the effects of the two experimental treatments. We also include estimates from a model where characteristics are not interacted on treatments to get the baseline effect of the four characteristics.

Table 4 shows that user orientation is a strong predictor of our two outcomes, meaning that those with higher user orientation are more likely to reduce demands and help clients. However, user orientation does not moderate the effects of the experimental treatments. We also observe that gender is not associated with responses to the outcomes and does not moderate the effect of experimental treatments. Age shows an interesting pattern where older caseworkers are less likely to reduce demands but show a tendency to be more likely to help clients. We also see that age negatively moderates the effect of the psychological cost cue when it comes to reducing demands. Hence, older caseworkers are less likely to reduce demands for clients experiencing psychological costs. Unsurprisingly, tenure (which is highly correlated with age) shows a similar pattern, where caseworkers with more tenure are less likely to reduce demands and less likely to reduce demands for clients experiencing psychological costs.

TABLE 4 Subgroup analysis.

	Reduce demands	Help
User orientation		
Baseline	2.05** (0.00)	1.43** (0.00)
×Psych costs	0.08 (0.91)	−0.05 (0.92)
×Ethnicity	1.06^{+} (0.09)	0.72 (0.15)
Gender		
Baseline	−0.15 (0.37)	0.07 (0.65)
×Psych costs	0.46^{+} (0.09)	0.15 (0.45)
×Ethnicity	−0.24 (0.37)	0.23 (0.27)
Age		
Baseline	−0.01* (0.04)	0.01^{+} (0.06)
×Psych costs	−0.02* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.16)
×Ethnicity	−0.01 (0.16)	−0.00 (0.58)
Tenure		
Baseline	−0.03** (0.00)	−0.02^{+} (0.08)
×Psych costs	−0.04* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.48)
×Ethnicity	0.01 (0.71)	0.02 (0.20)
Covariates	Yes	Yes
n (observations)	3144	
n (individuals)	1048	

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. The baseline models do not include interaction terms. Models are estimated with covariates (gender, age, tenure, and managerial responsibility). Standard errors are clustered at the individual level. Full regression models are available in Tables A4–A7 in the Appendix.
$^{+}p < .10$;
$^{*}p < .05$; $^{**}p < .01$.
[Correction added on 14 March 2024, after first online publication: the symbol 'x' before "Psych costs" and "Ethnicity" has been added.]

LIMITATIONS

Before discussing the implications of our findings, we touch on some of the limitations of the study. First, our operationalization of psychological costs in the three vignettes is a potential limitation. Thus, the operationalization of psychological costs does not constitute an

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exhaustive list of psychological costs that a citizen can experience. What is more, while the psychological costs of feeling stressed and overwhelmed from having to write a CV and upload it to a webpage can be viewed as a very direct consequence of a state demand, being ridiculed by coworkers in a government-arranged program is more of an indirect consequence of a state demand. Thus, in the latter situation, the psychological discomfort could have been prevented had the manager in the internship program been more thoughtful of the citizen's situation. Hence, the psychological cost is not directly tied to the nature of the state demand but is more circumstantial. Still, we believe that these indirect psychological costs are important to study, as it is often difficult to distinguish between psychological discomfort arising as a direct consequence of a state demand to psychological discomfort arising as a circumstantial consequence to a citizen while complying with state demands. In both cases, we do, however, find evidence that frontline employees respond to citizens' communication of psychological costs – regardless of whether these costs are direct or indirectly related to state demands. In addition, it is worth noting that our focus on direct and indirect psychological costs, rather than learning and compliance costs, may affect the generalizability of our findings. Importantly, we primarily expect our results to generalize to these types of costs as well, but only when the communication of these costs invokes a feeling of deservingness and empathy toward the client.

Second, our results may be affected by social desirability bias among the caseworkers, that is, they may be inclined to answer in a socially desirable manner to both the ethnicity treatment and the psychological costs treatment. Such biases are always a concern in experimental research involving hypothetical scenarios because there may be a discrepancy between stated- and revealed preferences (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). While we cannot exclude that social desirability bias occurs, previous research in the same setting have been able to identify discrimination using similar research designs (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2018). This provides some indication that frontline employees are not generally prone to responding to vignettes in a socially desirable manner, especially in a survey where their responses are anonymous.

Third, our application of hypothetical scenarios in the vignettes constitutes a limitation when studying ethnicity. Although our research design builds on validated methods used in previous research studies (Andersen & Guul, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2018; Schram et al., 2009), we may imagine, on the one hand, that stereotypes about ethnic minorities are more salient in face-to-face interactions than in a fictitious vignette. On the other hand, in a face-to-face interaction, caseworkers can seek out more information about the client and potentially disconfirm misconceptions. However, our null result on a direct effect of clients' ethnicity aligns well with ongoing research that applies other research methods. For instance, utilizing unique administrative data on caseworkers' decision-making in a regression discontinuity study, Kolstad (2023) finds no evidence of discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities in Danish unemployment agencies. Surprisingly, this result even holds during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the caseworkers experienced an increased workload, which – at least theoretically – is often associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in coping behaviors such as stereotyping and categorizing citizens based on their ethnicity (Petersen, 2021; Tummers et al., 2015).

Finally, it is worth contemplating the generalizability of our results: Can our findings be generalized to other public organizations beyond unemployment agencies in Denmark? One important precondition for frontline employees to engage in behaviors that can reduce citizens' compliance demands is that they have the authority and discretion to do so. As discussed earlier, frontline employees implementing unemployment policies often have such discretionary authority, but in many cases, for example, when compliance demands are entirely determined by law, they have limited discretionary power to reduce compliance demands. In these cases, burden feedback should not change frontline employees' willingness to reduce citizens' compliance demands. Hence, when considering whether burden feedback is expected to occur in other contextual settings, one of the main conditions to look for is whether frontline employees have discretionary power to alter the demands that citizens. In addition, other factors such as workload or capacity may be crucial factors that moderate the effect of citizens' communication, as we may well imagine that some frontline employees do not have the time or resources to respond to communication of burdens.

DISCUSSION

Our study raises new questions and causes for concerns. First, if frontline employees are willing to help clients that communicate their direct or indirect psychological costs (even at the expense of helping other clients), we should be concerned about what types of clients communicate their experiences, and more importantly, what types of clients are unable to communicate different types of psychological costs. Regarding the latter, a recent study shows that women, people with limited education, and those with low self-efficacy are less inclined to voice their experiences of burden in citizen–state encounters (Gilad & Assouline, 2022). Hence, the most vulnerable clients may be unable to communicate their reasons for not fulfilling state demands (an action that will usually warrant a sanction) or be so overwhelmed by demands that they instead opt to exit unemployment programs altogether rather than seek help from the frontline employees. In addition, we may expect that some clients – for example, those with a high level of

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administrative literacy (Döring, 2021) – may know how to take advantage of the frontline employees' willingness to prioritize and help clients in need. If that is the case, frontline employees' responsiveness to communication of burdens can potentially create or enhance existing discrepancies between clients. Managers in public organizations should work toward reducing or compensating such discrepancies by, for example, ensuring that organizational procedures are in place that can identify the most vulnerable clients so that these clients are provided with help to communicate their experienced administrative burdens in citizen–state encounters.

Second, our study sheds new light on how formal and informal policy designs shape the decision-making of the frontline employees and hence demands that citizens face. In a recent theoretical piece, Baekgaard and Tankink (2022) call for more research examining these relations within an administrative burden framework. According to the authors, the formal policy design concerns policies as decided by lawmakers, while the informal policy design concerns the implementation of policies at the frontline of public services. In this article, we study a tightly regulated policy area where citizens are formally required to fulfill several demands to get access to welfare benefits. However, as our results demonstrate, we need to take the informal implementation of policies into account to understand the relationship between state demands and administrative burdens. Burdens cannot simply be derived from studying the formal policy design as they are continuously shaped and reshaped in citizen–state encounters.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have theorized, and tested, whether communication of direct and indirect psychological costs may feed back into the implementation of state demands by affecting frontline employees' decision-making in citizen–state encounters. Using a 2×2 factorial survey experimental vignette design to test our preregistered hypotheses, we show that frontline employees respond to citizens' communication of direct and indirect psychological costs by reducing state demands and exerting an additional effort to help. This result shows how administrative burdens may feed back into public organizations by changing frontline employees' decision-making. We found some evidence that the effect of communicating direct and indirect psychological costs is contingent on citizens' ethnicity. Specifically, some of our results show that frontline employees are more inclined to help members of the ethnic majority communicating burdens than ethnic minority members.

Our findings contribute to the literatures of administrative burdens and citizen–state interactions by showing how citizens' burden communication influence frontline employees' decision-making. This finding improves our understanding on how state demands and burdens are continuously shaped and reshaped in citizen–state encounters. In line with recent research (Nielsen et al., 2021), we find that citizens can influence the frontline employees' policy implementation by communicating their direct and indirect psychological costs in citizen–state encounters. Thus, we show that citizens can be active players whose communication of burdens influences frontline employees' implementation of compliance demands as well as their prioritizations of clients. Our findings also improve our knowledge about the other important actor in most citizen–state interactions, namely, frontline employees. We show that they are indeed willing to "make their work harder, more unpleasant (…)," and most likely "(…) less officially successful in order to respond to the needs of individuals" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). In that way, our findings showcase a story of citizen-orientated public employees that display responsiveness toward citizens' needs – even though such behavior may decrease overall program success. Therefore, our findings also contribute to the recently formulated research agenda that calls for studies that highlight the "bright side" of public service delivery (Douglas et al., 2021).

Finally, our study helps bridge the literature on administrative burden and street-level bureaucracy. By demonstrating that frontline employees' decision-making is responsive to citizens' burden communication in citizen–state encounters, our study opens an array of new research questions. In particular, future research may investigate how citizens' resources affect burden communication, and how the effects of burden communication compare with more traditional factors such as citizens' gender, effort, and motivation (Guul et al., 2021; Jilke & Tummers, 2018).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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FUNDING INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

[1] The pre-registration can be found at: https://osf.io/7hvew/?view_only=06d920fe3c6c4a2b9f615f7127c6c7e1.

[2] Baekgaard et al. (2021) use the term "compliance demands". However, to avoid confusion between compliance demands and compliance costs, we opt for "state demands" instead.

[3] Tummers et al. (2015) also contend that frontline employees can move against clients, which entails confrontations – something we will not focus on in this article.

[4] A third explanation is taste-based discrimination, which is outright racism.

[5] It is worth parsing out that frontline employees may also give preferential treatment to ethnic minority members in some cases (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Petersen, 2021). For instance, Harber, Stafford, and

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Kennedy (2010) argue and find that white teachers give favorable feedback to minorities to see themselves as egalitarian. However, in our context that concerns intentions to help and reduce burdens, we expect unconscious biases to be more powerful than the desire to appear egalitarian.

[6] Our randomization followed a two-step process. First, we randomized whether the respondent was provided with a Danish or a Middle-Eastern name. Second, the respondent would randomly be given one of the 10 names.

[7] The caseworkers involved in the development of the vignettes did not participate in the survey.

[8] We ran all models both with and without covariates (age, gender, and work experience), but only report the models without covariates here because differences between models are negligible.

[9] This tests hypothesis 4 in our pre-registration on the effects of interacting user orientation on the experimental treatments. We discuss this in more length in the appendix.

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APPENDIX A

User orientation

In the preregistration, we specify three research questions. We only examine two of these in this article. For transparency, we also present the results from the third research question here.

The research question concerns the effect of user orientation (Jensen & Andersen, 2015). We expect it to positively moderate the effect of the psychological cost on the dependent variables, meaning that respondents with high user orientation will react stronger to the psychological costs. We also expect that user orientation moderates client ethnicity on the dependent variables, meaning that respondents with high user orientation will be less likely to show a bias against the client from an ethnic minority.

Table A4 below displays the results. We find no support for the expectation that user orientation moderates the effect of psychological cost. This finding is consistent across dependent variables. We find limited support for the expectation that user orientation moderates the effect of client ethnicity. For "reduce demands" we see that the interaction between client ethnicity and user orientation is significant at the .10-level. The effect is in the expected direction where respondents with higher user orientation do not differentiate between the minority and majority client, while those low in user orientation are less inclined to help the minority client compared with the majority client. However, it is worth stressing that the effect is only marginally significant and only so for one of the dependent variables. We also find a (non-preregistered), marginally significant ($p < .10$) three-way interaction between psychological costs, client ethnicity, and user orientation for the help measure. Substantially, this effect shows that respondents high in user orientation are equally likely to help clients both with an ethnic minority and majority background and with no or high psychological costs, while those low in user orientation show more differing reactions to our treatments.

TABLE A1 Regression by vignette – no interaction term (standard errors at the agency level).

	Vignettes pooled		Recently unemployed		Internship program		Utility job	
	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client
Psychological costs	1.01** (0.00)	0.50** (0.00)	0.47** (0.00)	0.25* (0.04)	1.70** (0.00)	0.79** (0.00)	0.89** (0.00)	0.48** (0.00)
Ethnicity	−0.14 (0.16)	−0.02 (0.76)	−0.13 (0.39)	−0.10 (0.50)	−0.24 (0.18)	0.24 (0.14)	−0.11 (0.56)	−0.23^{+} (0.08)
Constant	5.09** (0.00)	6.69** (0.00)	6.70** (0.00)	7.14** (0.00)	4.46** (0.00)	5.80** (0.00)	4.13** (0.00)	7.13** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated without covariates. Standard Errors are clustered at the agency level. $^{+}p < .10$, $*p < .05$ $**, p < .01$.

TABLE A2 Order – no interaction term.

	Vignettes pooled		First vignette seen		Second vignette seen		Third vignette seen	
	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client	Reduce demands	Help client
Psychological costs	1.01** (0.00)	0.50** (0.00)	0.93** (0.00)	0.52** (0.00)	1.01** (0.00)	0.51** (0.00)	1.12** (0.00)	0.51** (0.14)
Client ethnicity	−0.14 (0.16)	−0.02 (0.76)	−0.12 (0.48)	−0.18^{+} (0.07)	−0.24 (0.13)	−0.13 (0.47)	−0.12 (0.49)	0.19 (0.26)
Constant	5.09** (0.00)	6.69** (0.00)	5.59** (0.00)	7.11** (0.00)	5.00** (0.00)	6.69** (0.00)	4.70** (0.00)	6.27** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							

Note: The table shows the results for the first, second, and third vignettes the respondent encountered in the survey. Regression coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated without covariates. Standard Errors are clusted at the individual level when pooling results, and at the agency level when analyzing vignettes separately.
$^{+}p < .10$;
$*p < .05$; $**p < .01$.

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TABLE A3 Order – with interaction term.

	Vignettes pooled		First vignette seen		Second vignette seen		Third vignette seen	
	Reduce demands	**Help client**	**Reduce demands**	**Help client**	**Reduce demands**	**Help client**	**Reduce demands**	**Help client**
Psychological costs	1.12** (0.00)	0.64** (0.00)	1.13** (0.00)	0.91** (0.00)	0.96** (0.00)	0.72** (0.00)	1.32** (0.00)	0.36 (0.14)
Client ethnicity	−.04 (0.80)	0.11 (0.38)	0.07 (0.77)	0.19 (0.22)	−0.30 (0.18)	0.09 (0.68)	0.09 (0.72)	0.03 (0.92)
High psych. cost × Middle-Eastern name	−0.22 (0.30)	−0.27 (0.11)	−0.39 (0.22)	−0.76** (0.00)	0.10 (0.67)	−0.44^{+} (0.09)	−0.42 (0.33)	0.32 (0.37)
Constant	5.04** (0.00)	6.63** (0.00)	5.50** (0.00)	6.94** (0.00)	5.02** (0.00)	6.59** (0.00)	4.60** (0.00)	6.35** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							

Note: The table shows the results for the first vignette the respondent encountered in the survey. Regression coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated without covariates.
$^{+}p < .10$;
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

TABLE A4 Subgroup analysis 1: user orientation.

	Reduce demands						Help client	
	(1)	**(2)**	**(3)**	**(4)**	**(5)**	**(6)**	**(7)**	**(8)**
Psychological costs	1.12** (0.00)	1.46^{+} (0.05)	1.06^{+} (0.06)	1.12** (0.00)	0.65** (0.00)	1.44* (0.02)	0.69^{+} (0.09)	0.65** (0.00)
Client ethnicity	−0.02 (0.91)	−0.42 (0.52)	−0.02 (0.91)	−0.79^{+} (0.10)	0.11 (0.39)	0.33 (0.59)	0.11 (0.39)	−0.42 (0.29)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity	−0.20 (0.32)	−0.93 (0.30)	−0.20 (0.32)	−0.20 (0.34)	−0.25 (0.14)	−1.73* (0.05)	−0.25 (0.14)	−0.24 (0.15)
User orientation	2.05** (0.00)	1.75* (0.02)	2.01** (0.00)	1.53** (0.00)	1.43** (0.00)	1.60* (0.01)	1.46** (0.00)	1.07* (0.02)
Psych. costs × User orientation		−0.46 (0.64)	0.08 (0.91)			−1.09 (0.16)	−0.05 (0.92)	
Client ethnicity × User orientation		0.55 (0.53)		1.06^{+} (0.09)		−0.31 (0.70)		0.72 (0.15)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity × User orientation		1.01 (0.40)				2.05^{+} (0.07)		
Constant	4.47** (0.00)	4.69** (0.00)	4.50** (0.00)	4.85** (0.00)	4.85** (0.00)	5.16** (0.00)	5.27** (0.00)	5.54** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							
Observations	3144							

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated with covariates (gender, age, tenure, managerial responsibility). Standard errors are cluster at the individual level.
$^{+}p < .10$;
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

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TABLE A5 Subgroup analysis 2: gender.

	Reduce demands				Help client			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Psychological costs	1.12** (0.00)	0.60^{+} (0.07)	0.75** (0.00)	1.12** (0.00)	0.65** (0.00)	0.29 (0.23)	0.52** (0.01)	0.65** (0.00)
Client ethnicity	−0.01 (0.95)	0.08 (0.82)	−0.01 (0.93)	0.18 (0.50)	0.11 (0.36)	−0.29 (0.28)	0.11 (0.37)	−0.07 (0.72)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity	−0.23 (0.27)	0.03 (0.94)	−0.22 (0.29)	−0.22 (0.28)	−0.27 (0.11)	0.19 (0.60)	−0.26 (0.12)	−0.27 (0.11)
Female	−0.15 (0.37)	−0.31 (0.27)	−0.37^{+} (0.08)	−0.02 (0.91)	0.07 (0.65)	−0.25 (0.27)	−0.01 (0.97)	−0.05 (0.75)
Psych. costs × Female		0.63^{+} (0.10)	0.46^{+} (0.09)			0.43 (0.12)	0.15 (0.45)	
Client ethnicity × Female		−0.11 (0.77)		−0.24 (0.37)		0.50^{+} (0.10)		0.23 (0.27)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity × Female		−0.31 (0.56)				−0.57 (0.17)		
Constant	5.98** (0.00)	6.12** (0.00)	6.17** (0.00)	5.88** (0.00)	6.34** (0.00)	6.61** (0.00)	6.40** (0.00)	6.44** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							
Observations	3144							

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated with covariates (gender, age, tenure, managerial responsibility). Standard errors are cluster at the individual level.
$^{+}p < .10$;
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

TABLE A6 Subgroup analysis 3: age.

	Reduce demands				Help client			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Psychological costs	1.12** (0.00)	1.52* (0.01)	2.18** (0.00)	1.12** (0.00)	0.65** (0.00)	1.21* (0.02)	1.14** (0.00)	0.64** (0.00)
Client ethnicity	−0.01 (0.95)	−0.11 (0.86)	−0.03 (0.86)	0.58 (0.19)	0.11 (0.36)	0.35 (0.52)	0.10 (0.40)	0.30 (0.42)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity	−0.23 (0.27)	1.08 (0.20)	−0.20 (0.32)	−0.23 (0.26)	−0.27 (0.11)	−0.41 (0.58)	−0.26 (0.13)	−0.27 (0.11)
Age	−0.01* (0.04)	−0.00 (0.80)	−0.00 (0.83)	−0.01 (0.37)	0.01^{+} (0.06)	0.02* (0.04)	0.02* (0.02)	0.01^{+} (0.06)
Psych. costs × Age		−0.01 (0.50)	−0.02* (0.02)			−0.01 (0.26)	−0.01 (0.16)	
Client ethnicity × Age		0.00 (0.89)		−0.01 (0.16)		−0.01 (0.63)		−0.00 (0.58)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity × Age		−0.03 (0.12)				0.00 (0.83)		
Constant	5.98** (0.00)	5.50** (0.00)	5.46** (0.00)	5.70** (0.00)	6.34** (0.00)	5.98** (0.00)	6.10** (0.00)	6.25** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							
Observations	3144							

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated with covariates (gender, age, tenure, managerial responsibility). Standard errors are cluster at the individual level.
$^{+}p < .10$;
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

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TABLE A7 Subgroup analysis 4: tenure.

	Reduce demands				Help client			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Psychological costs	1.12** (0.00)	1.39** (0.00)	1.42** (0.00)	1.12** (0.00)	0.65** (0.00)	0.83** (0.00)	0.71** (0.00)	0.64** (0.00)
Client ethnicity	−0.01 (0.95)	−0.12 (0.60)	−0.02 (0.91)	−0.06 (0.78)	0.11 (0.36)	0.08 (0.68)	0.11 (0.37)	−0.02 (0.91)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity	−0.23 (0.27)	−0.15 (0.64)	−0.21 (0.31)	−0.23 (0.27)	−0.27 (0.11)	−0.48^{+} (0.07)	−0.26 (0.12)	−0.27 (0.11)
Tenure	−0.03** (0.00)	−0.02 (0.32)	−0.01 (0.43)	−0.03* (0.01)	−0.03** (0.00)	−0.02^{+} (0.08)	−0.02* (0.05)	−0.03** (0.00)
Psych. costs × Tenure		−0.03 (0.11)	−0.04* (0.02)			−0.02 (0.16)	−0.01 (0.48)	
Client ethnicity × Tenure		0.01 (0.56)		0.01 (0.71)		0.00 (0.84)		0.02 (0.20)
Psych. costs × Client ethnicity × Tenure		−0.01 (0.80)				0.02 (0.29)		
Constant	5.98** (0.00)	5.88** (0.00)	5.83** (0.00)	6.01** (0.00)	6.34** (0.00)	6.32** (0.00)	6.31** (0.00)	6.41** (0.00)
Individuals	1048							
Observations	3144							

Note: Coefficients with *p*-values in parentheses. Models are estimated with covariates (gender, age, tenure, and managerial responsibility). Standard errors are cluster at the individual level.
$^{+}p < .10$;
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

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