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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Is stress among street-level bureaucrats associated with experiences of administrative burden among clients? A multilevel study of the Danish unemployment sector

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Abstract

Research on street-level bureaucracy argues that factors such as stress and burnout affect the behaviors of street-level bureaucrats toward clients. At the same time, the literature on administrative burdens argues that citizens face a series of costs when they experience policy implementation as onerous. We draw on both literatures to theorize ways in which street-level bureaucrats' behavioral responses to stress states may influence client experiences of administrative burden. Using a multilevel dataset of unemployment counselors and unemployment benefit recipients from 53 departments of a Danish unemployment insurance fund, we find that stress states among counselors are positively associated with benefit recipients' experiences of both learning costs, compliance costs, and experiences of autonomy loss. We conclude by discussing limitations and practical implications. In particular, we call for research into how street-level bureaucrat characteristics influence client experiences of administrative burden.

Practitioner points

- When street-level bureaucrats enter stress states, they become more inclined to engage in coping strategies, such as rationing of services, routinized counseling, and rigid rule adherence, all of which will impose further administrative burdens onto clients.
- As a consequence, stress among street-level bureaucrats is associated with experiences of administrative burden among clients.
- Changing rules and demands are not the only levers available for reducing administrative burdens in administrative systems. Initiatives aiming to help employees avert stress states may also contribute, and do so without compromising rules, demands, regulations, and requirements, which all may be serving legitimate ends.

INTRODUCTION

Since Lipsky's (1980) seminal work on street-level bureaucracy, public administration scholars have documented that the discretionary decision-making of street-level bureaucrats is affected by factors, such as performance-based incentives (Brodkin, 2011; Soss, Fording, & Schram, 2011), client characteristics (Guul, Pedersen, & Petersen, 2021; Jilke & Tummers, 2018), and organizational control (Jakobsen, Jacobsen, & Serritzlew, 2019). As resources at the street level are frequently insufficient to meet clients' demands, a particular area of attention within this line of inquiry has been to study how street-level bureaucrats cope with scarce resources (Tummers, Bekkers, Vink, & Musheno, 2015). Following Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) and Tummers et al. (2015), these coping strategies can be categorized based on how the street-level bureaucrat moves relative to their clients. For instance, they move toward clients when

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they help clients more than formal requirements and resources mandate, but move away from clients when they dump, park, or simply ignore certain clients. Finally, they might even move against clients when resorting to rigid rule following against their clients' needs or engaging in hostile confrontations. Despite the rich literature on such coping behaviors among street-level bureaucrats, it is only rarely studied how they matter to clients' experiences of public service delivery (Eldor, 2018).

At the same time, it is a key assumption in the rapidly developing literature on administrative burden that state actions—encompassing both a policy's design and implementation by street-level bureaucrats—can induce learning, compliance, and psychological costs onto citizens that negatively affect their program access, civic engagement, and social equity (Bell, Ter-Mkrtchyan, Wehde, & Smith, 2020; Christensen, Aarøe, Baekgaard, Herd, & Moynihan, 2020; Sunstein, 2019). However, existing research has paid far more attention to the effects of onerous state actions at the level of policy design than at the level of policy implementation (see Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, Madsen, & Christensen, 2021). As a result, the literature strongly emphasizes policies that are politically constructed with the intention to induce or remove administrative burdens (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Ray, Herd, & Moynihan, 2023), while few studies consider the characteristics affecting the implementation of these policies, such as the working conditions, attitudes, and discretionary behaviors of street-level bureaucrats. The studies that do, such as the study by Bell and Smith (2022) on role perceptions among street-level bureaucrats in the Oklahoma Promise Program, tend to link these to client outcomes—such as program access or take-up—and not client experiences per se (Bell & Smith, 2022; Brodkin & Majmundar, 2010; Jilke, Van Dooren, & Rys, 2018; Olsen, Kyhse-Andersen, & Moynihan, 2022).

In extension, existing studies do not address two important aspects. First, the notion of client experiences is focal to the administrative burden framework and is often used to argue why conditional policies have limited take-up (Burden, Canon, Mayer, & Moynihan, 2012; Herd & Moynihan, 2018). Yet, without empirical evidence of how policy implementation relates to onerous experiences among clients, a core explanatory potential of the administrative burden framework remains unexploited (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021). Second, linking client experiences to characteristics of the street-level bureaucrats helps us identify under what conditions state actors shift burdens back to clients, and in turn makes possible remedies more operationally identifiable (Madsen, Mikkelsen, & Moynihan, 2022). That is, identifying relevant street-level bureaucrat characteristics is important diagnostically to identify the multitude of factors potentially driving experiences of administrative burden and prospectively to assess potential pitfalls in successful service delivery. Indeed, it is possible that even policies intended to ease clients' navigation through bureaucracy are sometimes unintendedly experienced as onerous if the street-level bureaucrats carrying them out in practice lack the resources or motivation to implement them as such.

We aim to address these gaps in the intersection between the street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden frameworks. Drawing on both literatures, we propose a set of theoretical hypotheses that link stress states among street-level bureaucrats—situations in which they become stressed, exhausted, or burned out—to administrative burden among their clients, that is their experiences of rules, regulations, and procedures as onerous (e.g., Herd & Moynihan, 2018).

Following Tummers et al. (2015), we hypothesize that stress states make street-level bureaucrats engage in coping strategies, primarily involving them 'moving away from' or even 'moving against' clients (see also Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). This response occurs if the street-level bureaucrat ceases the extra-role provision of assistance to clients that they often provide otherwise or compensate for their own stress state by using coping strategies at the expense of the client (e.g., Lavee, 2021; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003). In practice, stress states might thus result in the street-level bureaucrat resorting to, for example, cream-skimming (Lipsky, 1980), routinized as opposed to personalized counseling (van Loon & Jakobsen, 2018), or erection and exploitation of barriers to control demanding clients (Soss et al., 2011).

From the client's perspective, these types of behaviors are likely to increase onerous experiences in the interaction with public organizations (Burden et al., 2012; Herd & Moynihan, 2018). We argue that when clients interact with a stressed and burned-out street-level bureaucrat, they are less likely to get information about, and get help understanding, rules and regulations governing their benefit scheme (learning costs), to get assistance navigating and complying with demands and requirements (compliance costs), and to avoid feelings of autonomy loss, stress, and stigma from being on benefits (psychological costs). Hence, while coping strategies may help street-level bureaucrats alleviate stress, they impede on clients' ability to operate in the policy system they are engaging.

We test the expectations in multilevel models combining a survey of 1044 Danish unemployment benefit recipients matched with a survey of 151 counselors from 53 local departments in an unemployment insurance fund serving the very same clients. We find that department-level averages in stress states among street-level bureaucrats indeed are associated with client experiences of administrative burden. In doing so, our results contribute to research on both street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden by systematically showing how stress states among street-level bureaucrats potentially have downstream effects on clients' experiences. Qualitative studies (e.g., Nisar, 2018) have already begun treading down this path, but our study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to conduct a large-scale,

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quantitative examination of experiences from both sides of the bureaucrat–client relationship.

A THEORY OF STREET-LEVEL STRESS STATES AND ADMINISTRATIVE BURDENS

While the literatures on street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden have clear interests in similar phenomena—i.e., street-level bureaucrats' cognitive and behavioral responses to insufficient resources and stress states on the one hand, and clients' onerous experiences of policy implementation on the other—both literatures fall short of proposing ways in which these two levels can be linked.

As argued by Lipsky (1980), street-level bureaucrats often experience stress states from having to navigate extensive workloads and insatiable and conflicting demands of the policy they implement, their managers, themselves, and their clients. These stress states can instigate different cognitive and behavioral coping strategies that affect how street-level bureaucrats approach clients, their discretionary implementation of policies, and, ultimately, how the policies are experienced by their clients. Although all stress-related coping strategies seek to alleviate the pressure of stress states (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018), the specific mechanisms will vary across context.[1] For the sake of consistency with the street-level bureaucracy literature, we thus focus on cognitive and behavioral coping strategies that potentially arise when street-level bureaucrats experience prolonged occupational stress states from insatiable client demands, extensive workloads, or insufficient time or material resources (Lipsky, 1980; Vedung, 2015). We thereby distinguish our focus from, for example, the acute situational stress experienced among police officers, or health officials (Alcadipani, Cabral, & Lotta, 2020; Babore et al., 2020). To facilitate our discussion, we categorize coping strategies using the framework by Tummers et al. (2015): moving toward, away from, or against clients.

First, stress states can make street-level bureaucrats 'move toward' clients. This coping strategy posits that street-level bureaucrats respond to stress states by becoming further invested in the client's case. Cognitively, the street-level bureaucrats thus adjust their focus to the clients' needs by simultaneously avoiding external stress sources, such as the demands posed by organizational goals or policy rules (Lavee & Strier, 2019). For instance, Rayner and Lawton find that some street-level bureaucrats respond to work-related burnout by becoming increasingly patient toward clients, visibly exhibiting empathy, and even sidestepping eligibility discussions to prevent the interaction from becoming further emotionally draining (Rayner & Lawton, 2018). In other words, these strategies assume that street-level bureaucrats cope with their situation by further enhancing their role as compassionate citizen agents to absorb burdens on the side of clients while avoiding other external sources to stress and burnout (Masood & Nisar, 2022; Tummers et al., 2015). This is of relevance to clients' experiences of administrative burdens, in part because citizen–agent behavior may involve bending or breaking rules to favor clients. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003), for instance, show that teachers bend rules not for their own benefit but for the children they serve.

These coping strategies will likely depend on the street-level bureaucrats' personal resources and thus vary across street-level bureaucrats within the same organization. For instance, Bell and Smith (2022) find that street-level bureaucrats perceiving themselves as having a supportive role of clients are more likely to move toward clients than those viewing themselves as compliance officers (Bell & Smith, 2022). Others find that street-level bureaucrats' psychological resources, such as their psychological capital and ability to positively reinterpret negative circumstances, function as a buffer against stress and positively predict the ability to engage in innovative behavior when facing constrained working conditions (Babore et al., 2020; Brunetto et al. 2022).

However, while they have the potential to alleviate administrative burdens, these proactive coping strategies may be difficult for street-level bureaucrats to sustain. Drawing on Conservation of Resources Theory, Hobfoll et al. (2018) argue that there comes a point where one's stock of personal resources is insufficient to bolster stress states without additional consequences. Particularly when considering that attempts for street-level bureaucrats to move toward clients comes at the expense of their own personal resources. For instance, Lavee (2021) finds that Israeli street-level bureaucrats deploy their personal resources—time, modes of transportation, or money—to help clients. Also, as shown by Ropes and de Boer (2022), emphatically concerned street-level bureaucrats are indeed more likely to respond to stress states by working overtime, but as they also draw more heavily on their personal resources, they risk further enhancing the severity of their stress states.

Hence, street-level bureaucrats experiencing nonepisodic stress states are arguably more likely to 'move away from' clients. Specifically, street-level bureaucrats may respond to stress by engaging in formal role behaviors to protect themselves psychologically rather than spending personal resources on help beyond their formal mandate (cf. Lipsky, 1980; Vedung, 2015). These types of compensatory coping strategies can, for instance, include only offering routinized services across clients with different needs (van Loon & Jakobsen, 2018), cream-skimming less-demanding clients (Guul et al., 2021), or seeking to limit workload pressure by rationing available services to exactly what rules require (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003; Tummers et al., 2015). These strategies have the consequence that clients receive less help when facing rules and procedures, either because street-level

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bureaucrats avoid dealing with clients in need of assistance (cream-skimming), attempt to limit opportunities for clients to receive assistance (rationing supply), or refrain from providing assistance with interpretation of and compliance with rules and procedures when it is not explicitly required of them.

In the more extreme, street-level bureaucrats do not only compensate indirectly for their stress states but directly take their stress out on their clients by 'moving against' them. These types of coping behaviors include raising barriers directly against the needs of more demanding clients or even engaging in direct confrontations (Watkins-Hayes 2009; Bell & Smith, 2022; Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022). Clients facing these coping strategies are likely to experience their interaction with the policy system as both less pleasant and more difficult since stressed street-level bureaucrats not only avoid them but attempt to more or less explicitly deny them assistance.

In sum, when street-level bureaucrats respond to stress states by either moving away from or directly against clients, they do so to protect themselves or their organization at the expense of the client. Taken together, the share of administrative burdens often carried by street-level bureaucrats is shifted back onto the client (Barnes & Henly, 2018).

Regardless of whether street-level bureaucrats move away from clients or even against them, these coping strategies are likely to result in more severe experiences of administrative burden for the client (cf. Barnes & Henly, 2018; Soss et al., 2011). For instance, if a street-level bureaucrat offers more routinized counseling in response to stress, she will be less likely to help the client understand how rules and demands of the benefit match the clients' specific situation. As a result, the client is less likely to feel fully acquainted with conditions of their benefit and how rules and procedures apply to their specific situation (Bell & Smith, 2022). This will lead to an increasing experience of learning costs. Moreover, if the street-level bureaucrats cope with stress by rationing resources otherwise used to invest in client interactions, they might become more inflexible with meeting planning and more likely to impose demands unsuited to their clients' specific needs (Lavee & Strier, 2019). Consequently, their clients are more likely to feel subject to rigid and meaningless compliance demands, which will result in more severe experiences of compliance costs from living up to demands of their benefit. Finally, encounters with stressed street-level bureaucrats are likely to induce or worsen clients' experience of psychological costs. This might occur if clients experience autonomy loss from the barriers imposed by the street-level bureaucrats, stress from living up to street-level bureaucrats discretionary demands, or stigma because their case is not prioritized or street-level bureaucrats engage in conflict or abusive behavior against them (Auyero, 2011; Herd & Moynihan, 2018; Westman, 2001).[2] In sum, stress among street-level bureaucrats is likely to increase client experiences of the benefit system as onerous in terms of both learning, compliance, and psychological costs.[3]

Coping strategies that move toward clients may counteract some of these effects. However, our discussion of movement toward clients suggests that stress state-induced helping and rule-bending are likely of less consequence to client experiences than stress state-induced withdrawal, rationing, routinizing, denial, and conflict. First, 'moving toward clients' coping is, as noted, resource demanding and not likely sustainable for street-level bureaucrats in stress states. Second, not all street-level bureaucrats are disposed to this type of coping. Third, even when they are so disposed, moving toward does not necessarily imply helping or reducing administrative burden. For instance, Buurman, Delfgaauw, Dur, and Van den Bossche (2012) find that more altruistic caseworkers opt to avoid some clients rather than sanctioning them for breaking rules, effectively trading compliance for learning costs.

Taken together, then, our theory suggests that stress states among street-level bureaucrats will increase the experience of administrative burdens among clients. As discussed, this expectation holds for all parts of the common tripartite distinction between types of administrative burdens. We thus pose five hypotheses with the same directional expectation, one for learning costs, one for compliance costs, and three for different aspects of psychological costs:

Hypothesis 1. There is a positive relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client learning costs.

Hypothesis 2. There is a positive relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client compliance costs.

Hypothesis 3a. There is a positive relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client autonomy loss.

Hypothesis 3b. There is a positive relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client stress.

Hypothesis 3c. There is a positive relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client stigma.

We pose three hypotheses on psychological costs since these are more amorphous than learning and compliance costs in the administrative burden literature. There is less clarity on what types of experiences constitute psychological costs (Baekgaard & Tankink, 2021). The literature generally follows Herd and Moynihan (2018) and others in considering loss of autonomy, stress, and

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stigma as important psychological costs. As stated above, these aspects are also potentially relevant for our case, which is why we develop hypotheses for all three aspects of psychological costs.

Our study is not designed to effectively identify the specific behavioral strategies of street-level bureaucrats moving away from or against clients. Coping strategies are likely both contextual and situational in the form they take. Police officers' cream-skimming is different from that of social workers. However, our hypotheses do not require such empirical distinctions. Instead, we along with the street-level bureaucracy literature build on an expectation that street-level bureaucrats experiencing stress states are more likely to engage in broad families of coping strategies (Lipsky, 1980; Tummers et al., 2015; Vedung, 2015). Such abstractions are not beyond debate, of course, but without them learning from empirical studies of street-level bureaucrats becomes difficult, since the diversity of situational variations in coping strategies can easily overwhelm our ability to draw conclusions of wider theoretical relevance. This is exactly why the categorizations into such abstractions in ethnographic work in both the street-level bureaucracy (Davidovitz & Cohen, 2022; Lavee, 2021; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003) and administrative burden (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Masood & Nisar, 2022; Nisar, 2018) literatures is so valuable. As we return to in the discussion, however, even coping families may be contextually influenced (Hupe & Buffat, 2014).

Though we develop a new theory, we are not claiming that our propositions cover all relevant parameters. There are, of course, other sources of onerous experiences among clients than stress states among street-level bureaucrats, just as we would not claim that stress is the only—or even the most common—source of coping among street-level bureaucrats. Managerial expectations, organizational resources, policy characteristics, and a series of other internal and external demands and conflicts all fuel coping at the front lines (Tummers et al., 2015). Moreover, a point we return to in discussing our results, coping is not the only possible avenue for reducing stress for street-level bureaucrats. However, we do claim that stress states among street-level bureaucrats are a relevant parameter in accounting for these families of coping strategies and subsequent onerous client experiences, and thus is a good place to start a synthesis of the administrative burden and street-level bureaucracy literatures.

RESEARCH SETTING

To test our hypotheses, we focus on the Danish unemployment insurance system. Here, we use two separate surveys to gather data among both counselors employed in and unemployment benefit recipients receiving benefits from the Danish unemployment insurance fund 3FA. Collaboration with the fund offers a range of advantages for the empirical assessment of our expectations.

First, 3FA administers benefit payments and provides services to 15,000 unemployment benefit recipients across 65 departments covering the whole of Denmark. Each department enjoys a relatively high degree of (managerial) autonomy, which potentially leads to varying levels of stress states across departments, and, thus, varying capacity to implement the centrally formulated unemployment policy.

Second, the fund assists unemployment insurance recipients under a dual responsibility: they have to assist clients' way (back) to employment through individualized counseling while simultaneously monitoring and assessing the recipients' fulfillment of benefit conditions. Compared with other OECD countries, eligibility conditions in the Danish unemployment benefit system are strict and include active job search, maintenance of an online CV and a portfolio with registers of any job search activities, and attendance of regular courses and meetings at the unemployment insurance fund as well as the municipal job center. At the same time, recipients risk substantial financial sanctions if they refuse to take a job without valid reasons, fail to keep their online portfolio updated, do not show up for meetings, or say no to job offers and activation requirements. This setting places much importance on the level of policy implementation, and especially the working conditions, attitudes, and behaviors of counselors, as they have ample opportunity to—at best—provide relief from administrative burdens born by clients or—at worst—further exacerbate such burdens onto clients.

Third, rules and conditions of the unemployment insurance system are generally perceived as complex and demanding for both employees, recipients, and experts alike (Dagpengekommissionen, 2015; Deloitte, 2018; Faglig Fælles A-Kasse, 2019). Hence, counselors in our case are likely to experience stress states from, for example, running between multiple meetings, emotional exhaustion from needy clients, discomfort from monitoring client behavior, imposing sanctions that potentially affect client well-being, or limited control over client outcomes. Our case is thus well suited to test whether such conditions among street-level bureaucrats matter to their clients' experiences of navigating a demanding system, even if—as we discuss below—our case selection is not without costs.

METHODS AND DATA

Participants and procedure

We distributed distinct surveys to counselors and unemployed members in the fund through the 3FA's internal mail distribution system. The counselor survey was sent to 382 employees across all departments in the fund, deemed as likely having a counseling function in their everyday work.[4] The survey was fielded on October

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29, 2020 and closed on November 13, 2020. A total of 151 counselors answered the survey across 53 departments, resulting in a 39.5 percent response rate.

For the member survey, 7500 respondents were randomly selected from the fund's records of unemployed members. The recipient survey was fielded on November 13, 2020 and remained open until December 12, 2020. In total, 1377 members answered at least part of the survey, resulting in an 18.4 percent response rate. Compared with the population, male recipients (population = 68.4 percent, sample = 60.8 percent) and younger recipients (population = 44.2 years, sample = 51.1 years) are somewhat underrepresented in our sample.[5] We adjust for these and other variables in our models to account for these imbalances but our results should be interpreted in the light of them.

Since testing our hypotheses requires that we have data on both councilors and clients from the same departments, our final sample is somewhat reduced to a total of 1044 observations (client responses) completed responses across 53 departments.

Measures

Our independent variable—stress states—stems from the counselor survey and our dependent variables—learning, compliance, and psychological costs—are measured in the survey of unemployment benefit recipients. This alleviates concerns about common source bias. However, both surveys primarily contain perceptive or attitudinal measures, the causal ordering of which can be difficult to establish. For this reason, we opt as far as possible to use administrative records for control variables.

Stress states

To estimate the experience of stress states among counselors, we rely on two single-item measures of such states: occupational stress and burnout. To measure occupational stress, we use a single item, rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (0) to "completely agree" (4): "I feel stressed at work". To measure burnout, we use a single-item measure of emotional exhaustion, one core component of burnout, rated on the same scale: "I feel burned out at work". Though much larger inventories exist, single items very similar to ours have shown good statistical properties and are relatively good approximations for the much more practically demanding alternatives (West, Dyrbye, Satele, Sloan, & Shanafelt, 2012; West, Dyrbye, Sloan, & Shanafelt, 2009). As our interest is more general than occupational stress and emotional exhaustion—our theory speaks to stress states broadly—we create our central independent variable as a sum index of the two measures ($\alpha = 0.801$).

3FA did not share any records with us permitting a direct match between counselor and client, and such data would be difficult to assemble since clients do not always face the same counselor during their unemployment spell. Therefore, we rely on the department averages to match counselor stress states to clients. Of course, this necessary move implies a loss of information.[6] While this is a limitation we will return to, we do not view it as invalidating. First and most importantly, clients and counselors are not perfectly matched in counseling, as noted, which makes departmental averages appropriate reflections of practice in counseling. Second, remaining mismatches between department-level aggregates and the stress states of individual counselors likely lead to biases in our estimates of interest toward zero since relevant within-department differences in client experience are dampened (drawn toward the department mean) by our measure.

Administrative burden

Our measures of learning, compliance, and psychological costs are based on scales by Madsen and Mikkelsen (2021) and Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen (2020). All measures are made domain specific to the unemployment situation of Danish unemployment insurance recipients. Respondents were presented with a list of items about their experiences in the unemployment insurance system and asked to rate each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" (0) to "completely agree" (4). Learning and compliance costs were each measured with three items, which included: "It is difficult to understand exactly how the unemployment insurance rules apply to me" (*learning costs*, $\alpha = 0.772$), and "I have to meet too many requirements (e.g. apply for multiple jobs every week or participate in courses)" (*compliance costs*, $\alpha = 0.762$). For psychological costs, we include measures of autonomy loss, stress, and stigma. Autonomy loss is measured with four items and stress and stigma are measured with three items each. Sample items include: "I feel forced to do things that I do not want because of receiving unemployment insurance benefits" (*autonomy loss*, $\alpha = 0.748$), "I am often stressed and nervous because of receiving unemployment insurance benefits" (*stress*, $\alpha = 0.891$), and "I feel frowned upon because of receiving unemployment insurance benefits" (*stigma*, $\alpha = 0.904$). See Appendix S1 for the list of all scale items.

Control variables

To address confounding, we include a series of control variables on both department and client levels of analysis. At the department level, we draw on administrative data from 3FA to control for factors potentially influencing the counselors' experience of stress states, that is, the number of counselors and unemployed members registered in

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TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Compliance costs (DV)	1158	2.344	0.910	0	4.0
Learning costs (DV)	1158	2.145	0.897	0	4.0
Stigma (DV)	1150	1.754	1.073	0	4.0
Stress (DV)	1149	2.205	1.088	0	4.0
Autonomy loss (DV)	1150	2.026	0.831	0	4.0
Gender (Male)	1379	0.616	0.487	0	1.0
Age	1379	50.453	11.301	19	65.0
Education: Secondary	1366	0.467	0.499	0	1.0
Education: Tertiary	1366	0.122	0.328	0	1.0
Education: Other	1366	0.080	0.271	0	1.0
Children: One	1367	0.131	0.337	0	1.0
Children: Two	1367	0.102	0.303	0	1.0
Children: Three or more	1367	0.047	0.211	0	1.0
Number of members (department level)	64	305.141	308.642	16	2170.0
Number of counselors (IV, department level)	63	6.143	4.016	2	25.0
Stress states (IV, department level)	53	1.650	0.782	0	3.5

Note: Dependent and key independent variables are marked as DV and IV, respectively. *N* reflects the number of departments for department-level variables and the number of responding members for individual-level variables.

the specific department. Moreover, as certain departments are disproportionately large in terms of their member base, we log-transform the registered member count before entering it into our models. At the client level, we control for individual characteristics such as age, measured in years, and gender (both of which were taken from 3FA's administrative data) as well as educational level and children at home (both included as survey questions, measured in bands). See Appendix S1 for the exact measures of the latter items. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in the analysis are shown in Table 1.

As the table indicates, severe stress states among councilors are not widespread in our setting. Compared with other settings relevant to the street-level bureaucracy literature—including policing, social work, or even unemployment in other national settings—the Danish unemployment system may be a "good case" in the sense that the well-being of street-level bureaucrats, on average, is relatively high. However, there is still considerable variation between street-level bureaucrats in our sample, and 43 percent of all surveyed counselors score 2 or above on our 0–4 stress states scale. Hence, while other contexts may feature more severe stress states, there is certainly enough in our context to gain traction on our hypotheses. We return to the implications of this discussion below.

Models and estimators

Although unemployment benefit recipients in 3FA are subject to the same policies, their experiences of the implementation of such policies will likely differ across departments of the fund. To properly assess how their experiences are influenced by stress states among the counselors they encounter, we use a multilevel model that combines estimates among counselors in the fund's departments to members receiving counseling in those departments.

Specifically, we estimate multilevel linear mixed-effects models using the lme4-package in *R*. We include counselor stress states and the department-level controls, number of counselors, and the log of number of members, alongside client characteristics and department random effects. We model administrative burdens for the *ith* client served by the *jth* department by estimating models of the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} \textit{Administrative burdens}_{ij} = \alpha_{0j} + \beta_1 \textit{Gender}_{ij} + \beta_2 \textit{Age}_{ij} + \ldots \\ + \beta_8 \textit{Three or more children}_{ij} + \epsilon_{ij} \end{aligned}$$

$$\begin{aligned} \alpha_{0j} = \alpha_{00} + \gamma_{10} \textit{Stress states}_j + \gamma_{20} \textit{Councilors}_j \\ + \gamma_{30} \log(\textit{Members}_j) + \upsilon_j \end{aligned}$$

Where both ϵ_{ij} and υ_j are assumed to be normally distributed, independent, and centered around zero. The parameter of interest to our core hypotheses is γ_{10}, the relationship between counselor stress states and department intercepts. We estimate models of this type separately for each of our five dependent variables. While we have more departments than some multilevel studies in public management have upper level units, our 53 clusters may still require adjustments for appropriate standard

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error estimation. To ensure we avoid the risk of underestimating standard errors due to the finite number of departments, then, we rely on the Satterthwaite degrees of freedom approximation, which has been shown to eliminate anti-conservative biases in finite sample settings.

At the same time, given our limited number of department-level observations, statistical power vis-à-vis our central parameter γ_{10} is lower than we would prefer, and concomitantly the risk of Type-II errors looms relatively large. Consequently, null findings for department-level variables should be treated with caution.

Since we are interested in relationships between outcomes and department-level characteristics, we do not adopt a fixed-effects estimation strategy. For the same reason, we do not report Hausman tests or other specification tests designed to decide between fixed- and random-effects specifications. As shown in our robustness checks, our findings are qualitatively similar when we implement our models as ordinary least squares regressions with standard errors clustered by department.

RESULTS

Table 2 reports our main findings, providing support for three of our five hypotheses. As predicted by H1, more prevalent stress states among street-level bureaucrats are positively associated with learning costs as experienced by clients. The coefficient is small $\left(\widehat{\beta}=0.08\right)$ but significant at the 5 percent level. Similarly, as predicted by H2, more prevalent stress states among street-level bureaucrats are positively associated with compliance costs as experienced by clients. The estimate is approximately the same size as the estimate for learning costs in effect size terms $\left(\widehat{\beta}=0.09\right)$ but is also significant at the 5 percent level.

With regards to psychological costs, however, we only find a significant positive relation between stress states among street-level bureaucrats and experiences of autonomy loss among clients, thereby bringing support to H3a. The coefficient is small $\left(\widehat{\beta}=0.07\right)$ but significant at the 5 percent level. We do not find clear support for H3b and H3c as the estimates for stress and stigma both point in the expected direction but are nonsignificant.

The small associations reported in Table 2 should not surprise us from the perspective we have proposed. Interactions between counselors and benefit recipients are not as frequent as interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients in other policy fields and clients' experiences of administrative burdens are also likely to be driven by several other factors (Christensen et al., 2020). Moreover, as discussed further below, some street-level bureaucrats may have alternate avenues for alleviating stress states than behavioral coping related to clients. Regardless, in light of the small effect sizes, we run a series of robustness checks.

First, we implement our models as ordinary least squares regressions with standard errors clustered by department. As shown in Appendix S2, these results are not qualitatively different from the main findings reported in Table 2. As we discuss below, this is of both

TABLE 2 Main results of linear mixed-effects models.

	Learning costs	Compliance costs	Stigma	Stress	Autonomy loss
Stress states (department level)	0.102* (0.048)	0.092* (0.045)	0.055 (0.052)	0.036 (0.054)	0.080* (0.040)
Number of members (department level, log)	0.047 (0.107)	0.002 (0.098)	−0.224‡ (0.114)	−0.046 (0.116)	−0.074 (0.088)
Number of counselors (department level)	−0.004 (0.013)	−0.001 (0.011)	0.022‡ (0.013)	0.010 (0.013)	0.011 (0.010)
Age	0.007** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)	−0.006‡ (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.005* (0.003)
Gender (Male)	−0.105‡ (0.059)	0.020 (0.059)	−0.101 (0.069)	−0.086 (0.071)	−0.104‡ (0.053)
Education: Secondary	0.008 (0.066)	0.081 (0.066)	0.176* (0.078)	0.168* (0.079)	0.103‡ (0.060)
Education: Tertiary	−0.044 (0.094)	−0.067 (0.094)	0.292** (0.111)	0.168 (0.114)	0.055 (0.086)
Education: Other	0.141 (0.113)	0.072 (0.113)	0.070 (0.134)	0.202 (0.137)	0.089 (0.103)
Children: One	0.098 (0.087)	0.060 (0.087)	0.057 (0.103)	0.025 (0.105)	−0.045 (0.079)
Children: Two	0.051 (0.099)	0.001 (0.099)	−0.083 (0.118)	−0.091 (0.120)	−0.078 (0.091)
Children: Three or more	0.040 (0.146)	0.129 (0.146)	0.467** (0.174)	0.358* (0.178)	0.109 (0.134)
(Intercept)	1.377* (0.530)	1.411** (0.491)	3.002*** (0.569)	2.101*** (0.581)	1.981*** (0.440)
n	1027	1028	1019	1020	1019
N	53	53	53	53	53
Conditional R^2	0.033	0.034	0.029	0.014	0.017

Note: Results from linear mixed-effects models with department random effects.
*$p < .050$.
**$p < .010$.
***$p < .001$.
‡$p < .100$.

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theoretical and practical interest as it tells us about relationships between street-level bureaucrats and the clients they serve.

Second, as we examine conditional correlations, our results are potentially threatened by omitted variable bias. One might for instance fear that variation in rule density across departments explain both higher stress states among counselors and higher burdens among their clients. While this would be a valid concern in more decentralized regulated policy sectors, we do not believe it applies to our case as the Danish unemployment benefit system is densely regulated by the central government and, thus, applies equally to all departments in our sample. However, we cannot rule out potential feedback effects from client experiences on counselor stress states, which would happen for instance if counselors experience more stress from dealing with more burdened clients. In response to this concern, we construct a measure of caseload by taking the average number of clients per counselor for each department and using that as a control variable in our models. As shown in Appendix S3, this does not change our results.[7]

Unmeasured street-level bureaucrat characteristics may also confound our estimates. For instance, it is possible that counselors with higher levels of public service motivation (PSM) are more prone to bend rules in favor of clients (Weißmüller, De Waele, & van Witteloostuijn, 2022). Yet, for this possibility to threaten our conclusions, PSM would need to negatively impact occupational stress states. However, van Loon, Vandenabeele, and Leisink (2015) found PSM positively associated with occupational burnout and job satisfaction. We therefore do not believe PSM induces omitted variable bias favoring our hypotheses, though omitting it may bias them toward zero. That being said, of course, we cannot conclude with certainty that our estimates are not subject to confounding by other factors.[8]

Third, it is possible that our results are affected by our inability to match clients to counselors. On the one hand, this attenuates variation in our independent variable and leaves open the question whether we would have found more substantial effect sizes with individual matches between clients and counselors. On the other hand, clients are typically in contact with several different counselors within the same department, which makes department-level averages interesting in themselves. While we cannot resolve this entirely, we did examine the issue empirically. Specially, we ran a series of simulations that randomly match individual clients to individual caseworkers within the departments. We then rerun our model, extract the relevant estimates, and repeat this simulation 1000 times for each dependent variable. As the distribution of the extracted estimates shown in Appendix S4, the direction of the estimates is directionally consistent with our main results in nearly all these simulations (95.3 percent for autonomy loss, 94.9 percent for compliance costs, and 94.7 percent for learning costs), suggesting that our results are not overly sensitive to the exact match between counselor and client within departments. Taken together, these robustness checks strengthen our confidence in our findings. We do however encourage future research to further disentangle the relationship between street-level bureaucrat stress states and client experiences of administrative burden.

Although our study design does not allow us to distinguish between different families of coping strategies, we can provide some suggestive evidence that moving away from clients is an important family behind our results. First, it is theoretically possible that street-level bureaucrats respond to stress states by moving toward clients and bend rules in their favor to reduce demands. Though we have theoretical reservations for this claim, as noted, this could result in stress states being negatively related to particularly compliance costs among clients. Empirically, our results indicate that, if this process occurs, it is not sufficiently commonplace to counteract the positive relationship our hypotheses propose. However, street-level bureaucrats moving toward clients could mean we underestimate the magnitude of the relationships relevant to our hypotheses.

Second, we have centered our account on coping strategies that broadly speaking withhold help to clients or place additional burdens on clients who are subjected to creaming, parking, limitations in service, or additional requirements. Yet some reactions to stress states could result in administrative burdens without these types of mechanisms. One such alternate mechanism could be based on what Westman (2001) refers to as ‘direct crossover’, in which stress states are transferred between individuals in their direct encounters (e.g., via mood effects). In our setting, street-level bureaucrats’ stress states negatively ‘infect’ clients directly through empathetic mirroring of negative moods and outlook. To the client, this will most likely have a direct impact on their experiences of psychological costs. Our propositions, by contrast, lean more on Westman’s (2001) notion of ‘indirect crossover’, in which stress states are transferred between individuals via how each person experiences the coping strategies of the other. To the client, the street-level bureaucrat coping strategies we have discussed will first and foremost result in the street-level bureaucrat avoiding contact, providing less information, or imposing demands.

The implication is that our theory expects stress states to impact psychological costs among clients at least in part through withdrawal of discretionary help and imposition of discretionary demands by street-level bureaucrats. In contrast, an account based on more direct crossover would not imply such a mediated relationship but focus on alternate mechanisms linking stress states to psychological costs. To help distinguish our propositions from this alternative, we estimate mixed-effects models including both direct associations between counselors’ stress states on psychological costs and indirect associations mediated by learning and compliance costs. As shown in Appendix S5, the data are consistent with the association

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between stress states and autonomy loss being fully mediated by learning and compliance costs, suggesting that as counselors encounter stress states, they withdraw help or engage in other burden-shifting coping strategies, rather than directly impose psychological costs onto their clients. We encourage future research to employ research designs that allow them to focus more closely on interactions between street-level bureaucrats and clients and tease out these mechanisms in greater detail.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Fusing literature on street-level bureaucracy and administrative burden, we propose a novel perspective on the interaction between street-level bureaucrats and their clients. We argue that when street-level bureaucrats enter stress states, they become inclined to withhold help that clients need to experience administrative systems as less onerous and to impose additional administrative burdens through coping strategies. As a consequence, clients face learning, compliance, and psychological costs that they would not have faced otherwise.

Using novel data covering both street-level bureaucrats and clients, we find support for these propositions, but we also note a set of limitations. First, in line with the key definition of administrative burdens as onerous experiences (Burden et al., 2012), we have focused on experiences of clients as measured in our survey. Yet, these experiences theoretically have consequences for policy outcomes, and the literature often considers policy outcomes, such as take-up and program participation, in their place empirically (Madsen et al., 2022). Moreover, policy outcomes are of natural practical interest. Consequently, we would have preferred to also connect stress states among street-level bureaucrats to relevant policy outcomes such as program take-up or re-employment. With our data, this is not an option. It is worth noting, however, that existing evidence from employment policy (Gray, Leive, Prager, Pukelis, & Zaki, 2021) and from Danish public service (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021; Madsen & Mikkelsen, 2021) suggests that onerous experiences are indeed linked to policy-relevant outcomes. Thus, we consider it likely that our outcome measures tap into phenomena of relevance also to (unmeasured) policy outcomes.

Second, related to the question of effect sizes, it should also be kept in mind that the dependent variables that we are studying are likely influenced by a range of different factors that cannot be accounted for in a single study including how well the respondent feels the day of answering and the stress they feel from the uncertainty of being a recipient of benefits (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021). While such factors are unlikely to invalidate our study, they are sources of noise that may help explain why we do not detect stronger effects.

Third, and related, there are alternate mechanisms to coping from dealing with demands and stress states among street-level bureaucrats (Tummers et al., 2015). Some of these mechanisms, moreover, may influence our results if they open avenues for street-level bureaucrats to alleviate stress states without incurring administrative burdens on clients. To some individuals, emotional labor—or managing emotions at work—is easier than to others (see Grandey, 2000). As a result, some street-level bureaucrats may be better able to handle stress states without clients noticing anything that may be described as onerous, just like nonoccupational coping strategies including exercise, positive thinking, or excessive drinking are likely used more by some than others. Moreover, the effectiveness of alternate stress-reducing strategies is in part a function of the work environment, including social support (Hsieh, 2014). As a result, for some street-level bureaucrats, or street-level bureaucrats working in particularly supporting environments, potent stressors can coexist with few administrative burdens imposed on clients. Our data cannot properly capture this complexity. As a consequence, our estimates for our propositions are likely attenuated for some subgroups, increasing the risk of Type-II error. We urge future work to examine multiple types of stress reduction strategies and the mechanisms connecting them to administrative burdens among clients to remedy our study's limitation. Since the relevant literature includes little consideration to the complexity of such mechanisms, qualitative inquiry may be what is most needed in this respect at this point.

Finally, the comparatively low reported stress levels among the surveyed counselors in the fund arguably make the Danish unemployment insurance system a "good case" scenario with regard to benefit levels of clients and organizational capacity of service providers. This poses challenges to the external validity of our findings. Other systems, be they policy systems or national systems, are likely to differ substantially from the Danish unemployment insurance system in terms of the 'public service gap' (Hupe & Buffat, 2014) their street-level bureaucrats operate under. Nevertheless, we believe the Danish setting to be highly suitable to provide an empirical test of theoretical claims in literatures on both street-level bureaucracy and administrative burdens. While Denmark offers generous benefits, it also imposes comparatively strict demands onto clients, which entails a fixed set of compulsory interactions between clients and counselors, and—vis-à-vis our hypotheses—highlights the importance of the client–counselor relation. Moreover, although the mean levels of reported stress states are low at the aggregate department level, there is considerable variation between street-level bureaucrats in our sample. In any case, this does not rule out the relevance of our case but does attenuate effects and consequently increase the risk of Type-II error. That being said, coping strategies are in part contextually determined, and the strategies employed by other types of street-level bureaucrats—for example, police officers—in other types of contexts—for example, in the Global South—may be experienced differently, including more or

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less burdensome, to clients. Whether our findings apply in such different settings is, in the end, an empirical question.

Having noted these limitations and the modest effect sizes in our data, we consider our findings important to research and practice. In administrative burden research, state actions are commonly defined as including both policy design and policy implementation, but the empirical evidence hereof is more or less solely based on studies of the former. As a consequence, we have a firm understanding of how administrative burden increase with, for instance, rule complexity, but know very little about how they are shaped by frontline personnel in settings with homogenous levels of rule complexity. From this perspective, our findings are thus also relevant to policy makers and managers working with citizen–state interactions in practice. They show that employee well-being is not only valuable in its own right but also tied to the mission of the organization—serving and monitoring the client. Hence, combatting prevalent stress states among street-level bureaucrats should also be considered for their positive downstream effects on clients. This is particularly relevant within policy systems, such as the Danish unemployment system, where demands and requirements are centrally imposed on clients by governments and thus leave managers with relatively little control over policy design (Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021). Here, managers striving to ease interactions between clients and caseworkers might instead provide resources to employees to prevent them from entering stress states as an available lever. These resources do not need to be financial. For instance, both emotional labor training and managerial support are already recognized as an important resource in the current street-level bureaucracy literature (Hsieh, 2014; Raaphorst & Loyens, 2020) and in the occupational psychology literature (e.g. Grandey, 2000; Halbesleben, 2006).

The policy recommendation from our study is thus clear: Changing rules and demands are not the only levers available for reducing administrative burdens in administrative systems. Initiatives aiming to help employees avert stress states may also contribute and do so without compromising the rules, demands, regulations, and requirements, which, after all, may be serving legitimate ends (Madsen et al., 2022).

For future research, the recommendation for our findings is equally clear. Street-level bureaucracy research could benefit from looking more at the experiences of the clients being served by the street-level bureaucrats that are the main interest of this literature. Documenting reactions may help the street-level bureaucracy literature gain insight into which helping and coping behaviors are sustained because they are, in some sense, effective, and which falter due to adverse or otherwise unwanted reactions from clients.

Conversely, administrative burden research could benefit from looking more closely at street-level bureaucrats. It is clear from this literature already that both policies (Baekgaard, Mikkelsen, et al., 2021) and their implementation (e.g. Chudnovsky & Peeters, 2020) matter to client experiences of administrative burden, as well as characteristics of the clients themselves (Christensen et al., 2020). Our study adds an additional focal point: The people implementing policies. Stress states are, of course, just one of a long list of street-level bureaucrat characteristics that are potentially relevant to how clients experience burdens in administrative systems. Future research may look further into how characteristics, such as personality (Aarøe, Baekgaard, Christensen, & Moynihan, 2021), caseload (Andersen & Guul, 2019), ideological beliefs (Bell et al., 2020), burden tolerance of street-level bureaucrats (Baekgaard, Moynihan, & Thomsen, 2021), and managerial support of street-level bureaucrats influence clients' experiences and policy-relevant outcomes.

FUNDING INFORMATION

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ENDNOTES

[1] In the street-level bureaucracy tradition at least since Lipsky (1980), focus has been on coping strategies to handle occupational stress. We follow this tradition, but recognize that not all stress is occupational, just as not all coping strategies are related to stress as conventionally defined in the public administration literature (e.g., people can employ coping strategies to deal with grief, illness, or substance abuse).

[2] One might of course also expect that stressed street-level bureaucrats become more inclined to engage in hostile encounters or negative communication (Westman, Shadach, & Keinan, 2013). While we consider this less likely it may even further increase client experiences of administrative burden.

[3] It is worth noting that a plausible implication of our argument is that the relationship between stress states among street-level bureaucrats and client psychological costs are at least in part driven by increased compliance and learning costs. We return to this point below.

[4] As the fund is highly decentralized, the list of 'potential' counselors was gathered in collaboration with the fund's head office. However, the head office does not have records on which employees in practice engages in individual meetings with clients. As a result, we asked counselors a filter question in the beginning of the survey asking them to indicate whether they act as counselors of individual unemployed clients.

[5] Population data for age and gender of unemployment insurance recipients in 3FA are drawn from jobindsats.dk.

[6] The intraclass correlation coefficient for our two indicators are 0.242 for occupational stress and 0.132 for occupational burnout.

[7] An alternative strategy would be to match our dataset to information on neighborhoods or other geographical entities to measure whether some street-level bureaucrats are facing more demanding or challenging clients than others. Unfortunately, this is not possible with our data structure, and – since departments cover relatively large and diverse geographical areas – may not be sensible even if it were feasible.

[8] The model is estimated in a mixed effects model framework with all control variables and department random effects included in every path equation, and freely estimated covariances between learning and compliance costs and between the three types of psychological costs.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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