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A SIGNALING PERSPECTIVE ON BUREAUCRATIC ENCOUNTERS:

HOW PUBLIC OFFICIALS INTERPRET SIGNALS AND CUES

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ABSTRACT

This article provides scholars studying frontline judgements an analytical framework – the signaling perspective – that could be used to examine how street-level bureaucrats evaluate unobservable citizen-client properties. It proposes to not only look at the kind of signals and cues officials gather, but also at the interpretive frames used to make sense of them. This offers a valuable contribution to the street-level bureaucracy literature, which largely focuses on explaining discretionary decision making by looking at the influence of officials' personal preferences or client characteristics, but less on officials' interpretive frameworks to make sense of client characteristics. The analytical framework is illustrated by applying it to existing literature on trustworthiness judgements of social workers and police officers. Different interpretive frames were found from which frontline officials interpret citizen characteristics as signals. The article concludes by offering several avenues for future research.

Keywords: signaling perspective; analytical framework; street-level bureaucrats; frontline evaluation; uncertainty

INTRODUCTION

A trend of declining citizen trust in government has become of fundamental concern within public administration literature (Braithwaite and Levi 1998; Jennings 1998; Kim 2010; Nye, Zelikow and King 1997; Van de Walle *et al.* 2008). The underlying assumption is that public trust has declined because governments do not work properly, are not transparent or not ethical (Van de Walle & Bouckaert 2003). However, it could be argued that citizens' trust in government is not merely based on an assessment of public officials by citizens, but is also related to the trust governments have in citizens: "*citizens will not trust public administrators if they know or feel that public officials do not trust them*" (Yang 2005: 273).

Hence, the interaction between public officials and citizens has come to the forefront and is increasingly seen as a valuable phenomenon in itself (Bruhn and Ekström 2015). The public encounter, the place where officials and citizens meet, is seen as crucial aspect in fostering trust, commitment and collaboration between public officials and citizens (Bartels 2013), which in turn could help to democratize and legitimate the state (Peters 2004). This is not only discernable in social welfare agencies, but also in organizations engaged in the more traditional regulation and law enforcement functions of government, such as inspection agencies and tax administrations (e.g. Burgemeestre *et al.* 2010; Leviner 2009; Mascini and Van Wijk 2009; Sakurai 2002).

Moreover, faced with excessive red tape and high legal bills associated with deterrence mechanisms, many governments are gradually developing governance approaches based on cooperation and trust. For frontline bureaucrats, such a change from a command-and-control approach to a trust-based approach is quite a change. They are expected not to strictly enforce the law or implement policy, but to be responsive towards citizen-clients, i.e. to adapt their decisions to the citizen-client behavior they encounter in interactions (Mascini and Van Wijk 2009). Street-

level bureaucrats have to judge whether the citizen or client they are dealing with is trustworthy or not, or is risky or not. Such notions are moreover not predetermined by rules, but left open to street-level bureaucrats to flesh out in practice (e.g. Dubois 2014; Evans 2015). It is however not clear how officials come to evaluate such *unobservable* properties.

Within this article we propose that a signaling perspective may provide scholars an analytical framework to examine how street-level bureaucrats construct an image of citizen-clients in uncertain situations. We illustrate the usefulness of this perspective in examining street-level evaluation of unobservable citizen characteristics by applying it to existing scholarly literature on social service encounters and police encounters. Our illustration shows how street-level bureaucrats determine citizen-clients' trustworthiness by looking at signals and cues. In doing this, officials gain insight in unobservable properties without the search costs (time and effort) that would have been needed for a substantiated account. We moreover show that the signals and cues do not have a meaning on their own, but are dependent on different *frames* from which officials interpret these cues.

The aim of this theoretical article is twofold. First, it offers scholars an analytical framework that could be used to examine how street-level bureaucrats evaluate unobservable citizen properties. It thereby proposes to not only look at the kind of signals and cues officials gather, but also at the interpretive frames used to make sense of them. This offers a valuable contribution to the street-level bureaucracy literature, which does focus on the impact of officials' personal preferences (e.g. Hupe and Buffat 2014; May and Winter 2009; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), and client characteristics (e.g. Goodsell 1981; Vinzant and Crothers 1998) on discretion but less on the possible interpretive frameworks which give these characteristics a 'signaling status', i.e. the ways in which these characteristics become meaningful signals for officials. Second, the article

offers substantive insight in how unobservable citizen trustworthiness is assessed by social workers and police officers. This may be of interest for scholars examining collaborative and interactive forms of governance, where trust between officials and citizens is seen as an essential element for collaboration. It may also be of interest to scholars interested in decision making by street-level bureaucrats, for whom, as we will argue in the next section, evaluations of honesty and trustworthiness are part and parcel of their daily job.

In what follows, we will first argue that using a signaling theory perspective to analyze street-level bureaucrats' search for and interpretation of signals and cues is warranted, by showing the prominence of uncertainty in street-level decision making. After that we will show how such a perspective may yield interesting insights in how officials create images of citizen-clients in uncertain situations, by applying it to existing literature on judgements by social workers and police officers. For illustrative purposes we look at judgements about citizen-clients' unobservable trustworthiness. The article ends with a discussion of the implications for public sector organizations and of the wider applicability of the analytical framework to study frontline evaluation and decision making.

BUREAUCRATS' USE OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES AND SEARCH FOR SIGNALS

Bureaucrats' interactions with citizens have traditionally been studied within the literature on street-level bureaucracies. These studies generally focus on how public officials make use of their discretion in making decisions and, thus, in distributing services. It is commonly held that a street-level bureaucrat's main responsibility is to transform citizens into clients, which is "*actualized via the decision to categorize a client in one way or another*" (Prottas 1979: 4). In fact, it is held that public organizations need to classify citizen-clients according to their organizational schemes

in order to be able to direct assistance to them and to reduce complexity (Garsten and Jacobsson 2013). This categorization decision can be based on routine decisions, thereby relying on rules and procedures, but can also be based on moral judgements regarding the worthiness or deservingness of clients (Prottas 1979; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Dubois 2013; Hasenfeld 2000). The act of categorizing citizens is held to be an ambiguous and uncertain process (Raaphorst 2017). Considering the fact that these policies and rules are never "*specific enough to fit a local context, bureaucrats' work is to interpret them*" (Hoag 2011: 82). It is has been shown that, due to a lack of information, time and other resources, street-level bureaucrats develop shortcuts such as stereotypes to categorize clients (Lipsky 2010; Prottas 1979). They employ "*social typologies of their clients*" (Mennerick 1974: 398). These typologies provide strategic information where formal categories are lacking and allow frontline workers to act during initial encounters with citizen-clients which may be pervaded by uncertainty and fear on the part of workers.

The literature has paid remarkably little attention to the question how individual bureaucrats know that they have to do with a certain 'type of citizen-client'. It has been argued that frontline workers look for certain cues or signals stemming from citizen-clients, which warrant workers they are facing a certain 'type of citizen-client' (e.g. Mennerick 1974). Based on this, workers can form their expectations about citizen-clients' likely identity and behavior, and can adjust their behavior and decision-making accordingly. A study conducted by Diego Gambetta and Heather Hamill (2005) shows how taxi drivers, who need to decide quickly on the basis of only little information, assess observable signs of customers they believe to be related to unobservable trust-warranting and distrust-warranting properties, in order to distinguish a genuine customer from a villain. Following this signaling perspective, taxi drivers look for reliable signs, which are too costly for a mimic to fake but costless for a true possessor to

display, given the benefit that each might expect (see Henslin 1968 for a similar study). This study shows that signals or cues that are considered important by taxi drivers stem from different 'sources of knowledge': statistical discrimination, experience, causal knowledge and gut feeling.

Statistical discrimination entails category-based discrimination: "*being a member of a category that is statistically more or less dangerous is a type of trust- or distrust-warranting quality, and taxi drivers look for the signs of membership in those categories*" (Gambetta and Hamill 2005: 195). It means that decisions are made based on a group's average behavior. Picking up signals based on experience entails having knowledge about certain passengers based on assumptions about the constancy of a certain trait or quality experienced. Causal knowledge entails applying causal theories, even without previous experience or knowledge of statistical risks. Lastly, this study points to the role of drivers' gut feelings or instinct in assessing passengers' trustworthiness, and in particular, deception: "*facial expressions, looks in the eyes, and tone of voice were mentioned as properties that, in their experience, betray a passenger's true mood and intent*" (*ibid:* 217). However, the authors argue, the drivers were not always able to pinpoint which signs prompted their suspicion.

Certain signals or cues, thus, get ascribed a 'certainty status' due to mechanisms that indicate that it is highly likely that the observed signs are linked to the looked for unobservable properties. It is exactly these mechanisms that are interesting to look at, since these constitute the heart of frontline workers' epistemological work, which provides them a sense of certainty in situations characterized by uncertainty and complexity. Signals and cues do not have meaning in themselves; displaying particular characteristics or attributes associated with a lower socio-economic class, for instance, does not necessarily raise police officers' suspicion.

They get meaning because they are linked, for instance, to certain stereotypes regarding what constitutes 'a villain', or with causal beliefs regarding the behavior of certain groups of people. Exploring these mechanisms, thus, uncovers the meaningful reasoning that links frontline workers' epistemological work in assessing signals and cues to the categories that are employed to classify citizen-clients. These mechanisms, in a sense, constitute the interpretive framework from which frontline workers discern and judge signals and cues. Thus, to understand why certain signals and cues are linked to certain unobservable characteristics, and noticed in the first place, we need to look at frontline workers' interpretive frameworks.

THE IMPORTANCE AND MEANING OF TRUSTWORTHINESS EVALUATIONS

In this article we will illustrate the usefulness of the signaling perspective to analyze street-level bureaucrats' evaluations of unobservable citizen characteristics, by applying it to literature on social welfare encounters and police encounters. Before doing this, we first need to discuss the importance of trustworthiness assessments in street-level work more generally, and what it entails to assess citizens' trustworthiness in the respective fields more specifically. Since police officers have to deal with different kinds of citizens than social workers, citizen trustworthiness has a different meaning.

Trustworthiness in street-level bureaucracy

Street-level bureaucracy scholars have pointed out that how frontline workers act and respond to citizens is in large part dependent upon their perceptions of citizens. Street-level bureaucracy research has shown that bureaucrats' discretionary practices are not only informed by organizational classification systems and rules, but also by personal judgements regarding clients'

worthiness or deservingness, based on cultural schemes, moral beliefs and values, or certain stereotypes (Dubois 2013; Harrits and Møller 2014; Hasenfeld 2000; Kingfisher 1998; Lipsky 2010; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Mennerick 1974; Prottas 1979). Bureaucrats may assign citizens to social identities or cultural groups and when fixed, "*these identities shape the nature of street-level workers' responses, from bending the rules and providing extraordinary assistance to allowing only begrudging and minimal help and at times abuse*" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 154). The latter authors show how the act of categorizing citizens is bound up with questions of citizens' trustworthiness and honesty. They show how frontline workers suspend the judgement about citizens' worthiness by first giving a routine response, and how, after sensing elements of worth, they start testing the citizen-client and watch how s/he responds. After passing this "*crucial test of honesty*" (p. 120), citizen-clients have acquired the status of worthy.

The account of frontline workers as state-agents assumes that "*deviations are allowable only if workers adapt law to the circumstances of cases in a manner consistent with policy and hierarchical authority*" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 4). Contrary to this account of frontline workers, studies argue that we should not perceive of bureaucrats' work as a form of policy implementation, but as an institutionalized practice (Maynard-Moody, Epp and Portillo 2014; Musheno and Maynard-Moody 2015), or as a form of cultural abidance (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003), where frontline workers are driven by cultural norms rather than the application of abstract rules (*ibid*). In this vein, it becomes all the more relevant to study frontline workers' categorizations of citizen-clients; if workers are not referring to rules or policies in their daily work, but make cultural judgements in everyday interactions with citizen-clients, social categories become more prominent. Moreover, public sector organizations increasingly promote

values as cooperation and trust, which are, in the end, played out in the interactions between bureaucrats and citizen-clients.

What happens at the official/client interface, then, determines whether trust or cooperation will indeed occur (Brown and Calnan 2013). If public sector organizations' adoption of horizontal approaches and other delivery models to which mutual collaboration are central rather than command-and-control are to succeed, civil servants and citizen-clients need to be, at least, willing to trust and be open to each other. The perceptions civil servants have of their citizen-clients, and vice versa, likely determines the course of an interaction (Van de Walle & Lahat 2016). Exploring the categories frontline workers use to define a trustworthy or untrustworthy citizen-client and the signals and cues they rely upon, is a modest attempt at assessing how civil servants' work practices and perceptions are compatible or incompatible with these policies.

First, we scrutinized studies within the street-level bureaucracy literature focused on encounters between social workers and citizen-clients. Traditionally, these street-level bureaucracies have been engaged in defining categories of neediness, in order to be able to determine citizen-clients eligibility and to provide for needy people (Stone 1984). They regulate access to government services. It is held that to determine disability has always been problematic (Stone 1984: 23). Since it is assumed that people have incentives to escape the labor market (ibid.: 23), assessing citizen-clients' trustworthiness and honesty has always been part and parcel of frontline workers' neediness or deservingness judgements.

Second, we focused on studies on police encounters, mainly from within the field of criminology, social psychology and sociology. Within these disciplines, much research has been done on patrol officers' decisions to stop a citizen, and whether and to what extent these stops resulted in arrests

or other formal interventions (Dunham *et al.* 2005; Johnson and Morgan 2013). Considerable attention has also been paid to the process of suspicion formation, which "*is a police officer's initial decision to suspect that someone is involved in illegal behavior*" (Alpert *et al.* 2005: 408). Suspicion formation is, thus, the social process taking place prior to decisions to either stop, search or arrest suspects. These studies point out that police officers assess citizens on how suspicious their behavior and demeanor comes across. This means that patrol officers, in the end, are also preoccupied with the question whether citizens are trustworthy and honest in how they behave and what they tell.

What are trustworthy and untrustworthy citizen-clients?

For service workers, the assessment of citizen-clients' trustworthiness seems to play at two different levels. The first is short-term and is considered a dimension of moral worth: "*morally worthy citizen-clients do not try to con or scam workers or the system*" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 104). It is held that citizen-clients, even with genuine needs, "*who try to manipulate the system for undue advantage are labeled troublemakers*" (*ibid:* 104). Although these citizen-clients are not withheld the services, workers do not go out of their way to help the manipulative and over-demanding citizen-clients. Such citizen-clients are viewed with suspicion, since they might be driven by other reasons, beyond a 'real disability', to apply for a service. Thus, also citizen-clients with 'genuine needs', who therefore have a reason to apply for a service, might be defined as 'deceitful claimants' when they are manipulative.

The other level at which the assessment of trustworthiness occurs is with an eye towards the future; worthy clients are seen as good investments (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). This dimension is seen as a summative judgement: "*if citizen-clients have genuine needs, are of good*

character, and are motivated to respond to treatment, then they are likely to repay society for street-level workers' investments of time, effort and money" (*ibid*: 106). Frontline workers are, thus, willing to extend their services only to those citizen-clients they believe have the motivation and capacity to repay the investment. In this sense, they trust those citizen-clients to make workers' investment worth the effort. Central to this summative judgement is a citizen-client's motivation to improve or change.

Some scholars point to the importance of the frame of reference frontline workers adhere to in providing services. Different perceptions of entitlement entail different ways of approaching citizen-clients. Eikenaar *et al.* (2015) show that defining citizen-clients as needy persons who need to be helped primarily occurs within 'the caring frame of reference'. Frontline workers having a 'procedural frame of reference', on the contrary, approach citizen-clients to the extent they obey the rules. Hence, distrust seems omnipresent: "*You are guilty, unless proven otherwise*" (*ibid*: 9). Studies on active labor market policy show that caseworkers perceive of deserving citizen-clients as having a will to work and as adhering to the value of contribution, whereas undeserving citizen-clients are viewed as those clients who have a lack of motivation to work and do not want to contribute to society (Møller and Stone 2013). This aligns with the 'learning frame of reference' (Eikenaar *et al.* 2015), where citizen-clients' own responsibility and capacity is stressed. These workers do not want to 'take care' of a citizen-client, but to motivate them to take action themselves, and to improve their competences. Bureaucrats working from a 'work focused frame of reference' do not take formal rules as directive, but aim to get the citizen-client back to work. Whereas the possibility for deception is ever present, these workers try to avoid approaching a citizen-client distrustfully, since it works counterproductive for them (Eikenaar *et al.* 2015). They might be rather interested in why citizen-clients are unwilling or uncooperative (*ibid*). Within the 'facilitating frame of

reference', frontline workers have a "*basic trust in the client's competences*" (*ibid*: 14), and act as mere service providers. For this reason, they do not scrutinize citizen-clients' characters, statements and circumstances.

Frontline workers' categorizations of citizen-clients are, thus, not simply 'out there' to pick when they encounter certain citizen-clients. Rather, how a citizen-client is defined is dependent upon the frame of reference adhered to. This frame of reference could be constituted by how bureaucrats perceive of their task (e.g. I am here to enforce the rules versus I am here to help people), but also by the policy field they work in. Whereas some frames encourage workers to scrutinize citizen-clients' reasons for applying and their circumstances, other frames of reference let workers believe that citizen-clients are always to be trusted or, to the contrary, never to be trusted. A frontline worker with a procedural frame of reference thus believes every citizen-client is a potential deceiver, whereas a worker with a facilitating frame of reference believes there is no reason to doubt a citizen-client's intentions.

Moreover, the respective frames of reference are also likely to have implications for how citizen-clients' long-term trustworthiness is perceived. From within the learning frame of reference workers believe that citizen-clients' competences and behavioral structure are more fluid, and that citizen-clients need to be encouraged to take responsibility and use their own capacities to the full (Eikenaar *et al.* 2015). These workers are likely to believe that, if citizen-clients have taken responsibility for their own problems, they have the capacity to pay back society for the frontline worker's time and effort. If a worker, on the contrary, attributes a citizen-client's situation to the poor circumstances s/he is in or to a lack of motivation, the worker is likely to think the citizen-client is less inclined to pay back society in the long run due to structural impediments.

The literature on the formation of patrol officers' suspicion is less extensive about the categorizations used to classify citizen-clients as trustworthy or untrustworthy. Citizen-clients who are viewed with suspicion are generally perceived of as having a potential for violence or criminal activity (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Alpert *et al.* 2005). Suspicion formation is bound up with the perception of the risk of danger and criminality (Stroshine *et al.* 2008). Some reference is made about what, according to police officers, constitutes a citizen-client with a bad moral character: s/he is disrespectful, aggressive and ill-mannered towards police officers (Alpert *et al.* 2005; Stroshine *et al.* 2008). A Danish study points out that police jargon designates the citizen-clients with a bad moral character as 'assholes', 'asses' or 'regular customers', whereas the rest of the population is referred to as "*Mr and Mrs Denmark*" (Holmberg 2000). However, rich descriptions of the motivations and characters of 'morally bad' citizens and other categories of citizens are virtually absent. A possible explanation of this is that police officers usually have little time to decide whether to stop someone, where classifications beyond the simple binary 'posing a risk' or 'not posing a risk' would probably not be feasible and possibly make the task even harder.

In short, the two research traditions on encounters between officials and citizen-clients have a different focus. A trustworthy citizen-client is perceived of at different levels (short-term and long-term), from different frames of reference, in different contexts. Service workers seem to be preoccupied with both short-term trustworthiness as long-term trustworthiness, based on the rich assessments of citizen-clients' moral character. Depending on the frame of reference, frontline workers either look at motivations, competences or circumstances. Categorizations relied upon by police officers seem more 'flat' entailing a binary of good versus bad citizen-

clients. This could be due to the little time officers have to decide whether to stop someone, and the higher risk involved when they decide not to stop a potentially dangerous or bad person.

EXEMPLIFYING THE SIGNALING PERSPECTIVE: TRUSTWORTHINESS SIGNALS AND THEIR INTERPRETATION

What observable characteristics do frontline workers look for and what do these characteristics signal them about the unobservable trustworthiness of citizen-clients? We have seen that an assessment of a citizen-client's motivation to change or improve is central to frontline workers' judgement of moral worth. The manner in which bureaucrats assess this motivation is by looking at the co-operation there are getting from citizen-clients (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). When frontline workers get the feeling citizen-clients are really trying, they show they have the motivation to improve the situation. In another study, this 'trying' or rather 'not trying' is discerned by frontline workers when citizen-clients are missing a spark to sell themselves, or when there is no sign of movement (Møller and Stone 2013). Co-operation and 'trying' on the part of citizen-clients, regardless of their genuine need, then, signal frontline workers are dealing with worthy citizens, who are good investments in the long run.

The perception of who is co-operative and really trying is, however, not exempt from stereotypical beliefs regarding citizen-clients' socio-economic status, health status and family history. When a citizen-client applying for social assistance displays middle-class attributes, there is no suspicion of the client's motives; s/he is viewed as a good citizen-client who fell apart (Møller and Stone 2013). Moreover, when there are signs of a mental illness, and when there has already been a family history of mental illness, case workers are inclined to believe

that the mental illness is real (*ibid*). The use of stereotypes or 'flat identities' to get a grip on citizen-clients could be explained by the uncertain character of initial encounters which "*represent the social terrain in which workers tend to identify who people are by employing stigmatizing identity categories*" (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003: 83). Within sustained encounters, on the contrary, workers construct thick accounts of who people are (*ibid*).

The rather short-term trustworthiness of citizen-clients is also of relevance; manipulative citizen-clients, as we have seen, are seen as untrustworthy and as trying to con workers. Frontline workers know they are dealing with this type of citizen-client when they are either presenting themselves as manipulative, or as helpless (e.g. Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). The manipulative persons have a spoiled and demanding attitude (if I want it, I should get it), whereas the helpless persons are whiny and dependent (poor me, I need this help). Citizen-clients demeanor in the conversation with the frontline worker, thus, provide workers cues as to whether they are trying to cheat the system. Another strategy employed is by looking at possible discrepancies between a citizen-client's story and reality as frontline workers observe it. For instance, someone says s/he is not able to walk because of a bone fracture, but frontline workers observe the citizen-client walking without any problem (Møller and Stone 2013).

Thus, in order to assess long-term trustworthiness, frontline workers primarily look at citizen-clients' cooperativeness and at how hard they are trying, as signs of being motivated. The literature also suggests that stereotypes might influence how certain characteristics are interpreted. A middle-class person 'trying very hard' might be perceived as more (trust)worthy than a low-class person 'trying very hard', because there is a belief that there is no reason to have doubts about a middle-class person's motivation in the first place. Moreover, it is also

conceivable that certain characteristics have a signaling function for one frontline worker, whereas they do not mean anything or signal something very different to another frontline worker, depending upon how one perceives one's core task. For a state-agent, focused on implementing the law, a citizen-client's unwillingness to cooperate might indicate obstinacy and disobedience, whereas to a frontline worker with a 'learning frame of reference', it might indicate that the citizen-client just needs to be confronted with his own attitude, so s/he changes his/her view (e.g. Eikenaar *et al.* 2015).

While the literature on suspicion formation shows that police officers employ rather flat images of citizen-clients as either bad or good, or as constituting a risk for potential criminal activity or not, the ways they get to know whether they are facing a bad or good citizen-client are variegated. Within the literature on police encounters, the frames of reference have a more situational and practical character since patrolling police officers seem to be primarily preoccupied with determining 'short-term trustworthiness' (see also the work on riot police by Morrell and Currie, 2015). The approaches or procedures relied upon help them to distinguish deviance from normality. Four approaches or procedures are distinguished: stereotypical reasoning, incongruence procedure, having prior knowledge, and observing nonverbal cues.

First, stereotypes regarding socio-economic status, race, sex, age, dress and even hygiene lead police officers to believe they have to do with a potential criminal. Arab motorists, for instance, are looked at with suspicion, because of the belief that they are potential terrorists (Johnson and Morgan 2013). There is also the stereotype of young, male, African-Americans being potential criminals (*ibid*; Stroshine *et al.* 2008). The same goes for people who look scruffy and are shabbily clothed (Johnson and Morgan 2013). Besides appearance of citizen-clients, police officers look at vehicle appearance; old vehicles in poor condition are looked at with suspicion,

because of the belief that criminals own dilapidated vehicles, and cars with tinted windows signal police officers that the motorist may attempt to hide something (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Dunham *et al.* 2005; Stroshine *et al.* 2008).

Second, police officers' stereotypical reasoning is highly intertwined with another approach to observe deviance, namely 'the incongruence procedure' (Sacks 1972; Alpert *et al.* 2005; Dunham *et al.* 2005; Holmberg 2000; Johnson and Morgan 2013; Stroshine *et al.* 2008). This method is based on the assumption that people use the way other people look as a basis for dealing with them in public places. Police officers learn to recognize what is 'normal' behavior and demeanor at given times and places. Anything or anyone that is out of the ordinary, therefore, is suspect and a possible subject of investigation. An example is a suspect not looking at the police car spotlight, whereas the normal reaction would have been to shield one's eyes and trying to assess what and who is shining the light (Johnson and Morgan 2013). This is a deviance from what is deemed normal behavior. Sometimes the incongruence is interlinked with stereotypical beliefs, such as having suspicions when observing a shabbily dressed young man driving an expensive new car (*ibid*). This deviates from normality, in that this type of men normally do not drive such cars, but it also constitutes a stereotypical belief about what these types of men can possibly possess.

The incongruence procedure is not only applied to persons' behavior, but also to vehicle appearance. For instance, a dirty car with a clean license plate raises police officers' suspicion, suggesting that the plate belonged to another car, or a vehicle with an excessive number of air fresheners, signaling them that the driver tries to mask the smell of illegal drugs (*ibid*). The incongruence procedure is mostly tied to assumptions of normality regarding the place and time of the day a police officer is observing a suspect. For instance, white men driving slowly

through an Afro-Caribbean neighborhood, signals the police officers they are probably trying to purchase drugs or pick up a prostitute (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Stroshine *et al.* 2008). Another example that is perceived of as incongruent by police officers is black people driving in dilapidated cars in white neighborhoods between 9 AM and 12 PM, suggesting they might be ready to burgle a house (Stroshine *et al.* 2008). The incongruence procedure, thus, indicates what is odd at a particular place, with a specific car or a person's behavior, when compared with what might be normally expected.

Third, police officers also look at nonverbal cues in suspects' demeanor that are associated with lying and other forms of deceptive behavior, such as avoidance of eye contact (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Alpert *et al.* 2005; Stroshine *et al.* 2008), frequent speech interruptions (Johnson and Morgan 2013), grandiose hand gestures (*ibid*; Alpert *et al.* 2005), speaking at a faster rate and using a greater range of voice (Alpert *et al.* 2005). In a sense, looking at nonverbal cues could also be seen as an incongruence procedure; demeanor such as avoiding eye contact or speaking at a faster rate indicates that someone might be *unusually* nervous.

The fourth procedure employed by police officers to assess whether to trust or distrust a person is by relying on existing knowledge regarding a suspect's car (such as expired tags, stolen vehicle lists) (Stroshine *et al.* 2008), or the status of a suspect (prior arrests, lengthy criminal record) (*ibid*; Johnson and Morgan 2013), or the status of certain areas (area known for burglaries, drugs or prostitution) (Stroshine *et al.* 2008; Johnson and Morgan 2013; Dunham *et al.* 2005). When citizen demeanor and action is interpreted in light of prior knowledge about him or her, these mainly negative statuses serve as signals; prior behavior is extrapolated to someone's possible future behavior. This also applies to known 'bad' areas; citizens in known

drug areas or areas known for burglaries are looked at with suspicion because of the status of the area.

The literature, thus, shows that police officers look at various things when patrolling a neighborhood, such as a citizen-client's appearance, behavior, demeanor, the appearance of his/her vehicle and where and at what time s/he is observed. Again, the observed characteristics only get their meaning from within certain interpretive frameworks which give these characteristics a signaling status. Table 1 gives an overview of the different interpretive frameworks that are found, and illustrates how certain characteristics get their status as signals within the respective frameworks.

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DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article proposed a signaling perspective to the study of frontline evaluation of unobservable citizen characteristics. The analytical framework was exemplified by applying it to the literature on welfare encounters and police-citizen encounters. This illustration has shown that officials assess citizen trustworthiness, which is an unobservable characteristic, by looking at observable characteristics such as citizens' demeanor and background characteristics. We have seen that social workers look at a short-term and long-term trustworthiness. Citizen-clients who try to manipulate the system are seen as untrustworthy. Bureaucrats look at citizen-clients' attitude and demeanor in the interaction to assess whether they are manipulative or not. But also when it comes to assessing long-term trustworthiness, i.e. whether citizen-clients are likely to

pay society back for the worker's time and effort, workers look at their attitude and demeanor in the interaction. Citizen-clients' cooperativeness and 'efforts of trying' are perceived as signs of motivation. Police officers tend to rely upon rather flat categorizations of either good or bad citizens but employ variegated ways to assess whether citizens are suspect or not, by looking at citizens' appearance, demeanor and attitude.

We moreover explored how such characteristics get their status as signals by looking at the frames that give them meaning. The meaning of signals and cues does not stand alone. It is in the eye of the beholder: whether certain signals or cues are perceived as either warranting a trustworthy or untrustworthy citizen-client depends upon the interpretive frameworks of the respective frontline workers. Our exemplification of the signaling perspective as analytical framework has shown that social workers and police officers may use various interpretive frameworks that link observable characteristics to unobservable characteristics: 1) entitlement perceptions (social workers): variation in perceptions of when someone is entitled to service, leading to different categorizations of citizen-clients; 2) normality assumptions (police officers), where deviations from what is held to be normal demeanor and attitude are viewed with suspicion; 3) stereotypical reasoning (social workers, police officers), where possessing certain characteristics signal belonging to a certain social group which has certain beliefs attached to it; 4) prior knowledge (police officers), where citizen demeanor that accords with *negative* prior information about that citizen leads to suspicion. Interpretive frameworks, thus, vary in scope with some being profession-specific and others being shared by society at large.

This article has introduced a signaling perspective as analytical framework for researchers interested in studying frontline judgement. It proposes not only to look at the kinds of signals officials look at to asses not directly observable citizen properties, but also at the ways in which

such characteristics are interpreted as signals. This small-scale review of police officers' and social workers' trustworthiness evaluations possibly pointed to only a few of the interpretive frameworks frontline officials may use in interpreting citizen characteristics and behavior. Future research could empirically examine the different interpretive frameworks officials may use to interpret such characteristics, and the varying degrees of certainty they derive from these frameworks. This would give insight in *why* officials look at certain characteristics and not at others. Also, the analytical framework could be extended to study the evaluation of other types of unobservable characteristics such as competence, or deservingness, since trustworthiness is only a fraction of the judgments that frontline officials need to make.

Moreover, whereas the 'signaling perspective' as analytical framework offers researchers a way of studying and looking at frontline judgements in uncertain contexts, it is not a theory in itself. The framework could harbor different theories that aim to explain how and why officials interpret citizen characteristics and demeanor as signals for unobservable properties. A possibility may be signaling theory (e.g. Spence 1973; Gambetta and Hamill 2005) that posits that evaluators mainly gather *costly* signals, i.e. signals that are hard to fake by senders (such as their sex), because they offer more certainty than signals that are more easily manipulated (such as demeanor). The sociological status characteristics theory (e.g. Ridgeway 1991) to mention another example, may be tested to explain why officials look at certain stereotypical signals in interactions characterized by uncertainty. Future research could also develop theories explaining how normality perceptions affect the interpretation of citizen characteristics (see Harrits & Møller 2013 for a good first step in examining this in a frontline context).

Frontline public sector workers encounter countless situations where judgement is required and where they have to deal with uncertainty. Prior research has shown that uncertainty is part and

parcel of frontline work (Dubois 2014), and that frontline officials are geared at finding proof supporting their interpretations rather than finding out every detail of 'the truth' (Raaphorst 2017). Signals thus seem to provide officials a quick sense of certainty in these sometimes highly uncertain interactions. This underlines the importance of studying how officials gather and interpret such signals. Being judged as untrustworthy – regardless of the question whether it is justified or not – brings with it important implications for the citizen-client in terms of treatment, access and benefits. Efforts to deregulate and to give public officials the opportunity to use their own professional judgement may further increase the need for uncertainty reduction based on judgements of the citizen-client's trustworthiness. Given the fact that frontline public officials are often encouraged to rely on their own judgments about undetermined client properties (such as trustworthiness, risk and compliance), it is important to study how frontline public officials interpret signals in making decisions about citizen-clients.

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Table 1. Different interpretive frameworks

Interpretive frameworks	How do characteristics become signals?	Examples
Stereotyping	Being a member of a social group (discerned through observable characteristics) that is generally believed to be more or less trustworthy (stereotype)	*Middle-class* social assistance applicants as signal for citizens with good motivations (Møller and Stone 2013) *Young, male, African-Americans* as signal for potential criminals (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Stroshine *et al.* 2008)
Entitlement perceptions	Citizen demeanor (discerned in the interaction) that does or does not accord with entitlement perceptions	Non-cooperative citizen behavior as signal for disobedience for rule-focused officials
Incongruence procedure	Citizen characteristics and demeanor that do *not* accord with normality perceptions about behavior in that particular situation, time or place	Citizen not reacting to police spot light or avoiding officers as signal for having something to hide (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Dunham *et al.* 2005) Blacks in cars in White neighborhoods between 9 AM and 12 PM as signal for potential intention to rob a house (Stroshine *et al.* 2008)
Prior knowledge	Negative prior citizen or area information extrapolated to potential future behavior	Person known for prior arrest as signal for future criminal behavior (Johnson and Morgan 2013; Stroshine *et al.* 2008)